

**NORTH WEST QUARTER PART TWO:  
BASELINE REGENERATION ISSUES REPORT**

**RESPONSE**

**BELFAST CITY COUNCIL**



**Belfast City Council  
Jan 2007**

## **Draft response to the "North West Quarter Part Two: Baseline Regeneration Issues Report".**

### **General**

The Council supports and welcomes the Regeneration Principles and objectives as set out in the document and the terms of reference for the Masterplanning process i.e.:

"To produce a non-statutory framework for the promotion and implementation and timing of urban regeneration initiatives in this area"

"...the masterplan should identify how to release the full regeneration potential of the area and provide a development framework to guide the use of DSD's regeneration powers to prepare Development Schemes, undertake land acquisition and disposal and extinguish roads".

The issues document should, however, give an indication as to the proposed next steps and the potential timescales and phasing of the schemes and how this can be achieved in conjunction with public realm works, the other masterplan proposals (North West Part One and North East Quarters) and transport proposals. The timescales should be clarified as the suggestion for the Part One areas is that it will follow the work on the North East Quarter which is scheduled to be "complete by 2011". An indication of the effective timescales would allow a more effective assessment of the potential initiatives or projects including funding, viability and likely responsibilities, taking account of RPA and other organisational changes.

In short a more coherent assessment of the overall potential for regeneration of this part of the City Centre should be presented for a more effective consultation. Whilst the plans refer to a cross section of issues in the ten main sections (Socio-economic Trends, Existing Land Use Mix, Housing, Economy and Enterprise, Education, Retail, Tourism and Culture, Transport, Design, Other Proposals that Impact on the Area) there is limited consideration or supporting information and only a basic summary of conclusions is provided in the form of a section entitled Priority Actions.

In addition, the document fails to illustrate the commercial viability of the suggested priorities or the smaller scale potential redevelopments. The document should outline the basis for proposed redevelopments in the overall concept appraisal and address the terms of reference in relation to the "framework to guide the use of DSD's regeneration powers". The plans for the North East Quarter include significant a retail development and closer analysis of the viability of the developments proposed for the North West Quarter areas needs to be undertaken.

The proposal for this Quarter was intended to centre on the integration of the "physical, social and economic regeneration of the wider North West Quarter of the City Centre outside the Main Shopping Area which extends to the north of North Street and to the west of Millfield and Carrick Hill". This necessitates close integration with the emerging proposals of the "preferred" developers for the adjacent quarters and a realistic assessment of the potential for the area following the implementation of improvements in the retail core.

In the context of the elapsed time since the development of the other city centre masterplans it was anticipated that the potential proposals and priority actions would have been more developed in terms of their integration and the background investigation/ assessment. However, the priority actions as listed almost exclusively relate to continued work on the processes for consultation and coordination of actions towards the production of the final "masterplan".

On the basis of the initial consultations having provided a broad picture of existing and proposed activity it would have been appropriate for this document to have incorporated further assessment of the potential for specific initiatives and presented a framework for the future development of the area. Any frameworks should have taken account of the emerging statutory planning context

(BMAP) and related the retained or existing uses within the area to the potential for developments that would facilitate the delivery of the vision and objectives identified above.

The document contains little indication as to the commercial assessment of the land use sectors or the potential for the proposed initiatives such as independent retail, creative industries and the social economy. Prior to the inclusion of any such proposals an assessment of the implications through an economic appraisal, in the broadest sense, would be required. Consideration should be given to the application of economic forecasting techniques to assess future growth sector potential rather than assumptions or trend extrapolation.

A body of work has been developed in relation to the evening economy but limited reference to the potential for this complementary sector is included within the report. In addition, the work of the Council and others to develop specific measures around tourism and the enhanced legibility for the city has been omitted.

The document could usefully have incorporated "specific proposals" from plans for the adjacent areas and the incorporation of proposals e.g. Browns Square, Renewing the Routes (formerly Arterial Routes), Neighbourhood Renewal and other DSD initiatives etc. It is not clear how alignment of these potentially overlapping initiatives and actions will be assured.

The issue of Land ownership is a critical dimension of regeneration and could usefully have been incorporated into the document in relation to the potential for integrated activity and specific interventions or investment.

The final masterplan should seek to influence other funding sources and initiatives. It is therefore important that the draft or scoping document begins to capture the potential for this activity and addresses the issue of prioritisation and timescales.

### Detailed Comments

**Socio-economic Trends:** There is no assessment of the information set out in this section in relation to the manner in which it might influence actions or provide an indication of priorities. Any consideration of trends should be carried out sensitively as the approach needs to have a broader base that will seek to reverse the apparent negative trends for depopulation and increased physical separation. The work should look at the manner in which trends have been influenced in other successful regeneration areas and build on the work arising from the Belfast Masterplan (developed for the Council by the Buchanan consultancy) and the results of the Council's work on "State of the City".

The neighbourhood renewal priorities identified in the document are to:

- *Overcome physical/interface barriers to employment opportunities;*
- *Create new economic and social development opportunities; and*
- *Uplift urban quality and mend linkages.*

Whilst this provides a useful initial position to influence the continuing implementation of Neighbourhood Renewal and other processes the document should have taken these broad priorities and identified the focus for interventions based on the emerging work of the Council and other organisations.

There is no analysis of the census or other demographic information in relation to the linkages to potential initiatives or projects. The section concludes with the statement: "*From this information a picture of multiple deprivation in the wider area is presented. However, in many cases this is more acute in the smaller neighbourhoods of Peter's Hill and Carrick Hill especially in terms of social housing tenure, unemployment levels, perception of health, long term illness, no car ownership and religious polarisation*". Although identified as "key trends" there is no indication as to influence they may have on the final masterplan or proposals. Factors such as low car ownership have implications for policies or proposals in relation to accessibility and the importance of the public

realm, pedestrian access and parking standards. These factors are in turn influenced by other policies and locational factors such as the proximity to public transport and accessibility of local services. The final plan should include a more robust assessment of these factors and their potential relationships to wider policy and initiatives.

The **Existing Land Use Mix** section provides detail as to the spread of land uses within the Part Two area and highlights the more mixed nature of the area in comparison to the Part One retail core.

The commentary in relation to the identified sub-areas is limited and subjective in relation to both the uses and the initial problems or issues identified. Statements such as the *"campus generates much direct and spin off activity within the site and surrounds and is an important regeneration activator for the area"* are not quantified or provided with any context in relation to their influence on the objectives for the area and issues such as connectivity.

In relation to the housing areas there is little information as to the local environments, quality, demand, accessibility or their potential /need for change.

In the Peter's Hill section there is some consideration of the potential incompatibility of existing land uses which could inform the proposed actions within any final masterplan. However, the conclusions as to the development opportunity sites are unsubstantiated and not related to the context in terms of the BMAP "opportunity sites".

There is very limited consideration of the general commercial sector and the potential for such uses in the short to medium term that the masterplan is likely to address. This weakness is compounded by the inclusion of commercial elements in the "Community/Civic Uses" section of the commentary.

The Carrick Hill section presents similar issues in relation to the commentary and the absence of supporting or quantified data in relation to some of the statements, for example the retail businesses *"are all local, marginal businesses hidden between much dereliction, vacancy and surface parking"* and *"generally the area has a run-down, neglected appearance"*.

The final sub area dealing with sub area "Land to the north of North Street" in relation to the commentary on Central Library usefully starts to develop the basis for a project or initiative that could form part of the final masterplan. It should, however, be set in the wider context and draw out the influence it could have on the area in terms of activity, related benefits and connectivity issues.

In contrast the comment that *"much capacity exists for further residential development within the area"* is not provided with contextual information or an indication as to the form and location of such provision. The inclusion of this conclusion within this section is also unnecessary duplication as the next part of the document deals with housing.

There is no consideration of the current parking provision or issues in terms of the uses within the immediate area or in relation to the policy context of BMAP or the BMTP.

It would have been useful if the section included a land ownership map that could have highlighted where the Public Sector may have been in a position to provide greater influence and coordination of potential initiatives or actions.

In terms of analysis, this section should highlight where there are areas of incompatibility that should be addressed or areas of change or vacancy suggesting problems and needs for interventions or actions. Localised issues such as conflicting land uses should be priorities for either interventions or amelioration works in relation to the boarder visions and objectives.

The **Housing** section analysis appears simplistic with general commentary in relation to the segregation of stock and current position in relation to the demand and supply issues in relation to housing in the adjacent communities.

Whilst the information in relation to the results from consultations is informative there is no balance in relation to any analysis focussing on the potential for development in terms of the form of housing and the potential location / numbers. This information could have been developed from the work in relation to statutory documents and experience from other cities that have achieved successful inner or city centre regeneration.

Whilst there are references to existing proposals within the consultation responses section this is not set within an assessment of the area in relation to the overall development potential. There are no references to initiatives that have addressed the provision of integrated social housing or the potential for the development of mixed tenure developments. It should also be noted that elsewhere in the UK and Europe apartment style family accommodation has been successfully developed.

The conclusions are not based on any broader assessment of potential taking account of the existing and proposed developments in both the Part Two and surrounding areas. It is not clear how the conclusions could relate to measures or initiatives in the final masterplan. The recommendations are for further exploration without a clear indication as to how this would relate to specific initiatives or areas within the Part Two area.

The **Economy and Enterprise** section has limited analysis by economic sector with limited references to the general aspirations of the main employers/ landowners in respect of any business expansion plans or operational changes.

There is limited supporting information on the "opportunity sectors for further consideration" (Social Economy and Creative Industries) in relation to the appraisal of the proposals, the likely extent of the development and the implications in terms of the form of development and the potential for it to be accommodated within the existing built fabric or infrastructure.

The creative industries, based on the experience in Cathedral Quarter are subdivided into: Design (Architecture, Craft, Design and Design Fashion); Expressive (Music, Performance Arts, Visual Arts, Antiques); and Media and Information Services (Advertising, Film, Multimedia, Games, Software and Television).

There is limited reference to the benefits of cluster arrangements and the potential characteristics that could support these uses or sectors. In order for the masterplan to be effective there would have to be a robust assessment as to the potential for these sectors and the potential interventions that may be required to provide the stimulus for development. A body of information is readily available in relation to the status of this sector and the potential benefits of clustering having been developed through recent work by the Council. It should also be noted that the Council has supported successful interventions; developed a strategy and established an associated network for this economic sector.

There is little consideration of the potential for any other enterprises either related to these clusters or potential changes in the wider economy of the city and the other main sectors present in the Part Two area. It is not clear whether or not the potential for the evening economy and the leisure aspects of city centre regeneration have been effectively considered within the document.

An indication should be provided as to the proposed composition of the area from retail and other commercial use perspectives.

Whilst the **Education** section contains commentary in relation to BIFHE and the Central Library there are no masterplan related recommendations or conclusions in relation to the existing facilities and their potential to influence the vision or objectives for the masterplan. There is no assessment of the existing situation in respect of broader educational provision or social infrastructure, in the study area or adjacent communities, and any potential impact that could arise from additional residential development.

There are indications that the educational providers may wish to work in partnership with other organisations but no articulation of what this could mean in terms of initiatives or land uses within the area and the positive impacts that could be generated either through the support of other developments or through any actual partnership developments.

It would be useful if the document had captured the views or perspectives of the existing users of the facilities in terms of feedback or surveys and translated that through to plans or aspirations that were mutually supportive of the improvements sought by the local communities.

The **Retail** section conclusion that there is an opportunity to *"create an independent, robust and diverse retail offering on North Street and the area to the north to complement the core area and North East Quarter/Cathedral Quarter"* is presented in the absence of any supporting information or quantification in relation to potential floorspace. There is no geographic dimension to the proposals or commentary other than where it relates to existing uses.

The commentary in relation to the existing "independent" sector is uncomplimentary and negative categorising it as generally *"offering low grade, marginal business located in neglected premises often adjacent to derelict and vacant buildings and sites"*. This pejorative assessment does not support the conclusion of the section although it is stated that unspecified "major investment" is required to improve the offering in the area. It is not clear as to whether this investment should be in support of the existing businesses or the removal of the identified dereliction. In either eventuality a clearer assessment and rationale for any potential intervention should be incorporated and related to the development of the potential for the new independent retail development.

As in the case of the housing section there are references to the perceptions of areas as being "non neutral". This is, however, included without recommendations in relation to how the issues could or should be addressed as a precursor or part of the proposed interventions/ investments.

The requirements that Donegall Street be brought "back to life" is welcomed. However, the document, other than referring to the issue of neutrality, makes no assessment of the type of initiatives that could form part of the masterplan or the form of investment that could address this issue. The introduction of mixed uses and the relationship to the broader evening economy approach could usefully have been considered in conjunction with housing support initiatives such as Living Over the Shop – subject to assessment both in relation to their potential and the likely locations for such activity.

Whilst a number of issues are highlighted as having been raised during the consultation including niche markets and specialist retail there is no analysis or clarification as to whether there would be merit in their potential being further explored or inclusion within any final plan.

The document makes no reference to work carried out by the Council in relation to the development of a Street Trading Strategy and the legislative powers available to the Council as a statutory agency in this regard.

The **Tourism and Culture** section of the document is very weak without any analysis of the potential within the area and only limited reference to existing initiatives.

The conclusion that the "priority is to work with BIFHE & Central Library to maximise delivery opportunities" fails to recognise the role of the Council and other statutory bodies in relation to tourism and cultural developments for the city centre and the surrounding communities. There is no reference to the Council's Cultural Tourism policy or the work in relation to enhancements of visitor and information signage.

Also in the Priority Actions under the heading Tourism and Culture – 12.8 it states that the opportunity exists to use tourism and culture to break down non-neutral land uses in areas which are considered community interfaces. This statement is not substantiated in the body of the report or the priority actions.

Whilst the **Transport** section contains a range of consultation responses and detailed extracts from the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan in relation to the transport issues considered to have an impact on the area, the conclusions are limited to the pursuit of opportunities with Roads Service.

There are clear objectives for the final plan in relation to improved connections for pedestrians within the City Centre and enhanced public spaces and street environments. The report should therefore include clear priorities for actions that could enable early delivery of these objectives rather than the limited conclusion in relation to the pursuit of opportunities.

The report usefully identifies the issues under a series of headings:

- *Strengthen the Physical Connection between North Belfast and the City Centre*
- *Strengthen Gateways and Reduce Intrusion of Roads/Traffic Lights/Crossings etc*
- *Reduce Severance Effect from the Main Arterial Routes and Improve Pedestrian Crossings*
- *Traffic Management Improvements at Library Street/Little Donegall Street Intersection with Royal Avenue*

The section conclusion is welcomed in relation to the statement and acceptance that "severance caused by traffic dominated roads severely limits regeneration spreading from the core area to the wider study area and beyond". However, the document fails to demonstrate more fully how Phase Two of the Masterplan can integrate with and eventually benefit the Millfield to Westlink and Carrick Hill to Westlink areas through a specific range of initiatives to address the objective of improved connections for pedestrians within the City Centre. Proposals for changes to the highway infrastructure have implications for other land use proposals and vice versa. In order to effectively assess the potential for changes or modifications it is necessary for greater detail to be developed in relation to the other proposals and an assessment of the existing infrastructure.

Further attention is needed in relation to the integration of car parking and the potential for more alternative car parking arrangements that would maximise the potential for active frontages and contribute to long term viability and vitality in the area.

The report should also provide greater detail in relation to proposals for the redevelopment of Millfield to secure enhanced accessibility within the area. The role and status of the roads within the area will have critical implications in relation to the potential for the delivery of other proposals.

The identification of the gateway concept and the modifications to existing streets to create a more appropriate character is welcomed in relation to the connectivity between the area and the surrounding residential communities.

The **Design** issues and proposals follows on from those developed for Part One and the conclusion that a "requirement for high quality design should be paramount in all future developments to raise the profile and attractiveness of the area" is welcomed.

The absence of keys for the diagrams within the Design section of the document makes it difficult to follow the development of the concept. The emphasis appears to be on the east to west movement and gateways with secondary connections identified into and between the different quarters. It is not clear how the design proposals relate to the existing and potential open space other than the statement that "existing nodes and spaces" would "benefit from investment".

There is no prioritisation of initiatives within the design section in relation to either the introduction of mechanisms to secure enhanced design or specific proposals that should be prioritised to improve the overall area. A closer relationship should be drawn with the work that has developed for the Public Realm within the core of the city centre to identify the principles that could usefully be translated into the surrounding area to improve the quality of design and the legibility of the city centre as a whole.

It is also considered that in any event, every effort should be made to avoid unwelcome deviation from the principles of good urban design during the work with the preferred developers for the North East and North West Quarters and the other main interested bodies when detailed design proposals are being drawn up. There should be a greater emphasis on the introduction or maintenance of active ground floor uses within the area with reference to the necessity for adequate aesthetic and functional lighting.

Before the identification of proposals for additional "pocket parks" there should be consideration of improvements in the utilisation of existing space and the potential for improved linkages as part of proposals for the wider area.

The plan should identify the important design elements to be retained in the Quarter including the buildings that will form the basis for business continuity in the area as redevelopment takes place. The character areas should be broader than the pure design with reference to the types of uses that can influence the design or utilise the elements of the urban fabric that are likely to be retained.

The summary analysis for the design section incorporates a number of unsupported references to proposals and plans (not necessarily design related) by organisations or agencies within the area that should be refined prior to consideration for inclusion within any final plan.

The **Other Proposals that Impact on the Area** section provides only limited comment on the initiatives identified from the consultations. The only detailed consideration relates to the Crumlin Road Gaol and the document fails to address how the consideration of the issues for the Part Two area could be used to influence existing or imminent programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal.

The **Priority Actions** section has not been prioritised and concentrates on processes and requirements for further work rather than tangible actions. Many of the actions appear to relate to the necessity for further repetitive exploration of issues with organisations that have already been consulted.

In the context of the elapsed time since the initiation of the work on the Part One and Part Two plans it would have been anticipated that further analysis of the issues identified from the consultations in 2005 would have been carried out. This work should have explored the potential overlaps and issues to provide a more effective document for consultation. In the absence of more refined analysis it is difficult to assess or comment on the issues raised in a effective manner.

The priority action in relation to "*good urban design*" should suggest or identify the mechanism whereby coherence or control could be secured for future developments, in terms of existing statutory arrangements or additional measures.



The "*Central Library*" actions should also address the issue of linkages and the quantification or identification of the wider potential benefits to the area from the retained and improved facility.

The "*Neutral Uses/ Housing*" actions should be disaggregated to reflect the different issues and incorporate references to existing initiatives.

The Consultants/ document should also address rather than highlight the need for further exploration of issues to provide recommendations and options as a basis for consultation in advance of the production of the final masterplan.

The actions in relation to "*Education*" and "*Tourism & Culture*" are limited and in regard to the latter do not reflect the potential for the sector in the city centre and wider city.

In relation to the "*Belfast Telegraph*", "*Transport*" and "*NIHE*" it is again not clear as to why the exploratory work or engagement has not been carried out to clarify the position or the potential in relation to the land ownership, initiatives and operations.

The "*Social Economy*" and "*Independent Traders*" actions are again purely exploratory and do not appear to be based on any assessment or consideration of the viability of such proposals within the city centre or wider economic sectors.

The North East Masterplan linkages should be priority actions as they relate to the Part Two study area. The work with the preferred developer should focus on the proposed or emerging proposal to influence their development and ensure that the implications are considered for emerging Part Two schemes.

The absence of an appropriate draft timetable for the development and implementation of the final masterplan is a fundamental weakness of the report and the priority actions. The opening narrative suggests that the works in the Part Two area would follow on from the implementation of the North East Quarter. The document goes on to state that the implementation of the North East Quarter will not be completed until 2011. This suggested post 2011 timescale for the implementation of the "*works in the North West Quarter*" is impractical both in relation to the likely baseline data validity and the necessity for early intervention in the general North West Quarter area.

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