

## **Response to Bank Square Regeneration Project**

25 February 2010

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the regeneration proposals for Bank Square in Belfast.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organization working to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Belfast and beyond. Belfast is also a leading WHO European Healthy City, designated to Phase V (2009-2013) of the WHO European Healthy Cities Network with a strong track record of meeting WHO objectives in the previous four phases. Key partners include Belfast City Council, Public Health Agency, Belfast HSC Trust, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Bryson Group and Queen's University of Belfast.

The key aim of Belfast Healthy Cities in Phase V is to integrate health and health equity in all local policies. A key area of work is healthy urban environments and design, where our aim is to support organizations in the built environment sector to develop policies and actions that strengthen health and well as regeneration and sustainable economic development.

Our comments are based on this overall approach and will be general in nature. We would, however, be pleased to contribute to further development of the Square by sharing more detailed relevant evidence.

### **General comments – benefits of open spaces**

- Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased that proposals are taken forward to regenerate Bank Square, which has significant potential as an open space of very human scale right in Belfast city centre.
- Spaces of this type can create important 'oases' in densely built up areas, which offer opportunities for recreation and relaxation. They can also become natural meeting places for people from a range of backgrounds, which supports social interaction and can contribute to social cohesion. Events of different types can strengthen these effects, which bring a number of additional benefits.
- Firstly, increased social cohesion and understanding across population groups is vital for a shared future. Social cohesion can also reduce anti social behaviour; a well used space that people feel ownership of in itself

runs a smaller risk of being vandalized. Having access to a pleasant space for recreation during the day can also increase the productivity of employees, which benefits employers, while a high quality open space can increase custom and profitability in nearby businesses. The opportunities for recreation and social interaction also directly support health and wellbeing, in particular mental wellbeing.

- Incorporating greenery in open spaces increases their attractiveness and can encourage use; even limited green elements can boost the relaxation effect. In particular, green space can help people cope with stress, which is both a major health risk and a factor in reduced productivity. In addition, green elements trap pollutants, which can help improve air quality in city centres, while especially trees provide cooling and shade. This can provide direct benefits to individual users, but also contribute to reducing the heat island effect, which is particularly relevant in the context of dealing with climate change. However, the design of green elements must be considered carefully to avoid creating dark corners and alleys, that can make people feel unsafe.

### **The environmental improvements**

- In light of the above, Belfast Healthy Cities finds the regeneration proposals for Bank Square in principle very positive. In particular, the provision of seating in the Square itself is welcome, as this improves access especially for older people. It can also support equity, as it allows use without the need to buy anything, which may be significant for people on lower incomes – whether students or people from more deprived areas. Appropriate lighting can improve opportunities to use the Square at night. However, the design and layout of these elements must take into account legibility and accessibility to the Square for people with disabilities, in particular people with visual impairments. Equally, it is essential to make the space inclusive and accessible for children; opportunities might be explored to incorporate elements enabling play such as appropriate height planting or a small number of swings.

### **The access routes**

- We are, however, concerned that the regeneration proposals do not appear to deal with key aspects of the Square, namely access from Berry Street and Bank Street, and the service areas of CastleCourt and Tesco's. The current access routes from Royal Avenue are dark and can generate fear; this is particularly the case with the alleyway running along the CastleCourt service yard, which is recognized in the proposals. As such, we are concerned that the value of regenerating the Square will not be maximized, as there are no open, inviting routes to it. This has particular

implications for visitors to the city, who may be no more likely than at present to use the Square, except for specific visits to Kelly's Cellars or Mourne Seafood Bar.

- We would welcome proposals to explore ways of opening up the routes, initially for example through improved lighting, potential (removable) public art on the walls facing the streets and more aesthetically pleasing gates around the service yards. The green wall, while a very attractive proposal, may be more appropriately located away from the alleyway, for example to follow the Tesco service yard wall along Bank Street, as it may serve to make the alleyway even darker, and may encourage anti social behaviour, due to the poor surveillance.
- Longer term, Belfast Healthy Cities support proposals to explore opening the original Berry Street, which would recreate links to the pedestrian area of Rosemary and Lombard Street, and on to Cathedral Quarter. This would open up new walkable routes across the city centre and could encourage people to utilize it for socializing throughout the day, which in turn could support both health and wellbeing and sustain local businesses that are essential wealth creators.

### **The temporary structure**

- In relation to the proposed kiosk structure, we would suggest further consideration of the purpose as well as the design. The design appears not in keeping with the character of the Square and may reduce its 'rustic' appeal, while it also contravenes the spirit of PPS7. The structure would also appear not to sit well with the entrance to the Presbyterian church, which already has an air of being 'boxed in', that does little to welcome churchgoers and support their dignity and self esteem. The café could bring unnecessary competition to the established caterers within the area, unless operated by one or a consortium of these. Belfast Healthy Cities would be interested in the extent to which existing establishments within the Square area have been involved in developing proposals for a space, as we believe they have a key role as economic and community players that sustain use of the Square.
- While an information kiosk could be useful, consideration should be given to what type of information it provides and for whom. A facility aimed at local residents, providing for example information on cultural and other events, could have greater potential than a visitor kiosk; in part because of the access issues outlined above, but more importantly as it would send a supportive and inclusive message to local users. However, there may also be other, more flexible and sustainable alternatives such as a permanent performance space, or alternatives identified by existing establishments in the Square. The latter might have the added benefits of job and wealth

creation, while supporting local establishments that are essential to retain and maximise the benefits of economic development within the local economy.

- In conclusion, Belfast Healthy Cities believes that the proposals constitute a 'facelift' to the Square, of which the environmental improvements are to be welcomed. However, more thorough going proposals to deal with access to the Square, the environment within the access routes and sustainable economic development within the Square would be vital to maximise the value of regenerating this important space, which has significant potential to kick start revitalization and more sustainable social use of Belfast city centre.

### **The consultation process**

- Finally, we would like to note some comments regarding the consultation process. We very much welcome the approach taken to public consultation, with proposals displayed very publicly in Berry Street Presbyterian Church. Approaches of this type are vital to encourage the public to engage in the process, while this input is essential to develop a public space that will be used and add value to the city centre.
- However, we are concerned that no professionals were on hand to answer questions and record comments, and that no explanatory literature was available. The maps require specific skills to interpret, which are beyond the capacity of many, if not most, users of the Square. Similarly, many users may have been comfortable leaving oral feedback which now was lost, as only individuals and organizations with specific interest are likely to contribute written responses. The venue may also have discouraged some users, as it may not have been viewed as appropriate neutral ground.
- Last, we are surprised and disappointed that the consultation period has been limited to two weeks, while official guidance outlines a minimum of eight. It would appear appropriate to amend this with at least one public session, in a suitable venue at the Square.