

Independent Policy Observation Report

Urban Space Activation and Behavioural Uptake in Dundee Waterfront Regeneration Area

Author: Arne Lindahl

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Location: Dundee Waterfront, including City Quay, Slessor Gardens and surrounding promenade areas

Observation period: Approximately 13:00–17:00

Weather conditions: Sunny, mild for season, suitable for outdoor activity

Disclaimer

This document is an independent observational note based on a short field visit in central Dundee. It has not been commissioned by any public authority and does not represent an advocacy position.

The purpose of this report is to document street-level observations and consider them in relation to existing policy frameworks including Scotland's National Transport Strategy, Scotland's Active Travel Framework, and EU transport decarbonisation targets.

Observations are qualitative and indicative rather than comprehensive.

Context

Dundee's waterfront redevelopment is one of the largest urban regeneration projects in Scotland. The project aims to reconnect the city centre with the River Tay, support economic activity, and improve the quality of public space.

Relevant policy context includes:

- Scottish Government National Transport Strategy 2 (2020)
- Active Travel Framework (2023)
- Scotland's Climate Change Plan Update (2020)
- EU Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (2020)
- EU Fit for 55 package (2021) targeting transport decarbonisation

These frameworks emphasise:

- modal shift from private car use
- increased cycling and walking
- public-space accessibility
- climate-resilient urban design
- behavioural change in mobility and urban use

The Dundee Waterfront redevelopment provides a relevant case for observing how these policy ambitions translate into real-world behavioural outcomes.

Observed Level of Activity

During the observation period, overall activity levels were relatively low considering favourable weather conditions.

Estimated usage across the waterfront promenade area was approximately 40 individuals within a large spatial area.

User groups observed included:

- families with young children
- individual joggers
- tourists photographing the V&A museum
- small groups of friends
- a small number of older visitors

The majority of individuals passed through the area rather than remaining for extended periods.

Sustained activity occurred primarily in a small area containing children's play features and a coffee van, located near the V&A museum.

Outside this zone, pedestrian behaviour was largely transient rather than stationary.



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Public Space Design and Seating

The waterfront promenade contains a number of architecturally designed seating elements, including:

- fixed wooden loungers
- integrated seating around play areas
- bench structures within landscaped zones

However, the distribution and orientation of seating appeared to reduce usability.

Examples observed:

- loungers positioned in open pedestrian flow areas
- seating placed centrally rather than along edges
- benches integrated into walls rather than dedicated seating zones

This configuration appeared to make the space feel exposed rather than comfortable for extended use.



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By contrast, waterfront seating in several Nordic developments (e.g. Malmö's Västra Hamnen) typically prioritises:

- seating orientation toward water views
- seating located outside main walking paths
- clustered seating for social interaction
- sheltered or semi-enclosed seating areas

These design differences influence whether spaces are used for resting and socialising or simply passing through.

Commercial Activation

Limited commercial activity was observed within the waterfront promenade area.

The only location generating sustained activity was a coffee van associated with the V&A museum.

No additional vendors or kiosks were observed along the promenade.

Potential impacts of this include:

- fewer reasons for visitors to remain in the space
- limited opportunities for informal social activity
- reduced sense of neighbourhood presence

Mixed-use urban waterfront developments in Northern European cities commonly integrate:

- cafés
- small retail kiosks

- seasonal vendors
- food stands

These elements often function as anchors for public activity.

Accessibility and Urban Connectivity

A significant structural barrier between Dundee city centre and the waterfront is the major road corridor adjacent to the railway station.

Although pedestrian crossings exist, the road infrastructure creates a perceptual and physical separation between the city centre and waterfront space.

Observed challenges include:

- long pedestrian routes between destinations
- unclear visual guidance toward the waterfront promenade
- limited wayfinding signage

It was also noted that some visitors may reach the V&A museum directly but remain unaware of the extended waterfront promenade beyond it.

This suggests that wayfinding and spatial legibility could be improved.



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Cycling Infrastructure and Uptake

A cycling facility, the Dundee Cycle Hub, is located along the waterfront.

However, during the observation period:

- no cyclists were observed using the promenade
- no cycle lanes were visible along surrounding roads
- bicycle parking facilities appeared limited

This is notable in the context of Scotland's Active Travel Framework, which aims to increase walking, wheeling and cycling as everyday transport modes.



Within EU climate policy frameworks such as Fit for 55, cycling infrastructure is frequently linked to:

- modal shift targets

- urban air quality improvements
- reduced transport emissions

The observed low cycling activity suggests that supporting infrastructure and connectivity may currently be insufficient to encourage widespread cycling uptake in this location.

Behavioural Patterns

The space appeared to function primarily as a transit corridor rather than a destination.

Patterns observed included:

- brief pauses for photographs
- parents supervising children at play features
- walkers moving along the promenade

However, there were few indicators of:

- long-term social use
- informal gathering
- extended leisure activity

The absence of these behaviours may indicate that the waterfront has not yet fully developed into a socially activated public space.

Design vs Behaviour

The redevelopment appears visually successful in terms of architectural design and open space.

However, there appears to be a gap between design intent and behavioural outcomes.

Observed factors potentially influencing usage include:

- limited commercial activity
- insufficient seating orientation
- exposure to wind and open space
- limited cycling infrastructure

- weak connections with surrounding neighbourhoods

These issues are not uncommon in early phases of waterfront regeneration projects, where physical infrastructure precedes social activation.

Comparative Nordic Design Approaches

In Nordic waterfront developments such as Malmö's Västra Hamnen, public spaces frequently prioritise:

- abundant seating
- cycling-first infrastructure
- integrated cafés and kiosks
- sheltered social spaces
- pedestrian-first layouts

These features contribute to sustained everyday use by local residents rather than primarily attracting visitors or tourists.

Opportunities for Further Study

Further investigation could include:

- weekday observations during commuting hours
- lunchtime usage patterns
- interviews with local businesses and visitors
- survey data on perceived accessibility

These methods could provide additional insight into how urban design influences behavioural patterns in regenerated public spaces.

Conclusion

Dundee's waterfront redevelopment provides a high-quality physical environment with significant potential for public use.

However, initial observations suggest that the space currently functions more as a visually impressive transit environment than a highly activated social space.

Improving elements such as seating design, commercial activation, cycling connectivity and wayfinding could help support stronger alignment with Scotland's active travel and climate transition policy goals.