



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Framework for student housing in the city
Date:	21 st March 2014
Reporting Officer:	Suzanne Wylie, Director of Health and Environmental Services
Contact Officer:	Siobhan Toland (Head of Environmental Health)

1	Relevant Background Information
	<p>The Belfast Learning City context</p> <p>1.1 The draft Belfast City Masterplan Review highlights development of the Learning City as a key theme aimed at harnessing the value of the higher education institutions across the city to maximise their impact on the economy, vibrancy and diversity of the city and the region.</p> <p>1.2 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as anchor institutions in the city contribute significantly to the economic, social and environmental prosperity of the city, as well as providing a knowledge hub in the city. This is also recognised in the emerging Integrated Economic Strategy for the city which highlights the role of the Higher Education sector in developing skills and access to employment.</p> <p>1.3 Research has shown that students studying and living within cities make a significant contribution to local and regional economies. Belfast currently has 5 Higher Education Institutions across the city and by 2018 will have 2 major University campuses close to the city centre. There is also a growing international student market which presents a significant opportunity for Belfast in terms of international marketing, tourism and knowledge research.</p> <p>1.4 Attracting students to study and live in the city not only requires excellent education providers, high quality campuses and a wide choice of quality courses, but also the right city infrastructure including IT connections, transport and housing. Student housing of whatever nature needs to be attractive, high quality, safe, secure, accessible and affordable. It needs to be well planned and appropriately managed to ensure that there is positive integration with existing communities.</p> <p>1.5 The '<i>Belfast: A Learning City - Strategic Study of the Holyland and wider university area</i>' report was presented to the Council on 2nd April 2012 and outlined a number of recommendations in relation to student housing, to make Belfast a learning city and destination of choice for students. Two of the recommendations were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Development of a coherent city wide strategy for student housing promoting choice and fit-for purpose accommodation; and b) Identifying locations, innovative arrangements and measures to attract alternative funding for housing students in the city; </p> <p>1.6 As agreed by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 23 August 2013, a stakeholder engagement exercise on an initial 'discussion document' has been completed. This report seeks approval of the final framework document.</p>

2	Key Issues
2.1	The Council has been leading a joint Inter agency team on the development of a student housing strategy involving DOE Planning, DSD, NIHE and SIB, DEL, DRD and the main HEIs).

2.2	The purpose of the Framework Document is to set the policy context for student housing in the city. The full document and summary is attached in the appendix.
2.3	Belfast is different to most other large university cities in that the proportion of available managed purpose built student accommodation (PBSA) is considerably lower than elsewhere in the UK. Local students also tend to live with others from their home towns and stay in their student accommodation during weekdays only. Also whilst there are also lower numbers of international students, the HEIs are keen to attract new students and grow their existing base and there is a DEL target to increase the numbers over the next few years. This means Belfast needs a fairly unique solution.
2.4	<p>A stakeholder engagement exercise was completed between September/October 2014 on an initial 'discussion document' which presented proposals to address student housing requirements in the city. Following consideration of stakeholder responses, a final Framework document has been produced (provided in Appendix 1) which presents evidence to address student housing requirements in the city and promote Belfast as a Learning City, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Learning City context (including the value of students within the city); ▪ Evidence of market and demand for student accommodation; ▪ The current policy context for Belfast and evidence of approaches in other large university cities, ▪ New planning criteria for Purpose Built Student accommodation (PBSA) proposals.
2.5	<p>The planning criteria proposed in the document could form the basis for a future revised planning policy for PBSA (HMO Subject Plan, Policy HMO7) after 2015, following transfer of planning powers under Local Government Reform. The criteria are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. <i>Proximity: the development is within 15 minutes walking distance of a university/college campus or on a high frequency public transport route.</i> ii. <i>Design: the nature, layout and design of the development are appropriate to its location and context and would not result in an unacceptable impact on local character, environmental quality or residential amenity. The development should be designed to deter crime and promote personal safety.</i> iii. <i>Management: an appropriate Management Plan is in place to minimise potential negative impacts from occupants and the development on surrounding properties and neighbourhoods and to create a positive and safe living environment for students. This may require an Article 40 Planning Agreement with the relevant authority prior to the issue of planning permission (or Article 76 of the 2011 Planning Act);</i> iv. <i>Impact: the development would not result in an unacceptable impact upon surrounding residential neighbourhoods in itself or when considered alongside existing and approved student housing provision.</i> v. <i>Need: the development meets an identified need for the type of accommodation proposed.</i>
2.6	The Planning Service has also confirmed that once the Council has endorsed its support for these criteria, they will consider them as material in their planning considerations.
2.7	The framework document sets out the policy context. However a number of other interventions will be needed to achieve a choice of high quality student accommodation in the city. These other interventions include policy, legislative, practical and financial interventions around which work is currently ongoing. This includes improved HMO regulation, an accreditation scheme for student accommodation, complementary regeneration schemes in areas around the HEIs, pre-application discussion guidance for planning applications; and further work on the financial viability and options for facilitating/ supporting private sector or partnership delivery of PBSA schemes.
2.8	<p>As previously agreed by Committee on 23 August 2013, work is continuing with key partners, including SIB, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explore the feasibility of options for facilitation of purpose built student accommodation; and ▪ Develop a Business Case in conjunction with SIB to be submitted to DFP to assess whether there is scope for public sector financial support for delivering the strategy.
2.9	A further report on the outcome and recommendations of this work (in para 2.7) will be brought to Committee later in 2014.
2.10	As the Council inherits the responsibility for the development of a local area plan, it is likely to consider how this plan can control inappropriate student accommodation and support more managed purpose built accommodation.

3	Resource Implications
3.1	Costs associated with publishing the framework have been allowed for within the revenue estimates.

4	Equality and Good Relations Implications
4.1	The Good Relations and Diversity Officer has been consulted and has advised that equality screening of the Framework is not required at this stage. The Framework document highlights the commitment of Belfast City Council and the Joint team partners to ensuring that equality and good relations matters are considered in delivery of all aspects of the Framework. As strategy proposals/interventions are progressed in more detail by the relevant agencies, these will be equality screened in line with corporate equality policy.

5	Recommendations
5.1	The Committee is requested to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt and publish the Framework document and the summary; • Note the further work on feasibility/support for PBSA; and • Support the planning criteria for PBSA schemes in consideration of future managed PBSA proposals.

6	Key to Abbreviations
PBSA – Purpose Built Student Accommodation SIB – Strategic Investment Board DSD – Department of Social Development HEI – Higher Education Institution DEL- Department for Employment and Learning DFP – Department of Finance and Personnel	

8	Documents Attached
Appendix I – Framework on student housing and purpose built student accommodation (Full Version) Appendix II – Framework on student housing and purpose built student accommodation (Summary document)	