

**DRAFT for discussion**

## **Key elements of Belfast Healthy Cities' response to Planning Reform consultation**

### **Question 3. Do you think it appropriate to commence a 'plan led' system in advance of the transfer of the majority of planning functions to district councils under the Review of Public Administration?**

We believe introducing a plan led system is essential in the context of community planning, and strengthening local government. A plan led system offers a major opportunity to link spatial planning strategy to the overall community plan, and therefore helps in building and delivering a common vision. A collaborative model is key to improving health and wellbeing, as health is determined by a wide range of social and physical factors, and must be considered across policies and plans to achieve effective health improvement. Therefore, it is important that the final reform proposals provide more detail on the links and clear guidance as to how the local development plan process can, and should, link to the community planning process.

It is very important to commence the transition in advance of the transfer of powers, so that a framework is in place that allows simultaneous development of the LDP vision and the community plan. This also allows the necessary capacity building and associated culture change to begin early.

A plan led system also helps provide certainty and transparency for all stakeholders. However, it is vital to get the regional policy framework right, to ensure consistency and equity across Northern Ireland and to ensure the right priorities are made.

### **Question 4. Do you agree that the objectives contained in paragraph 3.6 are appropriate for local development plans?**

The proposal to significantly increase public engagement is essential. Most importantly, it improves opportunities to take into account how spatial planning affects local health issues. It can also indirectly improve health, by enabling people to influence decision making that affects them and therefore have greater ownership of development in their area (which may also serve to reduce objections).

The objectives of visioning places and strengthening evidence based planning are crucial for good and healthy development, which is thought through over the long term. The health sector is able to offer a strong evidence base, both on health outcomes and on the links between the built environment and health. A core theme of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network over the last ten years

has been healthy urban planning, which focuses on the latter, and Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to support a stronger evidence base by signposting to helpful sources.

Also see response to question 5.

**Question 5. Do you agree that the functions contained in paragraph 3.7 are appropriate for local development plans?**

We believe that the first two points under paragraph 3.7 should be made explicit objectives of local development plans. However, we believe supporting social and economic development (rather than 'needs') is an element of sustainable development, and can be achieved in a mutually beneficial way. For example, increasing mixed land use and facilitating increased public and active transport can improve health (physical in that it reduces obesity and mental in that it enables social interaction), reduces environmental pressure and can also boost the economy by creating places people want to spend time and money in. Point 1 should, accordingly, be amended to be less adversarial in tone.

Similarly, point 2 emphasises co-ordinating public and private investment where development can maximise wellbeing. We believe the role of planning in promoting wellbeing goes beyond this, as spatial plans as well as individual decisions fundamentally impact on people's lives and their ability to access jobs, services, socialise, choose transport mode and so on. Indeed, we believe there is a strong argument that this should be a core objective of planning, and that a key foundation of local development plans should be an analysis of how they are likely to impact on wellbeing.

Ultimately, sustainable development which focuses equally on economic, social and environmental needs is now necessary to ensure the future prosperity of Northern Ireland; a healthy population is a prerequisite for all three and economic development must consider a future where access to resources, especially fossil fuels, is inevitably more constrained.

**Question 6. What are your views on the proposal that a district council's statement of community involvement must be in place before any public consultation on the local development plan?**

We believe this is essential. In addition, there should be guidance on what constitutes good practice, including targeting of harder to reach groups, methods of involvement, timescales, communicating outcomes etc. Focus should be on good practice, although minimum standards should be set to ensure acceptable involvement is guaranteed.

**Question 8. Do you agree that a preferred options paper should replace the issues paper?**

This enables more meaningful public engagement, which is important for health and wellbeing (see question 4). It is essential, however, that the planning authority retains an open mind and willingness to amend options, to ensure engagement is genuine. Belfast Healthy Cities would recommend that community engagement also forms part of the information gathering stage, so that local issues and concerns become apparent and can be addressed at the earliest stage possible.

**Question 21. Do you agree that district councils should be required to prepare sustainability appraisals as part of their local plan preparation process?**

As outlined under question 5, Belfast Healthy Cities believes that a) sustainable development is a prerequisite for the long term health and wellbeing, including economic wellbeing, of people in Northern Ireland and b) health and wellbeing should be a cross cutting, key objective of plans. Sustainability appraisal offers a way of ensuring plans support sustainable development, and there is also potential to integrate health considerations in sustainability appraisal. This could reduce the burden of required assessments, which we acknowledge has resource implications.

Belfast Healthy Cities has considerable experience in health impact assessment (HIA), which is a methodology and concept for assessing how plans will affect health and how positive impacts can be strengthened. However, in 2006-07 Belfast Healthy Cities also initiated work with DHSSPS and NIEA (then the Environment and Heritage Service) on integrating health into SEA. We would be pleased to explore ways of supporting the Planning Service to restart this work.

**Question 31. What are your views on the suggested elements contained within a performance agreement, and setting a timescale specific to each individual application?**

The Introduction to the consultation document notes that the pre-application discussion teams are multidisciplinary. This is very positive and should be retained. However, representation from the health sector would be important to ensure health considerations are highlighted at an early stage.

Belfast Healthy Cities would recommend that sustainability appraisal is made a requirement for regionally significant development, and also larger applications in

the major development category. This would help ensure that the final decision is evidence based and draws on all necessary evidence.

**Question 33. Do you agree that developers should hold pre-application consultation with the community on regionally significant developments?**

Pre-application consultation is vital to allow stakeholders to make their views known, and thus strengthen the evidence base for decision making. It is also important to strengthen stakeholders' ability to influence decision making that affects them. This can directly benefit health and wellbeing as well as the planning process, by improving confidence and ownership. Developers should be expected to adhere to guidance on good consultation practice and minimum acceptable standards; there may be merit in utilising guidance for the Statements of Community Involvement Councils have to prepare. It should also be considered if a similar (but proportionate) statement should be required for developers, potentially as part of the performance agreement.

Pre-application consultation should be a requirement for both regional and major development. It should also be promoted as good practice for local development. Opportunities to offer incentives, such as faster processing, should be explored to encourage uptake in the local development category.

Councils should be consulted as part of pre-application consultation. The exception would be cases where one or more individual Councils are party to or have an interest in the proposal, which should potentially be excluded.

**Question 35. Do you have any views on what the form and process for verifying and reporting the adequacy of pre-application consultation with the community should involve particularly in relation to the elements indicated above at paragraph 4.32?**

Consultation should be carried out by an independent facilitator; the Department or local Councils could manage a list of approved facilitators. The report should detail the methods of consultation, the extent of objections, any written submissions and outline how the proposal has changed as a result of consultation.

It is important that adequate notice is given to stakeholders, to allow them to undertake any more detailed work such as EIAs or SAs, if they so wish - this should be at least 8-10 weeks. Invites to participate should be issued directly to those materially affected by the proposal, while particular consideration should be given to hard to reach groups.

**Question 36. Do you agree with introducing the power to decline to determine applications where pre-application community consultation has not been carried out or the applicant has not complied with the requirements of pre-application community consultation?**

This is an important deterrent that should help ensure pre-application consultation is meaningful. The power should be used extensively, when warranted, to maximise the deterrent.

**Question 45 and 46 Do you support a power for district councils to hold pre-determination hearings with discretion over how they will operate, where they consider it appropriate for major developments?**

**Question 46. Do you consider that there are other circumstances in which district councils should have the scope to hold such hearings?**

This could help strengthen local ownership of and confidence in the process. However, a broad regional framework should be established to ensure consistency.

They could potentially be used in relation to highly contentious local development, or to provide evidence to support decision making on regionally significant development.

**Question 49. Do you agree that, post-RPA:**

**a) the list of statutory consultees should be extended; and  
b) categories of development, linked to the development hierarchy, that require consultation (including pre-application consultation) before applications are determined by the planning authority, should be introduced?**

This is crucial to ensure that all relevant viewpoints and potential impacts are considered in decision making. Belfast Healthy Cities stress that the health sector, and specifically the public health sector, should be a statutory consultee to ensure that health consequences are considered.

Communities directly affected by a proposal should also be included as statutory consultees.

**Question 51. If so, what do you consider the specified timeframe should be?**

This should be proportionate to the size of each application; potentially a sliding scale could be introduced. The 21 day timeframe employed in England would appear sufficient for the majority of applications.

**Question 53. Do you agree that the planning authority should be able to require that, where possible, proposed development should enhance the character of a conservation area?**

This is important to meet the core purpose of conservation, ie retention of the historic character of an area. Preserving historic and local character can support health and wellbeing by providing a sense of identity and continuity with the past, which promotes mental health. It can also support the economy, as places with local interest and character attract visitors.

The health benefits of retaining local character apply in all areas, and therefore planning should facilitate development that respects the traditional character of an area. Other types of development, such as introducing apartments into an area of family housing, can severely disrupt the local community, and in more deprived areas cause gentrification (a situation where wealthier, new residents displace old residents). These phenomena can harm mental health and also create social instability, with potential spin-off costs for example for policing.

**Question 54. Do you agree that the normal duration of planning permission and consent should be reduced from five to three years?**

The long duration of permission can lead to blight, ie. vacant sites that can attract anti social behaviour, and stifle development around the site. This is harmful for surrounding property values, and can also harm health and wellbeing by creating fear, which discourages people from being active in their local area.

**Questions 74-79 – Developer contributions**

Public infrastructure typically increases land and development values. It would be equitable that the public benefit from this increase.

The levy system could create greater certainty for all stakeholders.

A wide range of infrastructure should be eligible for funding through developer contributions, while the usage would be informed by needs identified in the development plan and community plan.

Affordable housing should be included, along with public transport infrastructure, active travel infrastructure, schools, medical facilities, open space, water and sewerage, flood defences, community facilities and recreational facilities.

A regional level would ensure consistency and avoid a post code lottery situation, where Councils would compete for development.

Relevant thresholds and scales should be developed, with contributions proportionate to development size. A lower threshold based on development size, but not type, would appear appropriate.