



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	Cathedral Gardens (Buoys Park) Options
Date:	13 January 2011
Reporting Officer:	Gerry Millar, Director of Property and Projects
Contact Officer:	Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure

1.	Relevant Background Information
	<p>The Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, at their meetings on 20 November 2009 and on 21 May 2010, considered a number of Council owned properties in the context of the City Investment Strategy and potential asset realisation. It was agreed that a cross departmental Assets Realisation Group be established to undertake appraisal and assessment of certain land and property assets and to bring forward options for redevelopment and/or disposal. It was also agreed to undertake planning assessments and title research in respect of a number of properties.</p> <p>Assets considered included those already declared surplus to requirements; non operational assets not yet declared surplus, and operational assets that may have additional value beyond their current use.</p> <p>Cathedral Gardens (location map enclosed at Appendix 1) was one of the assets included as part of this asset realisation consideration.</p> <p>It was agreed that officers would undertake an assessment of options regarding the future use and/or redevelopment of the site taking into account its current use, with a future report to be taken back to Parks and Leisure Committee in the first instance, given that committee's operational responsibility regarding potential options.</p>
2.	Key Issues
	<p>Cathedral Gardens occupies a prime location within the city centre, surrounded by new growth areas including Cathedral Quarter; Royal Exchange and the proposed new University of Ulster campus, and the commercial value of these sites is potentially enhanced by this area of open space as is the value of the open space itself.</p>

On the other hand, Cathedral Gardens is also a strategically important area of public open space in Belfast City Centre, which is extremely limited in terms of public open space with the nearest equivalent open space being the grounds of the City Hall. There are a number of smaller and often poorly developed public open spaces such as Writers Square, Bank Square, Blackstaff Square and Cornmarket.

If the potential adjacent developments of the University of Ulster and Royal Exchange take place over the next few years the importance of Cathedral Gardens as an open space will become even more important as the daytime population of their part of City Centre increases.

While it is incumbent upon City Council to seriously look at its assets and ensure they are providing best value, such value is not always in the form of a commercial return.

The Parks and Leisure Committee as custodian of the City's open spaces is well aware of the value of well managed and maintained public spaces in assisting the broader social-economic objectives of a City as well as providing and promoting an attractive environment.

Bearing the above in mind, and in accordance with previous Committee decisions, Council Officers have obtained a Planning Assessment for Cathedral Gardens and looked at potential options for the site. Discussions have also been held with a number of interests who have ideas for the site ranging from private developers to arts groups to the University of Ulster.

The Planning Assessment indicates that Cathedral Gardens is a strategically important area of public open space in the city centre and any development proposals should be consistent with this. In planning terms it falls within the definition of open space, which has a presumption against the loss of open space subject to certain exceptions. The planning consultants are however of the view that sensitively designed smaller scale development as part of a comprehensive landscape/public realm improvement scheme to enhance and enliven the open space and deliver community benefit/planning gain, in keeping with the principle of the policy exceptions, is likely to be acceptable.

They advise that retention of Cathedral Gardens as open space is potentially valuable to adjoining landowners including the University of Ulster and Royal Exchange as it could be used to justify/offset higher density development.

The Planning Assessment makes reference to the Department for Social Development's Belfast City Centre 'People and Places' Public Realm Strategy which identifies the site as a prime location for a public realm regeneration scheme. The Belfast City Centre Public Realm Masterplan envisages a catalytic public realm project for Cathedral Gardens that 'announces' arrival at the City Centre. The draft Cathedral Quarter Vision and Framework for Strategic Development (which was considered at the Development Committee on 6 December 2010) recognises the opportunity that Cathedral Gardens presents and

	<p>emphasises the importance of enhancing the quality of public space around the Cathedral and connectivity to other spaces throughout the Cathedral Quarter and beyond.</p> <p><u>Options</u></p> <p>(i) Retain Cathedral Gardens in council ownership as open space in view of its wider social-economic contribution to this part of the city centre. There are however ongoing maintenance costs and currently no identified funding to improve or upgrade.</p> <p>(ii) Given that retention of Cathedral Gardens as open space enhances the adjoining sites and that planning approval for development on such sites may rely upon the retention of this open space, enter into an agreement with adjoining landowners, including the University of Ulster, to upgrade and redevelop as a high quality public realm/city park and potentially maintain and manage.</p> <p>(iii) Test the market in terms of development of the site for commercial purposes, although the market may be limited given the planning position.</p>
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3.	Resource Implications
	None identified at this time.

4.	Equality and Good Relations Implications
	None at this time.

5.	Recommendations
	Committee is recommended to approve Option 1 as the default position, i.e. retain Cathedral Gardens in Council ownership as open space, but agree that officers explore options with adjoining landowners, including the University of Ulster, regarding the future potential of the site in terms of upgrading, management and future maintenance options.

6.	Decision Tracking
	The Directors of Parks and Leisure and Property and Projects will jointly explore the potential of the site and report back to the Parks and Leisure Committee.

7.	Documents Attached
	Appendix 1: Location Map