

Comprehensive Treatment Area 1:  
Former Villiers Site



Feasibility Study and Treatment Plan  
Cabinet Office  
11th August 2021

## Site Context and Land Ownership.

The site is situated in an excellent town centre location with easy access to the following key destinations within Douglas:-

- The primary retail streets of Duke Street (adjacent to the western site boundary), leading into Strand Street;
- The primary visitor destination of Douglas Promenade and the beach (adjacent to the eastern site boundary);
- The Sea Terminal, which provides a key arrival point to the Island, located within 400 metres of the site, beyond Lord Street;
- North Quay and Douglas Marina to the south of the site, with its developing evening economy, and
- The key retail anchor of Marks & Spencer to the west of the site.

With the exception of a very small plot of land at the entrance to the underground car park, most of this site is in private ownership. Axa previously owned the Loch Promenade site, but the site was sold in October 2018. The purchase of the site incorporates Villiers House (formerly RBSI House), Clarendon House and land including a development plot and the area known as the 'town square'.

Ownership of existing local retail units on Duke Street and Regent Street is likely to be more mixed, and the legal issues associated with mixed ownership, combined with agreed legal tenures would complicate the future redevelopment of these sites. However, compulsory purchase could overcome this constraint.

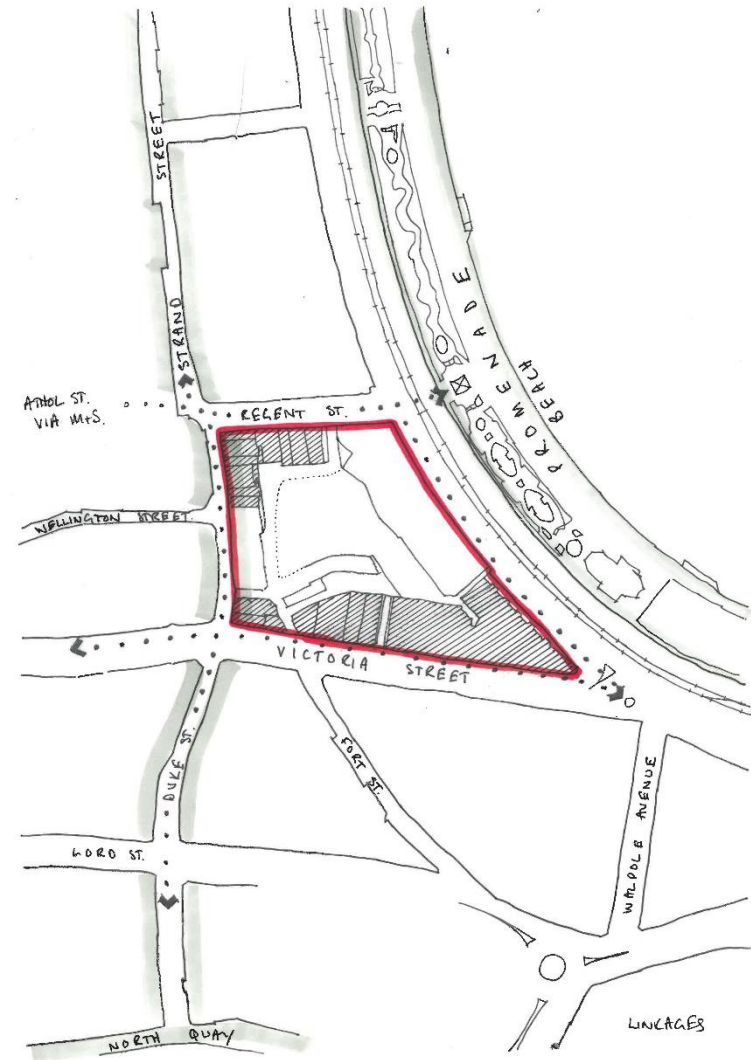


Figure 1: Illustrative Plan to show the site context and linkages

## Urban Block Form

The urban block form is clearly defined in this area by highways infrastructure, but demolition of older building stock has resulted in a gap site within the extent of the CTA. This erodes the urban block form on Loch Promenade, and allows views into the site from the Promenade that focus on rear building elevations that were never intended to be seen.

At the time of writing, construction works are currently on site for the development site fronting onto Duke Street (18/00641/B). This will help to repair the urban form within the main High Street and re-introduce the sense of enclosure that is characteristic of Duke Street and Strand Street. Completion on site is due in 2022.

Reparation of the urban block form fronting on the Promenade is desirable, as it would help to screen rear building elevations and re-instate the intended coherency of the townscape that was historically developed.

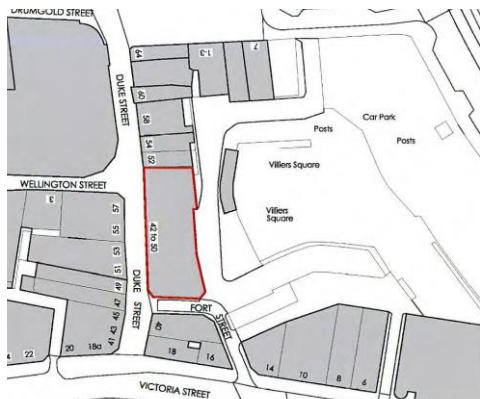


Fig. 2: Extent of application site currently under construction (18/00641/B)  
An amendment application is still pending PA 20/00679/B

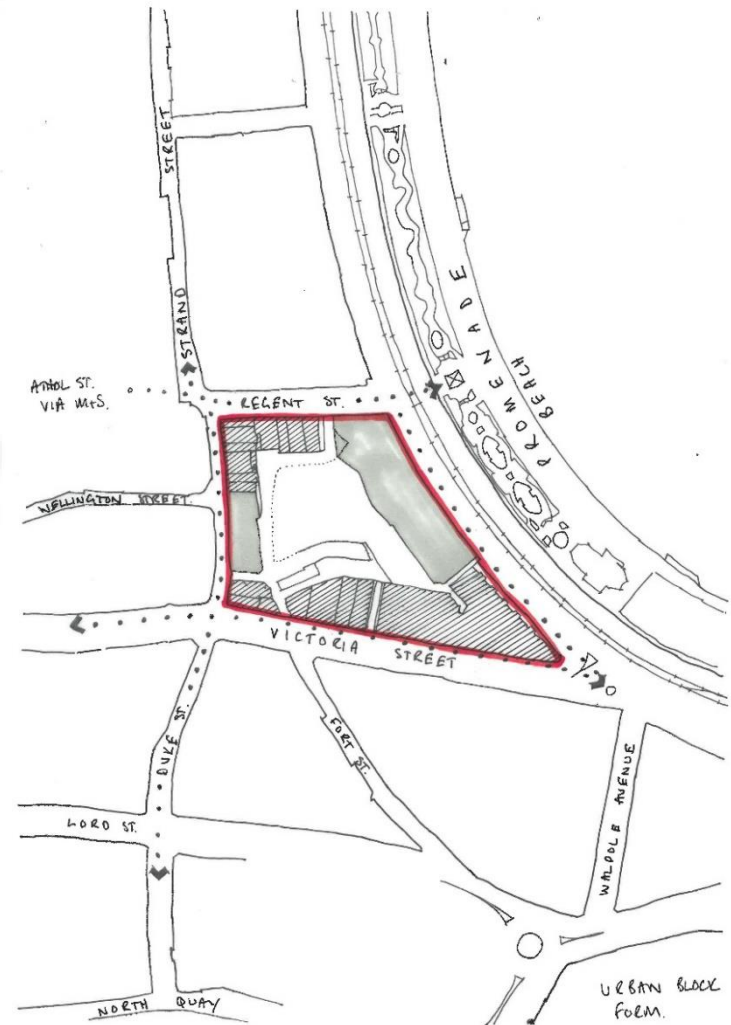


Figure 3: Illustrative Plan to show the urban block structure

## Historic Townscape Evolution

The 1869 Ordnance Survey (County Series) Map shows that the western portion of the site extended into Douglas Bay. Land use reclamation and engineering works in the Victorian period subsequently resulted in Douglas Promenade, with hotels overlooking the Promenade and the expansive bay.

The Villiers Hotel was opened in 1878, and was one of the first establishments to open on the newly constructed Loch Promenade. The Villiers stood prominently on the corner of Victoria Street and Loch Promenade, and was perfectly positioned to accommodate arriving tourists. The Athol Hotel stood on the corner of Loch Promenade and Regent Street, and was linked to the Villiers Hotel by a terrace of boarding houses.

During the 1960's, the Villiers Yard (to the rear of the Hotel) contained two public conveniences and a variety of buildings used by Douglas Borough Council. By the 1980's however, the majority of these buildings had been demolished.

Historic land uses within the extent of CTA 1 have catered for the Island's visitors until recently and many of the buildings that once stood on the site functioned as hotels and boarding houses. As tourism began to decline, the Villiers Hotel closed in the 1980's and was demolished. Commercial offices now occupy the former Villiers Hotel site. The Athol Hotel and the other boarding houses were demolished in 1994 and the site has been vacant ever since.

Empty retail premises on Duke Street have recently been demolished and a mixed use development with ground floor retail units and 20 residential apartments is currently being constructed on this site.



Figure 4: Terrace of boarding houses bookended by Villiers (far left) and Athol (far right) (Manx Nostalgia)



Figure 5: Present day view looking towards the site of the former Athol Hotel

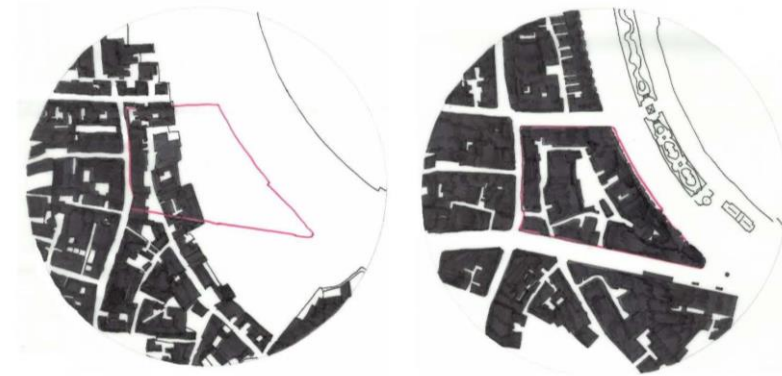
## Historic Townscape Evolution (cont...)

Figure ground illustrations show significant changes in land mass and density that correspond with the rise and subsequent decline in the tourism industry.

Most notably, the earlier plans illustrate that the eastern portion of the site is comprised of made up ground, of unknown materials. This could present soil stability issues for any future re-development on this site, and it would be prudent to explore soil stability, in order to help facilitate future development on this site and remove a potential barrier.

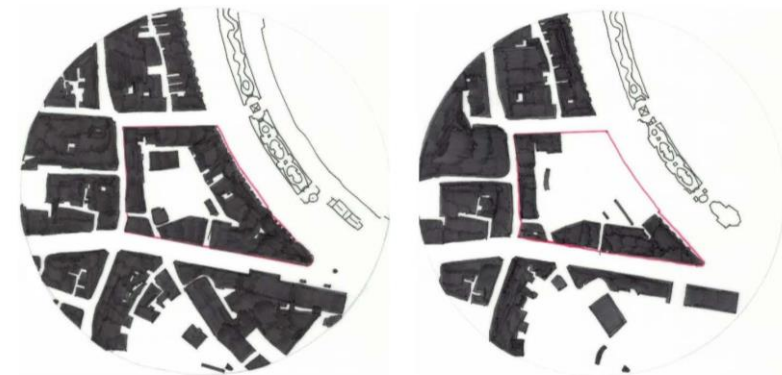


Figure 6: Villiers yard, 1970 (iMuseum)



1869 Plan

1960 Plan



1980 Plan

Contemporary Plan

Figure 7: Historic and Present Figure Ground Studies

## Land Uses

Land Uses within the CTA are mixed, but correspond to adjacent retail land uses within Duke Street and Strand Street and professional services found on Victoria Street, aligning with historic designations within the Douglas Local Plan 1998. They are detailed as follows:-

- Land uses on the corner of Strand Street, Duke Street and Regent Street comprised of Class 1.1 uses (shops) linking with the primary retail offer of Strand Street and the anchor store of Marks and Spencer;
- A mix of uses is proposed for the site currently under construction on Duke Street, comprising class 1.1 (shops) and Class 3.4 (flats)
- The predominant land use on the corner of Duke Street and Victoria Street is comprised mainly of Class 1.2 uses (professional services), with estate agents linking in with the business district. A small amount of retail is also evident on this corner also at ground floor levels;
- A mix of uses occurs opposite Fort Street, comprising class 1.1 (shops), class 1.3 (food and drink) and class 2.1 (offices)
- The land use on the corner of Victoria Street and Loch Promenade is comprised of Class 1.2 uses (professional services), now occupied by Lloyds Bank.
- Open space occupies the central area of the block.

The main gap site occurs adjacent to Douglas Promenade. The question arises that, having once been a hotel, could tourism ever be considered as a viable option for this site, in the light of the recent work undertaken on the Tourism Transformation Strategy?

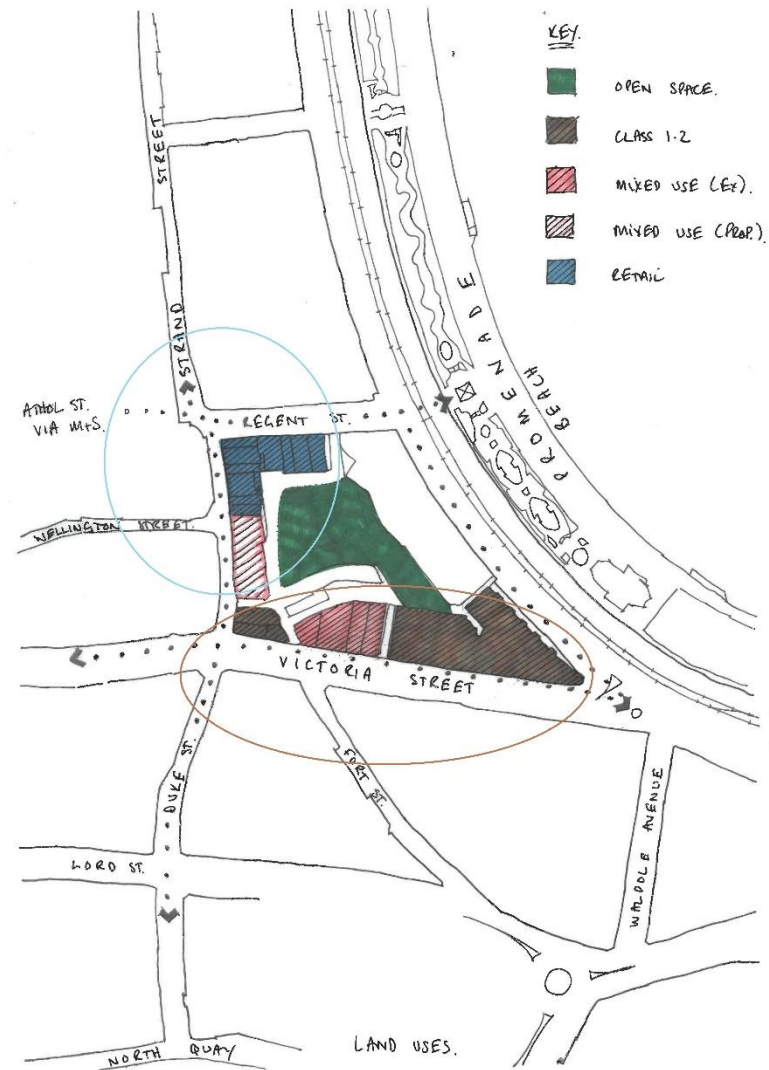


Figure 8: Illustrative Plan to show current land uses

## Levels and Vehicular Access

The site is fairly level, but there is an access to an underground car park associated with the office block fronting on to Victoria Street and Loch Promenade. The extent of the underground car park may pose a major site constraint and limit the amount of re-development that can take place on this site. The extent of this underground car park is not available in electronic form, and further research would be required to ascertain the full extent of the underground car park.

The principle access point to the site is from Regent Street. There is currently no access available from Loch Promenade. Similarly, there is no vehicular access route from Duke Street, due to the pedestrianisation of this street, and, with the exception of construction traffic, restricted traffic flows on Victoria Street and Fort Street preclude access to the site from Victoria Street. Servicing and access arrangements for back of house uses are very constrained for the smaller units within the CTA.

The site would benefit from an improved site access to aid with back of house uses and servicing, and this could be designed into any future schemes for re-use of existing gap sites, and help to relieve servicing issues for the smaller units.

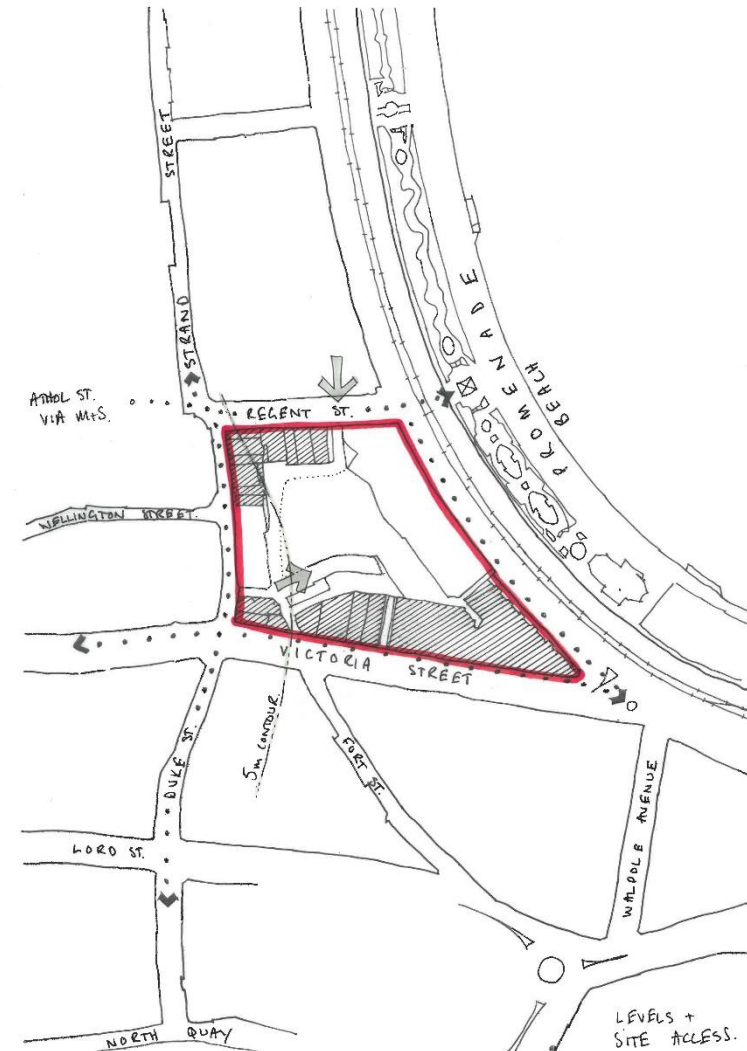


Figure 9: Illustrative Plan to show site contours and access

## Townscape Quality and Building Condition

### The Georgian Frontage

The building footprints located on the corner of Victoria Street and Duke Street are evident on the 1869 maps, but architecturally, they evidence a Georgian style that corresponds with the adjacent buildings fronting onto Victoria Street to the east. Collectively, they contribute to the imposing dual street elevation fronting onto Victoria Street, and show a consistent building height of 4 storeys. They are actively occupied at lower levels, and contribute to the vibrancy of the main street. The buildings have been maintained at lower levels, although vegetative growth is evident in the gutters at the higher roof top levels in isolated instances and there are broken windows. These buildings should be retained.

### Modern offices

The office block situated on Victoria Street and Loch Promenade is of recent construction and is currently occupied. The building height is perceived to correspond to the historic building heights on Victoria Street, but additional storey heights is discretely set back at the higher levels, so the characteristic eaves line on Victoria Street is maintained.

### Local retail

Existing buildings situated on the corner of Duke Street and Regent Street are more domestic in scale, with more variation in building height and eaves line. The condition of these buildings would benefit from improvement. Retail premises occupy lower floor levels, with upper floors serving as storage.

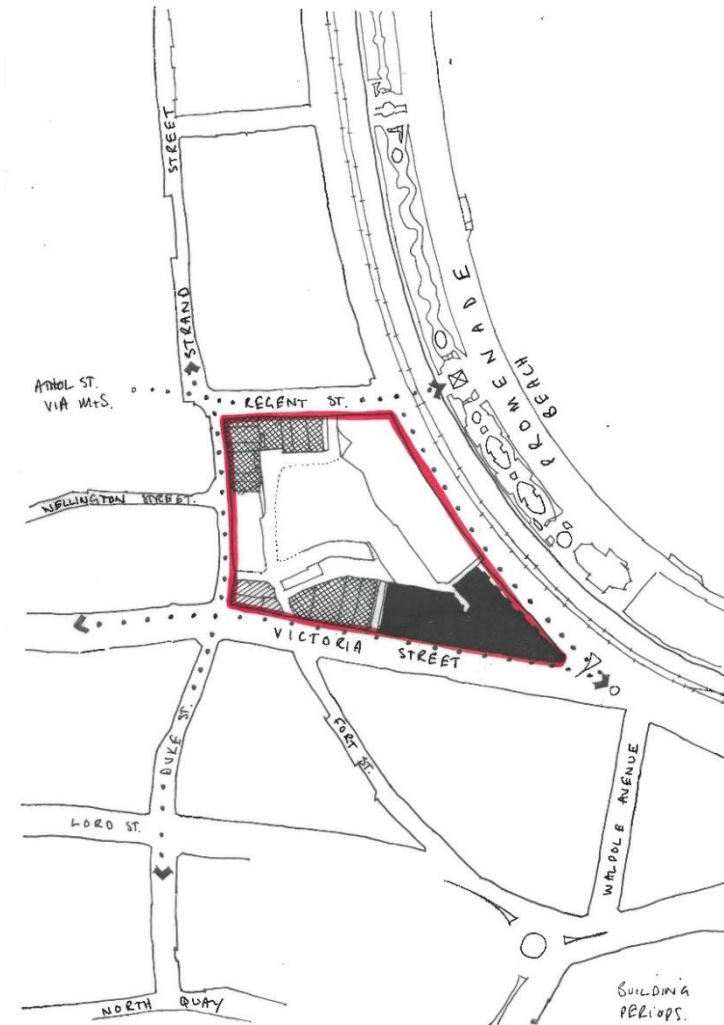


Figure 10: Illustrative Plan to show building periods



## Townscape Quality and Building Condition (cont..)

### **Public Open Space**

The current provision of open space is poorly located adjacent to the rears or buildings, with limited opportunity for natural overlooking. The development of a night time economy raises other issues, such as natural surveillance and safety, pedestrian routes and lighting within the public realm.

Alternative locations for open space should be explored, and it may be that investment opportunities could be created by re-positioning the building line on Regent Street to create a town square next to Marks and Spencer and the former post office.

## Vehicular and Pedestrian Permeability

The site benefits from pedestrian permeability around the entire urban block and also through the site, with priority given to pedestrians on Strand Street, Duke Street and the western section of Regent St, due to pedestrianisation of the High Street. Regent Street is one of the main pedestrian links between the retail street and the Promenade. It also offers a visual connection with the wider land/seascape which is otherwise unavailable in Strand Street.

Vehicular permeability is more restricted. The main vehicular access is via Regent Street. Priority to vehicular traffic is evident with the dual vehicular carriageway on the Loch Promenade, but pedestrian crossing points and wide pavements help to re-balance the transport hierarchy in this location.

Importantly, pedestrian and vehicular access routes are separated, but there are movement nodes, where both pedestrians and vehicles cross occur to the south western site boundary, at the junction of Duke Street and Victoria Street, where a pedestrian crossing leads into Duke Street and smaller nodes occur either side of this major movement node on Duke Street and Victoria Street.

A movement node also occurs to the north eastern site boundary, where Regent Street connects with the Loch Promenade, with a pedestrian crossing leading to the Promenade and sea front.

The intersection of Drumgold Street, Regent Street, and Duke Street creates one of Douglas' main pedestrian nodal points, particularly as Strand Street makes a step in direction adjacent to the main retail anchor that is M&S.

Further work is required to investigate the best way to alleviate pedestrian and vehicle conflicts and identify the best position for the main vehicular access. The safety of pedestrians on Victoria Street should be a priority.

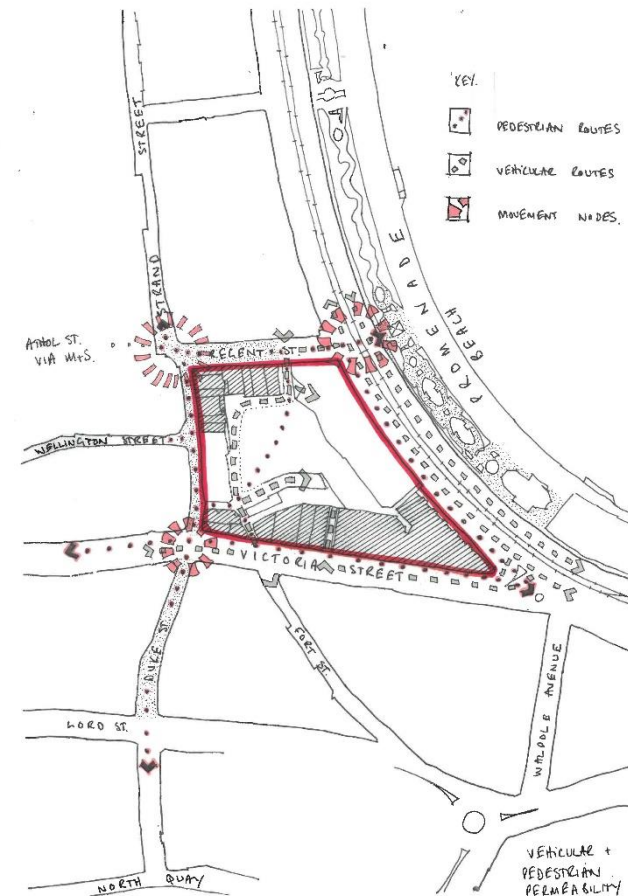


Figure 11: Illustrative Plan to show vehicular and pedestrian permeability

## Visual Assets and Detractors

The site benefits from an easterly aspect that affords unparalleled views of Douglas Bay, and the wider sea scape.

Properties on Regent Street benefit from an attractive aspect towards the renovated former post office building.

Properties on Victoria Street contribute collectively to the Georgian frontage on both sides of the street.



Fig. 12: Statue of the Bee Gees on the Promenade, with Douglas Bay in the background.



Fig. 13: Public Realm Improvements in Regent Street, with the former post office situated on the left hand side

## Environmental Constraints

Wave overtopping has occasionally been identified as an issue that will need to be considered as part of any scheme for future re-development of the gap site fronting onto Loch Promenade.

Any future buildings would need to be designed to withstand marine conditions, and any future flooding directive may constrain development further.

The eastern part of the site falls within the adopted Douglas Promenades conservation area, and the site forms part of the setting to Salisbury House, designated as a Registered Building. Manx National Heritage should be consulted as to whether there is archaeological interest in the area.

Recent works to Douglas Promenade have recently been undertaken by the DOI, and discussions with the designers should ascertain the full extent of refurbishment and upgrading in respect of drainage provision.

It is understood that there have been tidal flooding issues stretching as far back as the “movement node” in Strand Street/Regent Street in front of M&S. Tidal ground water surge could be a factor in the design of any further basements.



Figure 14: Historic photograph of storm waves breaking over the sea wall at Loch Promenade (courtesy of the i-museum photographic archive).



Figure 15: Extract from the Flood Risk Viewer Map

## Utilities Provision and Waste Storage

Observations on site would suggest that utilities and infrastructure provision for existing buildings on site is accessed via the surrounding road and pavement layout. A manhole is located within the Loch Promenade site, suggesting underground infrastructure within this site boundary. Any future re-development of this site may necessitate the re-alignment of this underground utility. This could impact upon site viability. A full assessment of utilities provision is recommended, to better understand the relevant constraints on this issue.

Commercial waste storage is located to the rear of existing older premises, or contained within the main envelope of the newer office block. Commercial waste storage currently serves as a visual detractor and would be better accommodated within a designated bin store, or should any of the site be re-developed, within the building envelope.

## Relevant Planning Considerations

### Area Plan for the East

Within TAPE, CTA 1 is situated within a mixed use proposal area for Strand Street (Mixed Use Area 3). This area forms the core of the retail shopping area and is characterised by shops, food and drink uses, financial and professional services and other associated town centre uses such as hairdressers, beauticians' etc.<sup>1</sup>.

The primary shopping frontage of Strand Street and Duke Street is notated by the dashed green line on Map 5 of the East Plan. The future vision for Strand Street is for it to continue as the primary retail area of Douglas.

More residential uses would benefit the area and help support the night time economy.

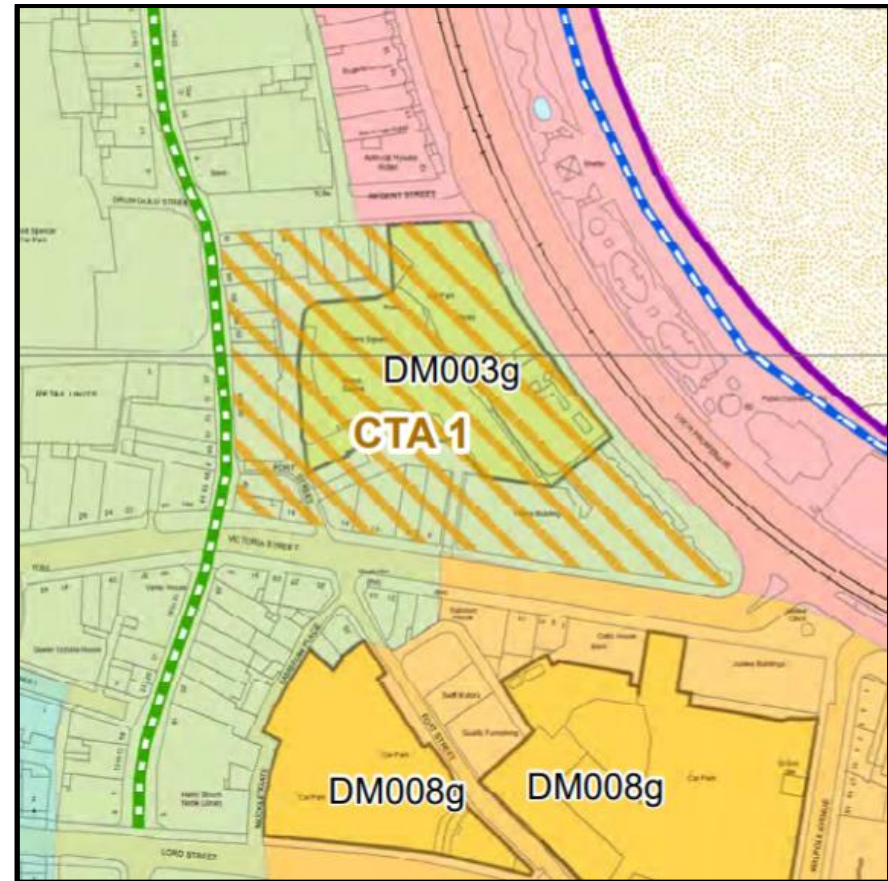


Fig. 16: Extract from Map 5 - Douglas Central, an accompanying map for the Area Plan for the East

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<sup>1</sup> CTA 1 falls within the boundary extent for the Central Douglas Masterplan 2014. It is included within the character area of Strand Street.

## Relevant Planning Considerations (cont...)

The broad extent of CTA 1 is denoted as an orange diagonal hatch on the map extract below.

Specific policy provision for this area can be found in the Area Plan for the East, as below:

### ***Town Centre - Mixed Use Proposal 3***

*There will be a presumption in favour of retail and ancillary town centre uses such as food and drink and health and beauty uses along the primary shopping frontage. Outside of the primary shopping frontage a wider variety of town centre uses including financial and professional services open to visiting members of the public will also be acceptable. Entertainment venues, Offices and residential use will be acceptable at first floor level and above, but not at ground floor level where an active frontage should be maintained and enhanced. These active frontages are essential to sustain an attractive town centre.*

Site DM003 (Loch Promenade) falls within this treatment area, and is included in Table 19 of the Written Statement for the Area Plan for the East, entitled 'Summary of Residential Land Provision'.

The site is estimated to be able to deliver a number of residential units. Higher densities would be expected here in line with its town centre location.

In respect of the Unoccupied Urban Sites Register, UU Site 17 (former Villiers Hotel) falls within CTA 1.

### **Para. 13.7.1 (TAPE)**

A brief spatial analysis and policy intent for the former Villiers Hotel site is set out in paragraph 13.7.1 of the Area Plan for the East:

*Despite planning approval for a variety of uses having been granted, much of the site remains undeveloped and has done for some time;*

*The site has a negative effect on this prominent area of Douglas and impacts on the appearance of the Promenade as a whole;*

*The area fronting the Promenade should either be developed or its appearance improved by creating an attractive public space;*

*Re-development of the wider area would not be discounted, although where existing buildings are attractive and have a sound fabric, they should be incorporated into any wider scheme;*

*The Central Douglas Masterplan suggests there is opportunity to support the intensification of the high street through the removal of some buildings on Duke Street, and*

*The Villiers site CTA is also a strategic freight corridor and maintaining access for commercial vehicles, including HGV's, must be considered in any proposed development.*

## Relevant Planning Considerations (cont...)

### Treatment Plan

A treatment plan for the former Villiers Hotel site is included within this paragraph, as set out below for ease of reference:

#### ***CTA Proposal 1 - The Villiers (Treatment Plan)***

*Development of this area shall include office, leisure, retail, hotel, residential, entertainment venues, food and drink uses and public open space or a combination thereof; or the laying out of the site as public open space/town square in its entirety.*

*Should built development not be brought forward independently of Government intervention, then consideration will be given to compulsory purchase of the site for either of the options described above.*

The CTA encompasses a number of individual retail units along its north, west, and south west boundary which have all been subject to numerous planning applications over the years. The central and eastern areas of the site are currently vacant, with open space occupying the central area, allowing for leisure uses within this space. This area has received a number of applications for its re-development. Finally the south west corner of the CTA contains an office block and bank which is noted below.

### **Duke Street, Regent Street and Victoria Street**

A planning application was approved at appeal in 2019 for the demolition of 42-50 Duke Street and erection of a six storey mixed use building to provide retail (Class 1) and eleven residential units (application ref. 18/00641/B). A further planning application for this site that is proposing to increase the amount of residential use to 20 units is currently pending.

Numerous planning applications have been determined in respect of alterations and extensions to retail premises on Duke Street and Regent Street and also for shop fronts and signage.

Similarly, for retail premises on Victoria Street, but there is also evidence of applications being submitted and approved for change of use from retail to commercial and/or residential on Victoria Street. This suggests a mix of uses are located in Victoria Street that are providing a different offer to that found on Duke Street.

### **Former Villiers Hotel Site**

In respect of planning applications worthy of note, a planning application was approved in 1994 for the construction of hotel/apartments/business centre with parking on the former Villiers Hotel Site and adjoining terrace Victoria Street, Loch Prom and Regent Street (application reference 89/01194/B), but this approval was not taken up.

Following numerous subsequent applications for re-development of the site, an application was approved in 2000 for commercial use, parking and public open space (application ref. 00/00638/B). This scheme was implemented and forms the office block at the south eastern corner of the CTA, currently occupied by Lloyds Bank.



### Relevant Planning Considerations (cont...)

An application was approved in 2004 (04/00418/B) for the area of the site fronting Loch Promenade (former Villiers Hotel), which consisted of 60 residential units with ground floor retail. A subsequent extension to this application was approved which moved its expiry to 2013. In 2013 a renewed application (13/00163/B) was approved which contained minor changes to the original.

Given the extent of the proposed scheme for site DM003, land values are critical to implementation of any scheme on this site. Lending appetite and timing will be a critical factor in successfully bringing this site forward, and discussions with lenders and developers would help to provide some further clarity on these issues.

Relevant Planning Considerations (cont...)

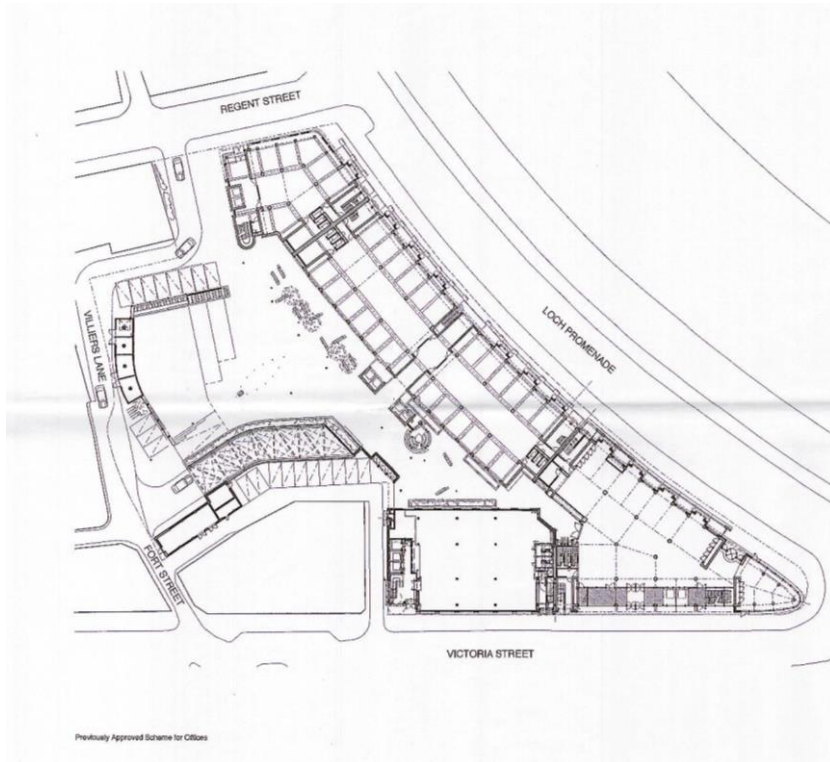


Fig. 17: approved 2000 planning application for commercial use (not available electronically)

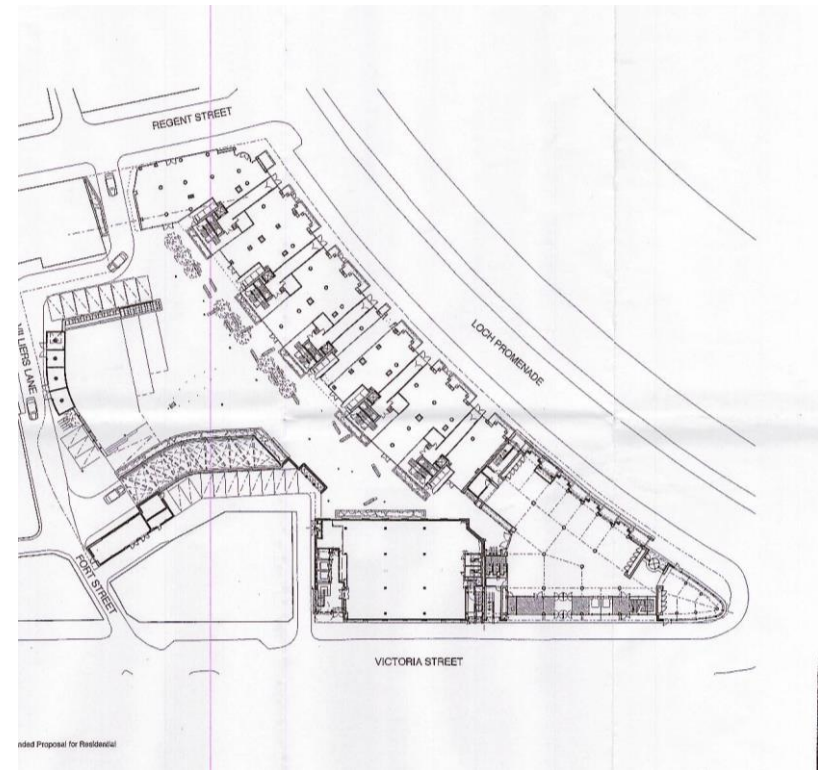


Fig. 18: amended 2004 planning application for residential use on the Loch Promenade site.

## Site Opportunities and Possible Outcomes

CTA 1 occupies a central location encompassing part of the primary retail and leisure offer of Douglas town centre, and also part of the business district. The key retail anchor of Marks and Spencer is situated adjacent to the CTA and pedestrian permeability around the CTA is good.

A gap site occupies at a prominent location at the junction of Loch Promenade and Regent Street. This site benefits from a superb easterly aspect that affords unparalleled views of Douglas Bay and the wider sea scape, and the northern part of the site overlooks the attractive aspect towards the renovated former post office and recent public realm improvements.

The nodal point at the intersection of Drumgold Street, Regent Street and Strand Street could be emphasised and/or celebrated via building architecture about that intersection. The bold redevelopment of CTA 1, incorporating a town square, would offer a focus for an otherwise linear townscape.

Alternative locations for open space should be explored, and it may be that investment opportunities could be created by re-positioning the building line on Regent Street to create a town square next to Marks and Spencer and the former post office.

Recent public realm improvements in Strand Street, Duke Street and Regent Street have improved the quality of the townscape surrounding the CTA significantly. There is an opportunity to extend the public open space in Regent Street into a town square and increase the primary retail frontage that overlooks the former post office building and Marks and Spencer. This would create a well-lit, sheltered environment at the heart of the retail offer of Douglas that

could would benefit from natural surveillance and accommodate events. Public toilets would also help to improve public facilities in Strand Street.

The redevelopment of the site could offer improved pedestrian permeability from the interior of the site onto the Promenade and from the intersection of Regents Street, Drumgold Street, Duke Street were a town square to be incorporated.

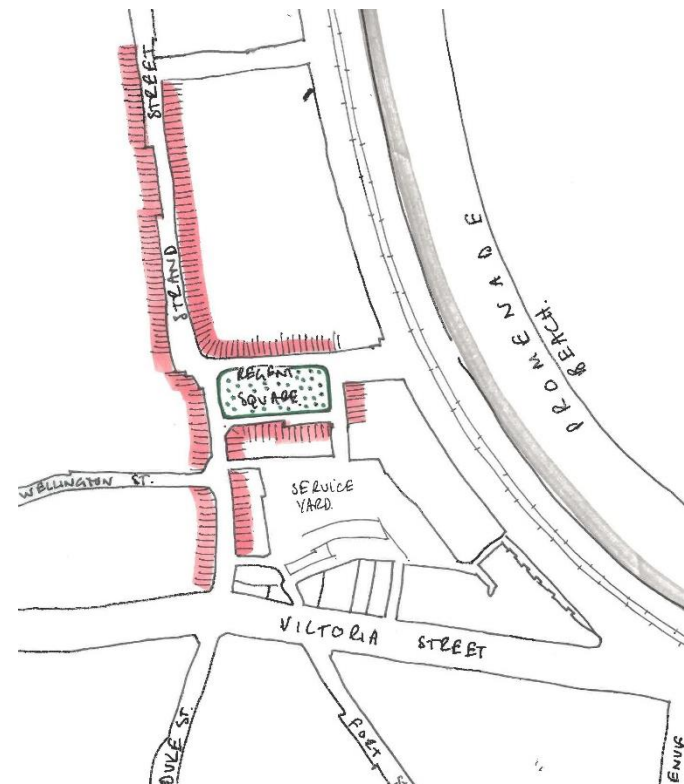


Fig. 19: Suggested layout to incorporate a town square

## Site Opportunities and Possible Outcomes (cont....)

The CTA also links well with the harbour and Douglas Marina, and also the Sea Terminal. These linkages could be further enhanced and made safer during evening hours.

Given the historical legacy of Douglas Promenade and the Bay, the ideals of active travel can benefit from the wider links available along Douglas Promenade and recent public realm improvements to the Promenade can facilitate active travel become a plausible option on this site, thereby helping to reduce dependency on the car.

Given the location and the size of the plot, this site is considered to be one of the prime development sites on the Island, and presents significant investment opportunities to deliver an attractive and high quality waterfront mixed use development.

Planning policy supports re-development of this unoccupied urban site, as recognised on the unoccupied urban sites register for the East, and guidance has been drafted to allow for flexibility in respect of future land uses within this CTA, to better meet current market demands. The policy designation within the Area Plan for the East is for mixed use, including office, leisure, retail, hotel, residential, entertainment venues, food and drink uses and public open space, or a combination thereof.

Historical planning approvals on this site have supported high density office and residential development.

As a registered unoccupied urban site, there is an opportunity to use this site as a test pilot project and tailor an appropriate enabling package to enable development on this site to come forward. As a

'front face' of Douglas, the site presents an opportunity for a signature building that sits well within the surrounding townscape.

As a very last resort, compulsory purchase of the Loch Promenade site is an option.



Fig. 19: Waterfront development at Clippership Wharf, Boston

## Development Barriers

Although much of the CTA lies in private ownership, the Loch Promenade site, including the area of public open space, is in one ownership. This makes the prospect of developing the Loch Promenade site easier, as land acquisition is not required.

Because of the size of the Loch Promenade site, the main issues impeding the development of this site will relate to land values and market demand, lending appetite and timing.

Due to the previously developed nature of the CTA, the site will need to be remediated.

Due to made up ground in the area, there may be issues with soil stability, which may require underground piling and possible contamination from the imported fill.

Additionally, the underground car park may affect the extent of available floor plate that can be constructed, and this could compromise future square meterage.

A drain runs through the Loch Promenade site, and again, this may either limit the available floor plate on this site, or require re-alignment.

Depending on proposed land uses, requirements for s. 13 planning obligations may further impact on site viability.

Cumulatively, all of these issues will cost money to rectify and impact upon site viability.

Turning to environmental constraints, the maritime climate will need to be factored into the design of any future scheme. Robust architectural detailing will be needed to withstand wave overtopping and sea spray associated with stormy weather, and the specification of building materials will need to consider premature corrosion, due to the high salt content associated with maritime conditions.

The conservation area designation will require a scheme that shows architectural merit and high quality detailing.

Servicing and access will need to be overcome, with the agreement of the Department of Infrastructure, and waste storage will need to be accommodated within any future scheme in a discrete manner.

The condition and layout of older building stock on the corner of Duke Street and Regent Street may present problems when meeting modern retail needs and there may be difficult decisions to be made in respect of these older buildings, as to whether they are renovated and refurbished or demolished to make way for a more contemporary scheme that is more suited to contemporary retail needs.

## Recommendations

Early discussions with lenders and developers are recommended, to give greater clarity on current lending appetite and timing, post Covid, and the Loch Promenade site should be used as a test case for an assessment of viability and subsequent development of a tailored package of supporting measures to enable development to take place.

A study in respect of soil stability could provide technical information at an early stage in the design process that can inform the design of structures at sub grade levels.

The full extent of the underground car park needs to be ascertained, as this may impact upon the extent of floor plate that the site can accommodate, and affect building heights.

Existing utilities provision should be assessed, particularly in respect of any utilities provision that crosses the Loch Promenade site.

Discussions with the Department of Infrastructure are recommended, to explore the potential benefits for an additional vehicular access point onto Loch Promenade.

Gutter clearance to buildings on Victoria Street.

A building condition survey for retail premises on Regent Street and Duke Street should be undertaken to assess how these premises cater for the needs of modern retailing. This study may also be extended to premises on Victoria Street, to explore any deterioration in building condition due to gutters becoming blocked by vegetation.

A designated bin store for hire by smaller retailers operating in the main shopping street is recommended within the extent of the CTA,

and where wholesale re-development takes place, bin storage provision should be included within the building envelope.

It is also suggested that current market demand for tourism uses on the Promenade are investigated, to determine whether a shift has occurred on Douglas Promenade from tourism accommodation to residential accommodation, or otherwise. This will enable a better understanding of future needs to be considered within the Promenade in the future.

The location and size of the site within the townscape, and the use options available, provides an opportunity for a bold statement of urban regeneration in the island's capital. Such a scheme including an appropriately located new town square on Regent Street, overlooked by Marks and Spencer and 1886 could create significant opportunities for retail and leisure investment, whilst providing space for outdoor leisure activities in a well-designed and safe environment. In so doing, its development is part of a bigger strategic picture which can unlock benefits for everyone.

Whatever options are considered, the opportunity for such high quality proposition, incorporating much needed public realm, is a vitally important aspect of developing this part of Douglas which could act as a catalyst for the wider redevelopment of the town as previously envisaged in the Lower Douglas Master Plan.