

Response to Living Places: An urban stewardship and design guide

Department of the Environment

October 2013

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on this guide.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation working to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Belfast and beyond. The organisation acts as the link to the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network on behalf of Belfast as a WHO Healthy City, and currently holds the WHO secretariat for the Network. The role of Belfast Healthy Cities is to bring organisations and sectors together to consider how their work contributes to health and wellbeing; to share evidence and build capacity, and to introduce and pilot new concepts linked to core themes identified by the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. Healthy urban planning/environments have been a core theme for Healthy Cities for a number of years, and work in Belfast has recently focused in particular on exploring elements of child friendly cities. DOE is among Belfast Healthy Cities' key partners, alongside Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Bryson Group, DHSSPS, DSD, DRD, NIHE, Public Health Agency, QUB and UU.

Belfast Healthy Cities (BHC) welcomes the Living Places guide as a new approach to place making. In particular, we are pleased to see the principles underlying the guide and the wider perspective focusing on social issues and deprivation, alongside environmental and economic considerations. This is vital for place making that works for people and communities, which in turn ensures places that are environmentally sustainable and economically prosperous; this is helpfully underlined in the guide's assertion that living places are not a luxury, but a necessity.

Place, and indeed land use planning, fundamentally shapes people's lives, and through that their health:

- Zoning plays a key role for the job opportunities people can avail of, and in extension, has an impact on people's income.
- Access to transport is a closely linked factor, which in particular affects people on lower incomes who are less likely to own a car – limited public transport and long distances between residential and employment centres can significantly curtail job opportunities for these groups and thus compound disadvantage.

Conversely, significant health benefits can be gained through positive places that support people.

- green space offers opportunities for recreation and stress relief, and also acts as a meeting space where children, families, teenagers and older people can naturally share a space.

Belfast Healthy Cities has in recent years explored in particular child and age friendly cities, through initiatives such as Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children, a model that engages with primary school age children to explore their views about and wishes for their local neighbourhood. KidsSpace is another initiative exploring child friendly city centre space, with the aim of identifying how this can encourage families to use city centre services and retail more often, in addition to exploring how allowing children access to the city centre can encourage healthy development and a responsible attitude to shared space. The overall finding from these initiatives is that much can be done within existing spaces, through relatively minor adjustments such as creating more open space and managing traffic speeds – a key wish from both children and families engaged in these initiatives has been for new ways of working and new attitudes, which emphasise positive place, as outlined in this guide. Belfast Healthy Cities can provide further information on the results of this work.

A new programme being developed by BHC, is based on a Scottish model, *Good Places, Better health for children*, which focused on four health challenges relating to children and place: obesity; mental well-being; asthma and injuries and emphasises the importance of shaping place to support and improve health and well-being. Poorer environments are associated with disadvantaged neighbourhoods where already children and their families experience inequities in health,

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the list of 10 qualities outlined in the guide. Our key comment would be that it is important to recognise the cross linkages between them, and identify ways of linking more effectively in future:

- local stakeholders should be key players in identifying the context within which planning and place making takes place; the lay expertise and local knowledge offers valuable insights into the unique qualities and challenges of any given place.
- collaboration also goes beyond occasional workshops on a specific development proposal; effective collaboration and engagement is undertaken on a regular basis, where possible through existing mechanisms such as community councils, residents' associations and so on. The capacity and ownership built in this way is likely to both encourage better places, and strengthen relationships between local people, developers and decision makers, in ways that can reduce conflict.

It would be helpful to identify in this context the potential role for existing facilitatory bodies, such as Community Places, and also outline how the strengthened pre application consultation arrangements in the forthcoming new planning system link to this. In particular, it would be important to outline how community planning can contribute to effective place making, and how forthcoming structures could effectively support this.

Belfast Healthy Cities would also welcome a stronger emphasis and understanding of health and inequities as a cross cutting issue. In the current draft, health is mentioned only in relation to the 'welcoming' quality, and air pollution as the key health issue. We would emphasise the initial paragraph above outlining the fundamental impact of place and planning on people's health - *How places are planned, designed, constructed and managed affects the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits affecting health and inequities.*¹ and can provide evidence to support this.

In this context, we would also note that while it is vital to ensure city and town centres remain viable, especially in larger towns and perhaps more dispersed settlements local neighbourhood centres also play a key role in maintaining the sense of community. Therefore, concentration of all services to the town centre may negatively affect in particular mental and social wellbeing, reducing opportunities for chance social interaction and potentially increasing fear of crime and anti social behaviour. Identification of elements key for local neighbourhoods and enhancing the attractiveness of town centres – through elements such as described in this guide – would seem most effective in discouraging edge of town and out of town retail development.

A particularly relevant reference in this context is the work undertaken by academics at the University of the West of England in Bristol, who have led the development of the concept of healthy urban environments, and identified the synergies between health, the environment and the economy. *Healthy Urban Planning* (Barton & Tsourou 2000, Spon Press, London) outlines 12 qualities of healthy places – many of which strongly resonate with the 10 qualities in the Living Places guide. *Shaping Neighbourhoods* (2nd edition, Barton, Grant & Guise 2010, Routledge) offers a detailed overview of design elements that enhance health as well as crafted and welcoming places.

Finally, Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome clarification of the status of the Living Places guide in the forthcoming planning reform. What is its relationship to the forthcoming Single Planning Policy Strategy, and what weight will local authorities as planning authorities be expected to give to it? It would also be helpful if the guide offered further ideas and suggestions for how collaboration can take place, and how new stakeholders can be engaged. We would also note that there are further relevant stakeholders beyond the built environment and creative sectors – health professionals have valuable insight into the attitudes and behaviours of local people, as do community and voluntary sector organisations. Belfast Healthy Cities is currently tendering a project seeking to develop a shared understanding of healthy urban environments across all these sectors, and would be pleased to support this process, should that be helpful.

¹ [Review of social determinants and the health divide in the WHO European Region: executive summary](#)

In conclusion, the guide offers an important new perspective in place making, and Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome a strong position for it in shaping future place making and planning policy and practice.

Healthy Lifestyles: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote healthy exercise?

Planning can create attractive, safe and convenient environments that encourage people to walk or cycle to work, shop, school and other local facilities. Development plans can ensure adequate recreational opportunities with equality of distribution among the community and in suitably accessible locations.

Social cohesion: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote social cohesion?

Urban planning cannot create local community or cohesive social networks. However, social cohesion can be facilitated by creating safe and permeable environments with natural social foci where people can meet informally. Mixed-use development in town centres and commercial environments as well as residential neighbourhoods can help widen social options.

Housing quality: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote housing quality?

Housing quality can be improved by ensuring that detailed design, orientation and appropriate energy efficient materials are used in construction, with siting to reduce heat loss. Providing a sufficient range of housing tenure with good basic services is essential. Adaptable buildings can be planned for community uses such as health, education and leisure.

Access to work: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote access to employment opportunities?

Urban planning, linked to strategies for economic regeneration, can assist by facilitating attractive opportunities for business and can encourage diversity in employment and ensure that local job opportunities are retained. Equitable transport strategies can also play an important part in providing access to job opportunities. The provision of local work opportunities can encourage shorter trip lengths and thus reduce emissions from transport.

Accessibility: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote accessibility?

Planning can improve the choice of different transport modes available, in particular by making local facilities more accessible to people walking, cycling and using public transport. Safe and environmentally sound cycling and walking networks can be promoted and traffic managed to slow, calm and reduce vehicle speeds in residential areas.

Low -input food production: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote local food production with low input of chemical fertilizer and pesticides?

Local food sources such as market gardens, allotment gardens, smallholdings and city farms can enable people on low incomes to grow their own fruit and vegetables. New healthy living centres are developing such initiatives on site to combine opportunities for health and wellbeing with gentle exercise. Urban planning can assist by preserving and protecting areas for small-scale community projects and opportunities for local food production. Urban planning can also encourage a diversity of shopping facilities in local centres, helping to alleviate individual reliance on large supermarkets outside town centres.

Safety: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote safety and the feeling of safety in the community?

Traffic calming techniques to slow the speed of road traffic and give priority to pedestrians and cyclists are key to a safer environment. The detailed design and layout of residential and commercial areas can ensure a natural process of surveillance over public space that reduces both the fear of and the actual incidence of crime.

Equity: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote equity and the development of social capital?

The planning system can help in the process of providing social or low cost housing; it can facilitate the provision of job opportunities; and through its influence on the safety and convenience of neighbourhoods, can improve patterns of movement by providing a range of easily accessible facilities. Local networks of mutual support are enhanced by these factors, which can help foster a sense of local community.

Air quality & aesthetics: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote good air quality, protection from excessive noise and an attractive environment for living and working?

Planning can assist by putting local environmental quality high on the agenda in commercial and industrial areas as well as residential ones; by segregating polluting and noisy industrial uses of land; by promoting less polluting forms of public transport, deterring car use and restricting lorries to specific routes; and by supporting the development of energy-efficient buildings and neighbourhoods.

Water & sanitation: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote improved water and sanitation quality?

Urban planning can impose standards and criteria that any new development has to meet. It can promote on-site water collection, purification and infiltration back into the ground or replenishing streams. It can aim to ensure that development does not take place where there is a threat from flooding and that aquifers are not contaminated when agricultural, transport and industrial processes are planned.

Quality of land & mineral resources: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote the conservation and quality of land and mineral resources?

Planning can ensure that recycled and renewable materials are used whenever possible in the building construction process. New building types can be encouraged that incorporate composting and growing food. Urban open spaces and local allotment gardens, market gardens, smallholdings and food growing activities on the urban fringe can be safeguarded. Brownfield sites or derelict urban land can be redeveloped.

Climate stability: Do planning policies and proposals encourage and promote climate stability?

Urban planning can affect the rate of human emissions of greenhouse gases by influencing energy use in buildings and transport and by developing renewable energy sources.