

07 06 2023

OUR UNION STREET

WHAT ABERDEEN WANTS



WHY WAS "OUR UNION STREET" CREATED?

Union Street is not what it used to be – it's not what it should be, and it's not what it can be.

People care about the state of Aberdeen's historic high street.

They care that many retail units sit empty and uninviting.

They care about graffiti, litter, dirty buildings, weeds growing on balconies and the general upkeep of the street.

They want Union Street to be a safe, busy, energetic, thriving thoroughfare that compares favourably with the best of UK's small cities.

They want someone to take responsibility for addressing these challenges and improving the street.

They want a consistent, concerted effort with plans, actions and progress. They want to be listened to, and they want to be heard.

To date, there has been no single body that has the remit to take on these challenges and opportunities.

That's what the new organisation – **Our Union Street** – is for.

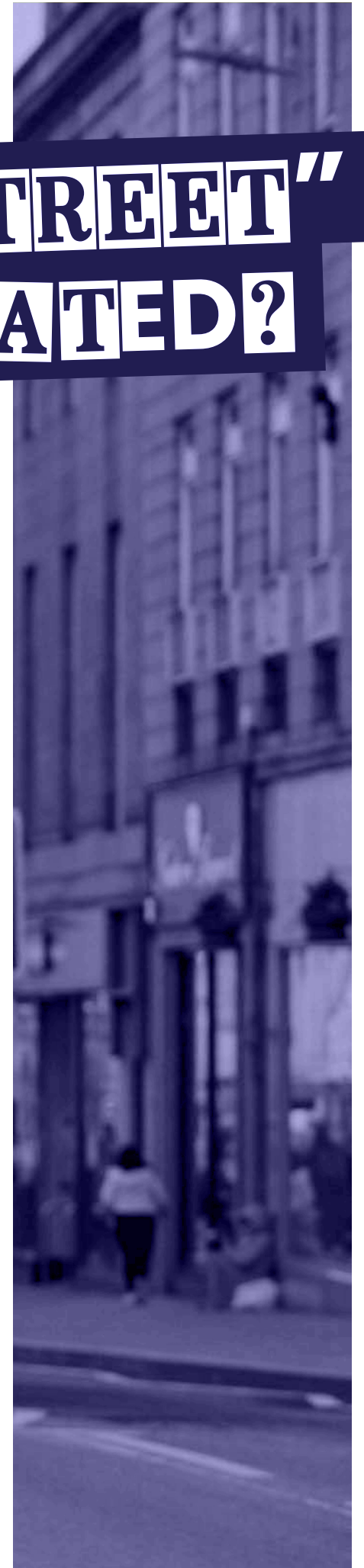
We want:

- To build a community that is passionate about Union Street;
- To engage those who care, and listen to everyone's ideas and suggestions; and
- To mobilise volunteers, tap into corporate goodwill, harness the tools and support that is available and start making a difference.

In short, we want to re-energise Union Street so that people can be proud of it again.

And we wanted to start by asking for everyone's input. This paper sets out the process we undertook and how we distilled the key themes.

Bob Keiller
7th June 2023



CAPTURING YOUR IDEAS

We launched *Our Union Street* on 22nd March and invited the public to answer four questions:

- What would you do to improve Union Street?
- What should we do with empty retail units as we try to get them filled?
- Which organisations should we be approaching to come to Union Street?
- Where have you seen good examples we might learn from?

The response has been overwhelming, and by 1st May over 1,600 people had submitted responses to us. In total, these responses came to over 200,000 words and cover 10,000 separate suggestions, comments and ideas.

We also met with around 60 groups in March and April to discuss and listen to their suggestions and ideas.

These included:

- Aberdeen City Council (ACC) staff, councillors and nominated leaders;

- City Centre Community Council leader;
- Aberdeen Inspired and Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce staff;

- Local MSPs;

- Events management specialists;

- Property owners;

- Estate and Letting Agents;

- Entrepreneurs;

- Architects and property developers;

- Third Sector leaders;

- Staff from Robert Gordon's University and Aberdeen University, NESCol and Harlaw Academy;

- Developing Young Workforce (DYW) and schools;

- Aberdeen Rotary;

- CREED Aberdeen; and

- Many passionate individuals.

& IDENTIFYING THEMES

We also received many suggestions by email – collectively around 50 pages – and other suggestions were offered in response to social media posts.

This was the dataset we set out to analyse, and we took three parallel approaches to dissecting what people shared with us:

- We read all of the inputs to the website, the emails that we had received, the notes we had made from meetings and comments made on social media posts.
- We searched the website entries against keywords to see which themes were mentioned most.
- We split the website entries into smaller sections (c. 100) then used Artificial Intelligence to provide a summarised list of ideas for each of those sections.

This allowed us to draw up a draft list of 15 themes.

We then discussed and debated these and cross-checked them and realised that there were two other areas that we would need to investigate further to enable two of the draft themes to be delivered:

- For activities and attractions there is an enabling theme about how people find out what is going on and potentially book places at events; and

- For street and building cleaning activities there is an enabling theme around recruiting and organising volunteers.

These two themes were added to the list to provide a total of 17.

Although we have tried to distil the main themes, the detail is not lost.

There are rich details in the entries submitted on the website (on average, each visitor to the website spent 25 minutes answering the questions we posed).

We will ensure a searchable version of the website entries is provided to the teams who begin to dig deeper into each of the themes.



THE IDEAS WE HAVE SET ASIDE (FOR NOW)

We launched *Our Union Street* on 22nd March and invited the public to answer four questions:

Some ideas are already in place or underway, such as a network of electric bikes, a large illuminated “Aberdeen” sign, connectivity between the Green and Union Street, which the new Aberdeen Market will provide.

Some ideas were beyond our scope, for example dealing with anti-social behaviour, city centre masterplanning, demolishing shopping centres and moving traders onto Union Street.

And a few ideas were tested against the following criteria:

- Would this attract you to visit Union Street (footfall)
- Would this make you feel more positive towards Union Street (pride)
- Will we be able to achieve significant progress in the next year (practicality)

For example, returning trams to Union Street. Would it bring footfall? Quite possibly. Would it restore pride? Maybe, some would love them, others might loathe them (Edinburgh

trams are a good example). Is it practical? No, as large capital projects take years of planning and significant funding. So this **WOULD NOT** be a project we could take forward.

Another was cleaning up stained granite. Would it increase footfall? Yes, indirectly, if the street feels brighter and cleaner it may attract more visitors (many people have commented positively about Marischal College since it was cleaned). Would it restore pride? Yes, quite clearly. Is it practical? Yes, although not easy, as there will be lots of barriers to overcome. So this **WOULD** be a project for us.

There are other suggestions where it is difficult to see HOW it might be done, but the underlying concern is relevant. For instance, the suggestion that we should “abolish rates” is clearly not achievable as it would take a change in the law, but the concern that non-domestic rates on Union Street may be unattractively high for tenants in retail unit is valid.

THE KEY THEMES

Following the process set out earlier, we have identified 17 key areas to investigate as we draw up our action plan.

They all fall under the five distinct challenges facing Union Street, which are: footfall, accessibility, the state of the street, empty shops and the narrative around it.

FOOTFALL

1. Atmosphere – creating tourist attractions and a rich and varied calendar of city centre events and experiences.
2. Ensuring that all events are easy to find and to book.

ACCESSIBILITY

3. Review parking concerns.
4. Investigate bus and taxi problems and options.
5. Questions around pedestrianisation and café culture.

THE STATE OF THE STREET

6. Cleaning the streets, pavements and street furniture.
7. Maintaining upper-levels on buildings.
8. Making empty units more attractive.
9. Improving the look of existing shops.
10. Organising exhibitions for empty retail unit windows.
11. Aesthetics: Colour, plants, flowers, trees, seating, lighting and public spaces.
12. Organising Volunteers.

EMPTY SHOPS

13. Attracting new tenants for empty units.
14. Empty unit options (beyond retail, food & drink).

NARRATIVE

15. Marketing the street.
16. Uncovering our history and culture.
17. Learning from other places.

We have explained a little more about each theme in the pages which follow.





1. Atmosphere: Creating tourist attractions and a rich and varied calendar of city centre events and experiences

The popularity of the Spectra Festival of Lights in Aberdeen city centre in February is a clear demonstration that people will come into the city centre if there is something to see or do. So how can we create a calendar of events – large, small, frequent, infrequent, for younger people, for history buffs, for gaming enthusiasts, for cruise ship passengers? How do we recruit and train a team of tour guides that can help bring the city to life for visitors? How can we harness the power of augmented reality and technology to create unique city centre attractions? How do we ensure that Union Terrace Gardens are a venue for events, particularly over summer? Who would design and run events, and how would they be organised? What licenses and permissions would be needed, how would costs be covered?

2. Ensuring that all events are easy to find and to book

How do we make it easy for people to find out what events are happening and how they can take part? This may be already covered with existing websites provided by VisitAberdeenshire, VisitScotland, Aberdeen Performing Arts, Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeen Live, the Press & Journal and others. However, do they cover all events,

do they overlap or duplicate each other, are they all kept up to date, do they allow events to be booked and offer additional services (e.g. reserve a table at a local restaurant ahead of a visit to the theatre)? What could be improved?

3. Review parking concerns

We have received lots of concern around the availability, accessibility and cost of city centre parking. Many suggested lowering parking costs or providing free parking to stimulate footfall. Do we have enough city centre parking? Is it accessible? How do costs compare with other Scottish cities? Are people aware of the options? If lower cost parking was provided, would the increase in usage offset the potential drop in revenues for car park operators? Are restrictions to parking durations (e.g. 1 hour limit at Golden Square) putting people off? What data is available to support any change proposals?

4. Investigate bus and taxi problems and options

We have heard lots of criticism that there are not enough taxis in Aberdeen. Several people (who live in Aberdeenshire) said that they would not come into Aberdeen in the evening for meals or drinks etc because they have no faith in the availability of taxis. What are the options? Is there a different way to operate taxi services? Would Uber make a difference? Should city centre

bus journeys be free? Would it make a difference? How would it be funded? Do we need shuttle buses between the city centre and the beach – what would the business case be for this?

5. Questions around pedestrianisation and café culture

Again, we have had a large number of people looking for pedestrianisation of sections of Union Street (and a few who want the opposite). How do we get beyond opinion and look at the case for and against it? How do we ensure that people with mobility restrictions would not be unfairly excluded? Are there certain times of the week, month or year where pedestrianisation makes more sense? What data from other towns and cities might support cases for or against further pedestrianisation?

6. Cleaning the streets, pavements and street furniture

This is an area that was mentioned many times – the perception is that the street is untidy and dirty. How do we change that? Who would do it? How would they do it? What equipment and materials would they need? What might already be available (e.g. from Aberdeen City Council?) Can we hire cleaning equipment, or do we need to buy it? How would it be powered? If it includes pressure washing for instance, where would

the water supply come from? How would we ensure cleaning and tidying activities don't harm or hinder members of the public?

7. Maintaining upper-levels of buildings

Weeds and plants growing from balconies and ledges are very obvious and very damaging to the appearance of the city centre. How could they be removed? How would this be organised and paid for? How could work be done without causing further damage? How can we fix underlying problems – e.g. blocked or broken drain pipes? Most buildings on Union Street are granite – it is a tough material that wears well and can look sparkling when clean. Some of the buildings would benefit from being cleaned. What are the options, costs and practical considerations? How could work be carried out safely and at a manageable cost?

8. Making empty units more attractive

Concerns around the negative impact of empty retail units were clear from the outset – that's why we asked a specific question about them when we were looking for input. Can we ensure that the external surfaces of empty retail units are clean? Can we touch up any flaking or peeling paintwork? Can we install temporary signage to cover bare and unsightly plinths? Can we put something interesting in the windows? Can we replace the large Letting Agent boards



with something less obvious? How could we do these things?

9. Improving the look of existing shops

Some of the occupied units are very poorly maintained, others have very unattractive window displays, some have peeling paintwork and a few have signs in place that are tasteless. What can we offer to help people improve the aesthetic of their shop front. Could we persuade them to change their window displays? Could we help them to clean up any stained pillars or surfaces? Could we encourage them to improve their signs? How would we show them what alternative options might look like?

10. Organising exhibitions for empty retail unit windows

The suggestion of using empty shop windows as arts space has been made several times. What could be displayed in the windows that would improve the look of the empty unit and potentially attract people to come to the street? If we had, say, 30 windows to fill – how could we regularly refresh displays? Can we create artistic offerings, or ones which are educational, or entertaining? Could we use high quality printing to make it look like an occupied shop?

11. Aesthetic: Colour, plants, flowers, trees, seating, lighting and public spaces

What practical options do we have to bring colour onto Union Street? Years ago, woodwork on upper floor windows was not always white. Could we introduce Asphalt art in selected places? There are a few hanging baskets on the street – how could we do lots and lots? Could they be made from recycled materials? Similarly with window boxes – what if we had hundreds of them – bursting with flowers and colour? Could we make the ones on higher levels artificial flowers to reduce maintenance need. Could we get people to “create” their own and put it in place. What scope is there to increase the number of planters and pots on the street – why were people not allowed to place shrubs outside retail units before? Can we provide more seating? Can interesting buildings be better lit when it’s dark?

12. Organising Volunteers

How can we attract and engage everyone who wants to contribute to the success of Union Street? How do we capture their skills, talents and areas of interest? How do we plan for volunteers – what are the best times to have people taking part? How do we welcome volunteers, make sure they have any necessary health and safety information and allocate them to tasks? How do we ensure that it is a fun and positive



experience and that they want to come back? How do we debrief them and thank them after they have done their “shift”? How do we encourage community involvement and groups of friends to participate?

13. Attracting new tenants for empty units

How do we provide a clear and compelling offer for businesses and other organisations to attract them to Union Street? How do we market the benefits of Union Street, the City and the region? How do we target potential occupants and what do we need to do to get their attention? What can we do to make the costs (e.g. rent, rates, refurbishment and fit-out) competitive?

14. Empty unit options (beyond retail, food & drink)

Lots of suggestions about using retail units as places for arts, crafts, social activities and other uses. What are the options and how would they work commercially? How would rent and rates costs be covered? Who would run any shared units? Can we segment larger units into multiple smaller workspaces?

15. Marketing the street

We need to attract local people and tourists to come to Union Street. We want to attract businesses too. How do we do this in an effective way that shapes the reputation of

the street? How do we harvest the positive stories, fantastic pictures and great videos? What tactics work and which are a waste of time and effort? What skills and talents do we need? Which streets or city areas from other cities have already achieved this?

16. Uncovering our history and culture

Aberdeen is an ancient city with a deep and interesting history. How do we make our history accessible to local people and tourists and present it in a fascinating and educational way? How do we blend the old stories with the new channels? Where do we source information? Which themes will be the most interesting, what places and artefacts can be used to illustrate stories? What artwork and videos do we need?

17. Learning from other places

Lots of places were suggested on the website – but what are the specific ideas that could potentially be adopted or adapted by us? How do we translate general concepts into specific proposals? What ideas are likely to provide the biggest positive impact?

