

ZONAL ANALYSIS

PART C: HILLHEAD STUDENT VILLAGE & HILLHEAD CENTRE

The University's extensive student village at Hillhead is an integral part of the campus experience for large numbers of our home and international students.

Following extensive investment in our residential accommodation and shared facilities, the remaining challenges and opportunities presented by Hillhead are assessed below.

What/Where. Hillhead is the University's main student accommodation hub and home to over 2500 students. Located north of the King's College Campus, a tranquil setting is provided by the natural boundaries of the River Don to the north and west, and Seaton Park to the south. The picturesque Brig o' Balgownie is only a short walk to the east. The site is accessed on foot from Kings College via Don Street or Seaton Park and by road along Don Street via King Street.

Challenges. Hillhead has benefited from significant investment in recent years, with a major programme of new-build and refurbishment projects undertaken to modernise the student accommodation and adjacent amenities. Ensuring that our accommodation remains of a competitive quality over-time will require continuing investment and efforts to gauge and meet student demand, adapting what is on offer to meet evolving student expectations, and monitoring moves in the private rental market. Critical to any commitment to an exemplary residential experience, will be the need to ensure that all facilities are equipped to take advantage of the major digital infrastructure developments envisaged elsewhere on campus. Robust connectivity to networks that support both study-related and personal technologies will be central to the provision of a seamless experience in which students can learn and relax.

The main infrastructure challenges include the need to identify a use for an unoccupied ex-retail unit adjacent to the Central Building, while in the longer-term there will be a need to consider upgrades to the heating network. Investment in recreational and sporting facilities that serve both the student population at Hillhead and the wider University community (at the adjacent Hillhead Centre) will be necessary.

Beyond the physical infrastructure, the main challenges at Hillhead centre are on improving pedestrian accessibility to and around the village, and enhancing the public areas, most notably the numerous green spaces spread across the Hillhead site. Public areas at Hillhead include a number of large green spaces between buildings and smaller secluded quads. The site is encircled by a one-way road for vehicular access, with associated car parking bays, while pedestrians move around the site via a series of inter-linked footpaths lacing through the accommodation blocks and amenity facilities. Some of the roads and paths are in poor condition, while many of the green and open spaces could be more imaginatively utilised and better maintained.

Pedestrian access, notably through Seaton Park, presents a number of challenges. The scenic route through Seaton Park is preferred by students during the day and is the most direct route. It does, however, present security and safety challenges after dark (when using this route is actively discouraged). Access to Seaton Park from Hillhead is via a secluded wooded area behind South House that joins a formal path in the park; this too presents further safety challenges. The route encouraged by the University is along Don Street, but takes longer and could be better signposted.

Opportunities. With limited need for any major redevelopment of buildings, there is now a chance to focus on improving the amenity value of the site through public realm investment. Improving pedestrian access to and around the site is a priority, in particular by enhancing the route via Don Street with better signage, lighting and improved paving to create a clear, designated route to and from King's College. This will improve wayfinding and increase use of this route by students. However, acknowledging that students will continue to use Seaton Park during the day, improved lighting where appropriate and moves to enhance security should be considered. Improving accessibility to the park from the area behind South House, while continuing to discourage use of this route during the hours of darkness, should be a priority.

There is considerable scope to make better use of both formal and ad hoc open and green space to encourage and facilitate communal usage. Through more innovative landscaping across the site, these green and open spaces, particularly in the main areas in front of Central Building, offer

potentially attractive outdoor social space that will enhance the village's sense of community. The possibility of creating simple landscaped terracing could, for example, provide a focal point at the centre of the village that would be ideally suited as an outdoor gathering point and informal event space. The provision of informal outdoor seating around the various accommodation blocks will further improve the usability of these spaces as socialising spaces for residents. Across the site more generally, improved paving, re-surfaced roads, better signage, and general aesthetic improvements will enrich the village as a modern living environment and enhance the student experience.

The unoccupied retail unit adjacent to Central Building offers a development opportunity, perhaps as a flexible, multi-functional space capable of supporting a range of social, learning or commercial activities. Identifying an alternate use for this building is a short-to-medium term priority.

In terms of sports facilities, the current tennis court / five-a-side pitch requires upgrading, with plans to transform this into a multi-sport area for the use of Hillhead residents. The Hillhead Centre (which is home to sports facilities that serve the wider University community) is also in line for collaborative investment to introduce high-quality all-weather pitches and to extend the provision of ancillary facilities housed in the pavilion. This latter project forms part of a wider plan for the eventual rationalisation of University facilities at Balgownie and the ongoing development of our relationship with Aberdeen Sports Village in support of our institutional sports and wellbeing strategies.

Place. Further enhancement of the site, through the kind of outdoor interventions mentioned above, will improve the student experience and reinforce the sense of place and belonging. Improving both the accessibility and security of the south facing entry point, will help to create a more welcoming, secure and attractive entrance for residents. Along the western perimeter, there is potential to create better links to the River Don via existing footpaths and trails, embracing the spectacular natural setting and local environment. Across the entire site, improved landscaping will encourage the use of these areas by students. A series of relatively modest interventions will enliven the campus, creating a vibrant sense of place that underpins a high-quality campus and student experience for all residents.