



## Belfast City Council

Report to:	Special Development Committee
Subject:	Renewing Communities Local Masterplans – West Belfast Enterprise Council Spatial Regeneration Plan
Date:	27 February 2008
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### Relevant Background Information

The Development Committee at the meeting in December agreed to receive presentations in relation to the development of the five local area Masterplans within Belfast, by RPS on behalf of the Department for Social Development, and a spatial regeneration plan for West Belfast & Greater Shankill being developed by consultants on behalf of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Enterprise Council.

The proposed presentations seek to provide an update on the work that has been carried out by various consultants since their appointment last year to develop the proposed documents.

### Key Issues

#### Local Area Masterplans

The Masterplans are being developed by DSD as part of the Renewing Communities Agenda and are intended to identify strategic action required to address areas of major dereliction. The documents are intended to “provide a vehicle to coordinate and orchestrate public sector investment and leverage in private sector investment”.

RPS since appointment has been engaged in consultations and data identification, across all of the areas, to inform their work and provide a context to any future recommendations. As part of this process they have met with representatives from a range of organisations including Council Officers and Members.

The consultancy team is currently drawing up draft masterplans to capture the economic opportunities identified. This work will include development of investment options, proposed street environmental works, proposed site acquisitions, early wins and longer-term aspirations. The proposals will be included within the draft plans, which are projected to be completed sometime after Easter. A report by the consultancy team, compiled for this Committee, is appended (**Appendix 1**).

### West Belfast & Greater Shankill Spatial Regeneration Plan

The establishment of the Enterprise Council was a key recommendation of the Task Forces' reports, published in February 2002. It was envisaged that the Enterprise Council could assist in implementing the recommendations of the Task Forces which pertained to the local small business sector bringing greater coherence to the promotion of and support for local businesses. The aim of the Council is 'To release the productivity and economic potential of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force area and their inhabitants through education, enterprise and investment - both indigenous and foreign direct investment - thereby boosting local incomes and employment opportunities and facilitating the renewal and regeneration of the area".

One of the six core objectives for the Enterprise Council is to develop a spatial regeneration plan for West Belfast & Greater Shankill from the perspective of business and entrepreneurial development, consistent with our vision of the area as a vibrant economic area within the Belfast region. This proposed spatial plan for West Belfast and Greater Shankill is therefore being funded and undertaken on behalf of the business community in area. During initial consultations with the appointed consultants it was suggested that it would be beneficial for the Committee to be made aware of the work which this privately funded organisation was undertaking.

The approach being adopted in the spatial regeneration plan is to focus on the identification of the primary regeneration drivers for the area and to develop more detailed concepts around these priority projects. The Enterprise Council in making the presentation to the Committee is seeking to both raise awareness of the initiative and if appropriate endorsement of the approach by the Council.

### **Resource Implications**

#### Financial

No additional financial implications involved with these recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

Members are asked to:

- Note the information in respect of the presentations; and
- Consider the endorsement of the spatial regeneration approach for West Belfast and Greater Shankill.

### **Documents Attached**

**Appendix 1 – Report by the Consultancy Team (Renewing Communities Masterplans)**

# **Appendix 1**

## **Report by the Consultancy Team (Renewing Communities Masterplans) to the Belfast City Council Development Committee, 27th February, 2008.**

### **1) Background**

RPS Planning and Environment, in conjunction with Jon Rowland Urban Design was commissioned by the Department for Social Development to prepare five physical development Masterplans for inner city areas of Belfast, including Lower Shankill, Crumlin Road, Lower Falls, Shore Road / York Road and Inner East. The masterplans are being developed as part of the Renewing Communities initiative, and are seeking to tackle the problems of dereliction and under-utilised assets in the target areas.

The consultancy team, reporting to the Renewing Communities Masterplan Steering Group, (which includes representatives from all the key statutory Departments and agencies including Belfast City Council) has undertaken a significant programme of area analysis, identifying all areas of dereliction and under-performing assets. The team has also analysed the many plans and strategies that impact both directly and indirectly on the target areas. The team has also completed a process of detailed consultations with key stakeholders and community representatives. The programme of consultation included a series of walkabouts with Neighbourhood Partnerships, a series of three day workshops with public, private and council representatives, and more recently 'drop in sessions' were held in each of the areas for Ward Councillors.

The consultancy team provided a report to the Development Committee at its meeting of the 12th December 2007. The report outlined a number of key issues that had become apparent during the consultation process. These included the need for early interventions to secure public and community confidence; the need to provide a greater focus for public investment, to lever in the significant private sector investment that will be required if we are to achieve the regeneration of the target areas; and the need to find a 'new role' for each of the target areas, to ensure that the areas can contribute to the development of Belfast as an international destination.

### **2) Current Position**

In addition to a review of the very many plans and strategies already completed both for the target areas and adjacent or related plans, the consultancy team has been mindful of the need to liaise with other consultants currently employed on a range of studies which will impact upon the target areas. In addition to the Strategic Regeneration Frameworks for North, West and East Belfast, other key plans underway include the Masterplan for the Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Barracks, the North West Quarter, South West Quarter, Lower Oldpark Spatial Strategy, the West Belfast (Private Sector) Regeneration strategy and the Newtownards 2012 Action Plan. The consultancy team has met with the consultants for all these plans to ensure complementarity between plans.

A key objective of the Renewing Communities Masterplans has been to support delivery of the objectives of the Neighbourhood Renewal strategies and the consultancy team has worked closely with stakeholders to secure this. The aforementioned workshops culminated with meetings with representatives from local neighbourhood partnerships. At these meetings, we outlined the significant regeneration activity already underway in the target areas and discussed with them their views as to the future role of their neighbourhood in the new Belfast. We then

sought views on what they considered to be the priorities for the area, to take advantage of the economic drivers within the local area and to lever in the significant private sector investment which will be required in order to deliver sustainable regeneration.

The consultancy team has since completed mapping of all regeneration activity and has developed the ideas that arose from the workshops. These ideas are presented in this report, in which we suggest the role that the areas could play in the future; the key drivers and barriers to growth within the target areas; and the areas which we believe need to be tackled in order to drive forward sustainable regeneration of the five target areas.

### **3) Area Analysis - Overview**

Throughout our consultations with stakeholders, a number of consistent messages have emerged. The need to make sense of the many plans and strategies that have been prepared or are underway within the target areas; a call for early, effective and visible action on the ground; the need to provide a tighter focus for public sector investment, acting as pump primer for the private sector; and the need to provide mechanisms whereby communities and the private sector can be better engaged. During the aforementioned workshops, we discussed these issues and worked with stakeholders to resolve three key issues:

**What are the barriers to and drivers for change?** There is a great deal of activity, both from the public and private sector, already underway in the target areas. In addition, each of the areas needed to identify what are the key opportunities to help us realise the ambitions of partners. Moreover, we need to understand what barriers are preventing sustainable change and how can these be overcome?

**What is the future role of the target areas?** The target areas have all suffered economic and social disadvantage. However, as Belfast changes and opportunities for development arise, it is important that the areas can identify a new role for themselves within the emerging Belfast.

**How can we make best use of limited public resources?** – There is an acceptance that the funding available to the public sector for regeneration investment is limited. There is a need therefore to ensure that private sector investment is maximised.

Turning now to each of the target areas, we have outlined below the key findings of the study to date.

## **Crumlin Road**

Bounded by a number of interfaces and with a falling population, the Crumlin Road target area suffers from significant problems related to dereliction, particularly in the Lower Oldpark area along the interface (some of which is now being converted into a park) towards the North and West of the estate. The troubles have had a major impact upon the confidence of local residents and this has had an impact upon their readiness to accept private sector investment into the area, particularly in relation to housing investment. A spatial strategy prepared by the Housing Executive is currently the subject of public consultation.

Hillview Enterprise Park is at present a failing estate. Many of the industrial units are vacant and the area suffers significant environmental difficulties. Along the Crumlin Road itself, there is evidence of some vibrancy with private sector apartments being constructed along the road at various points. However, despite being an obvious route from the town centre to the North of Belfast, pedestrian links to the area from the town centre are poor and the road houses a number of temporary buildings belonging to the Mater Hospital which adds to the poor quality of the overall street environment.

The area does benefit from housing the Mater Hospital, a major employer for North Belfast. However, the lack of amenities along Crumlin Road means that an opportunity to harness employee spend in the area in local shops is being lost. The area does however offer a remarkable opportunity for economic development in the shape of the former gaol and Courthouse. The owner of the Courthouse is keen to develop the facility as a hotel, which, if coupled with the redevelopment of the gaol for tourism, will act as a tremendous spur for growth of the area. Indeed, in discussions with stakeholders, the idea of developing the area as a 'quarter' or district linked to the gaol has been warmly received. The proximity of the town centre to the area and opportunities for further site acquisitions for the regeneration of the road mean that the area can begin to create a new, positive identity and harness the economic opportunities that the redevelopment of the gaol and court will bring.

With this in mind, the team has worked to develop the role of the area as a 'gaolhouse' quarter. Whilst the proposals for the gaol must still be finalised, the team believes that the Renewing Communities Masterplan can be used to lay the foundations for the successful implementation of a future development on the site and of the Courthouse. The plan for the Crumlin Road will link closely with the plan for Lower Shankill. Both areas must benefit from any eventual redevelopment of the gaol and courthouse.

## **Lower Shankill**

As with the Crumlin Road target area, the Lower Shankill has been particularly badly affected by the troubles and more recently by paramilitary feuding. The estate has seen a marked fall in population levels and now suffers from high rates of voids and derelict properties. Large areas of the estate have been cleared, leaving significant empty space at the heart of the estate and adjacent to the Shankill Road between Peters Hill (the main link to the town centre) and Agnes Street. The street environment along the main Shankill Road is poor. In addition to the open spaces identified above, the buildings along the Road up to the Agnes Street junction are generally of a poor quality. The 'bonfire' site gives a particularly bad impression of the area and poor street management exacerbates this.

Some evidence of private sector interest has been identified. New apartments and retail outlets have been constructed in various parts of the Road. However, there is a

deal of opposition to such developments from within the community. This lack of trust between the private sector and community has been in part due to a lack of confidence within the community similar to that within Lower Oldpark. However the lack of trust has been exacerbated by the need for improved housing (the housing stock within the estate is poor) and indeed the lack of quality design of the private sector apartments.

The North of the estate is bounded by the Crumlin Road. The environment is adversely affected by the temporary buildings identified earlier and the subject of our proposals identified for the Crumlin Road. The road realignment at Agnes Street has reinforced links with the Lower Oldpark and offers an opportunity for development linked to the Courthouse. The industrial estate on Agnes Street and Health Centre are of poor architectural quality.

The recently completed Regeneration Strategy completed for Lower Shankill on behalf of the Housing Executive outlines plans for the regeneration of the site through private sector led affordable housing. The need for the private sector to undertake such redevelopment is clear and the plans developed for the estate will see this much needed development take place over time. There are other grounds for optimism too. The new Health and Well-being centre will considerably improve the overall street environment. The retail offer further up the Shankill Road is strong and there is evidence that this could be extended. Some edge of town retailing is also performing well. The benefits of close proximity to the town centre and moreover the opportunity afforded by the Courthouse and gaol must also be harnessed. The large areas of land in public control also offer a unique opportunity for the public sector to pump prime regeneration activity.

In determining a role for the Lower Shankill, we again feel strongly that the gaolhouse 'quarter' should encompass both the Crumlin and Shankill. This will create stronger, more confident communities and moreover create a far more positive image of both areas than is currently the case. However, whereas the focus of private sector investment related to the gaol should be along the Crumlin Road (bars, apartments etc) we feel the role of the Shankill Road should be as the 'High Street' with a strengthened retail and residential offer.

### **Inner East**

The Inner East area again has suffered significant dereliction as a result of the troubles and in particular the interface along Templemore Avenue. The area has been blighted by empty properties, exacerbated by the vacation of a number of public buildings, including most recently the former Belfast Institute. Along Newtownards Road itself, the retail offer is weakened by rows of empty shops and a poor urban environment. There is a lack of open space and playgrounds within the area. Housing stock is, in places, poor and the lack of demand for social housing in the area means that significant redevelopment of the Housing stock will need to rely upon private sector led investment.

The Inner East Neighbourhood Action Plan recognises these difficulties and has identified a number of key actions to guide future regeneration of the area. The actions, which we can support through this Masterplan, include objectives relating to developing links to the Titanic Quarter and City Centre; redevelopment of Templemore Avenue as a civic hub; regeneration of the High Street; and the development of a new heart for East Belfast.

The recent announcement of the BIG Lottery grant funding for the Green Community Walkway is a massive boost to the area and to the Agencies involved and it is vital

that we build upon this to realise the full potential of the walkway. There are many other positives that augur well for the area. As well as the close proximity to the Town centre and Titanic Quarter, the proposed redevelopment of the Sirocco Works will have a positive impact on the area.

These developments will act as a tremendous fillip to the area, supporting an already strong retail park (Connswater) and the thriving East Belfast Enterprise Park, which is now expanding. There is moreover a real opportunity to realise the true potential of the Portview Mill / Brown's Mill complex, particularly in the light of the Lottery award, making this part of Inner East the heart of East Belfast, linking to investment already underway at Holywood Arches.

### **Lower Falls**

Dereliction within the Lower Falls area is not the problem that it is in the other study areas. In the Lower Falls, demand for housing is very high and the problem is not one of dereliction but rather one of a lack of space for new housing and of greatly under-utilised assets. The Lower Falls is effectively 'hemmed in' by the interface with the Shankill to the North and the Westlink to the South and East. Key problems include anti-social behaviour, particularly around the Dunville Park area, a weak economy and poor environment.

Though very close to the City Centre, access is poor, particularly for pedestrians. This is a particular problem at Grosvenor Road. Here many of the coaches and buses, which enter the City Centre, do so at the bus station there. The visitors' first views of Belfast are poor, with the police station and adjacent under-utilised land providing a poor, even threatening environment. Along the Falls Road, the area between Conway Mill and Divis Street is a major asset that is failing to deliver its potential regeneration impact.

A significant amount of work has already commenced within the area. Renewing the Routes has invested in schemes along the Falls Road and Springfield Road. Further investment is planned via Renewing the Routes including a gateway scheme at Divis Street junction. The ongoing improvements to the Grosvenor Road crossing over Westlink will also greatly improve access to the City Centre.

The strong sense of community is an asset to the area. The developing Gaeltacht quarter is currently centred on Beechmount and Andersontown Road. We feel strongly that the Gaeltacht has tremendous potential. However to fulfil that potential, we believe that the quarter needs to embrace the Lower Falls area too. We believe there is real potential for creating a gateway to the Gaeltacht from the Divis Street and Grosvenor Road junctions. This in turn will help realise further economic opportunities for the Lower Falls, as attractions such as St. Peter's Cathedral, St. Congals and Conway Mill can benefit from being a part of a wider tourism and cultural programme.

### **Shore Road / York Road – 'The Gateway to Belfast'**

In common with the Lower Shankill, Newtownards Road and Crumlin Road, the Shore Road / York Road target area has seen a significant drop in population numbers and has a number of interfaces which have contributed to large areas of dereliction. Particularly badly affected is the Tigers Bay area, notably along the interface along Duncairn Gardens. The Mountcollier and Gainsborough areas as well as the interface at Skegoneill Avenue are further areas suffering stress. The lack of demand for social housing in these areas, together with lack of necessary funding,



means that a solution to housing problems in the area will likely need to be found via the private sector and provision of affordable housing.

The road system exacerbates the environmental problems created by the dereliction identified above. The link to the town centre via York Street has effectively been shattered and is dangerous both to pedestrians and traffic. Whilst this junction is the subject of consultation by DRD, and plans for amendments to the junction are in place, funding has yet to be confirmed. The North Queen Street link to town is again poor, suffering from its proximity to an interface area and poorly lit. Finally the M2 and poor crossings over the motorway effectively cuts off the area from employment opportunities on the Port. The area is serviced by one rail stop at Yorkgate, which has poor pedestrian access to the area.

Although the area sits adjacent to the tourism attractions of the Castle, zoo and Cavehill Park, there is poor signage to these attractions, this despite the area being the entry point to tourists from boats from Liverpool and Heysham. The entry point to Belfast for many, it is currently uninspiring. However it is this entry point to Belfast that we feel is the economic opportunity that needs to be harnessed if the area is to realise its potential.

There is evidence of private sector interest in the area. The edge of town retail development at Yorkgate is strong and will be boosted by the now approved planning application for a high-rise apartment development on the Iceland site. The former flax mill has been redeveloped successfully and will soon be operational, offering modern office provision in an outstanding building. The new Health and Well-being Centre and Housing Association development on the Grove Road will lift this part of York Road.

### **Next Steps**

The consultancy team is currently drawing up draft masterplans to capture the economic opportunities identified above. This work will include development of investment options, proposed street environmental works, proposed site acquisitions, early wins and longer-term aspirations. The proposals will be included within the draft plans, which are to be submitted to the Steering Group shortly with the final plans projected to be completed sometime after Easter.