



Working together for a healthier Belfast

Response to consultation on Regional Development Strategy, Department for Regional Development

31 March 2011

Summary of response: Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Regional Development Strategy (RDS). Within the strategy, Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the strategic emphasis on ensuring that regional development provides social benefits, and is particularly pleased that the RDS includes an aim to promote development that supports health and wellbeing. Belfast Healthy Cities also welcomes important aims that support health, including aims to reduce reliance on the private car and develop green infrastructure.

Belfast Healthy Cities **supports the overall settlement hierarchy and clusters approach**, which offers an opportunity to preserve local character and build sub regional economic hubs. However, the approach could be **significantly strengthened if the RDS more decisively targeted development of different types – including housing - into specific areas deemed particularly suited for it**. This would enable each area to build on existing strengths to tackle weaknesses, and develop a unique offer highly valuable in a competitive investment arena. This approach could effectively support balanced growth, and avoid inadvertent negative outcomes such as increased separation of job growth and residential growth, leading to increased car reliance, loss of green space and increasing regional inequity. It would also support wellbeing and equity, by improving access to jobs and education for all population groups, supporting sustainable travel, and enabling people and places to build strong, cohesive communities.

It is noted that **many economically and socially successful cities and regions have built their strategy around a specific theme**, for example sustainability and technology in Sweden, or finance in south east England. This has attracted new residents and businesses and also international attention and investment, in a way shaped by local priorities.

In relation to proposals for Belfast City and the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area, Belfast Healthy Cities **supports proposals to manage travel demand and protect the natural setting**. There is significant potential to develop Belfast as a sustainable and livable city by developing green spaces and transport connections, and this can provide a basis for both repopulating the city and creating a world class, attractive city in which to live and do business. However, **greater attention is required on how to tackle deprivation** in a way that enables all population groups to improve their living conditions and life opportunities.

Introduction: Role and remit of Belfast Healthy Cities

Belfast is a designated Healthy City, and a leading member of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network, with a strong track record of meeting WHO goals and objectives. Belfast Healthy Cities is a citywide partnership working to improve health equity and wellbeing for people living and working in Belfast, and responsible to WHO for the implementation of requirements for designated WHO European Healthy Cities. Our focus is on improving social living conditions and prosperity in a healthy way, through intersectoral collaboration and a health in all policies approach. Key partners include Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Bryson Group, Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, East Belfast Partnership, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, PLACE, Planning Service, Public Health Agency, Queen's University of Belfast and University of Ulster.

Belfast Healthy Cities' office has a staff team dedicated to working with partner organisations to facilitate and support change. The office also acts as the link between the city and WHO, and Belfast currently provides the secretariat to the Network.

Healthy urban environment (HUE) is a core area of our work and focuses on highlighting and demonstrating how a high quality, people focused physical environment can support and improve people's lives, health and wellbeing. Our work involves sharing evidence and building capacity among planners and other built environment professionals, and increasingly also demonstrating benefits of a people centred approach to physical and spatial planning. Our comments are made in light of this rationale, which also stresses that people friendly, healthy environments are a cornerstone of thriving, vibrant communities and economies.

Enclosed with the response is a recent publication by Belfast Healthy Cities called *Healthy Places: Strong Foundations*, which covers the evidence base for the approach taken in the response. We would be happy to provide further detail or information on any issue highlighted, should that be helpful.

Positive emphasis on society and wellbeing

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the strategic emphasis on ensuring that regional development provides social benefits. Belfast Healthy Cities submitted an evidence paper for consideration in the development of the new RDS in May 2009, which emphasised the importance of considering people and their wellbeing as part of spatial strategy and policy. We are very pleased to see that the RDS now does include an aim to promote health and wellbeing. This provides a new and stronger basis for making sure that physical development contributes to making Northern Ireland a healthier place, and also puts greater onus on development plans to take health and wellbeing into account.

Belfast Healthy Cities is also pleased to see that the draft RDS includes aims to

tackle deprivation, develop green infrastructure, tackle climate change and reduce reliance on the private car. All of these can significantly support health and wellbeing, and contribute to other aims including economic growth.

It may be important to emphasise here that while the causes of deprivation are complex and the nature of deprivation differs for example between urban and rural areas, the physical environment can in many ways contribute to strengthening equity. In particular, land use decisions and transport provision can improve access to jobs and services, while regeneration and land use planning also can improve the quality of the living environment and therefore improve people's living conditions. It is important to note that growing the economy or creating wealth in itself provides no guarantee that the benefits are distributed evenly or serve to reduce income or living standard gaps. Concrete action must be taken to provide new opportunities for people affected by disadvantage or deprivation, and enable them to take advantage of those opportunities.

For example, exploring and investing in alternatives to the private car is important to support social inclusion in itself. Access to public transport, community transport and active travel also widen the relevant area within which people can seek work and training. In this way, transport policy is key to help tackle joblessness and skills gaps, which are key elements of the forthcoming economic strategy and also vital components of tackling deprivation.

Widening transport choice and access to public and active transport can also encourage people to use local town centres and businesses, which have suffered from the increase in out of town shopping that is based around private car transport. In particular good walking facilities into and within town centres can support this, as pedestrians bring life to the street and also are easier to attract into shops. Increased walking, cycling and public transport use also improves safety, both personal and road safety. From a perspective of tackling deprivation this is important, as safety concerns can be particularly significant in more deprived areas. For example, children in deprived areas are five times more likely to be injured or killed in a car crash than children from more affluent places.

While public transport provision is challenging in the current economic climate and in a predominantly rural region, a focus on alternatives should be given priority in the RDS, to provide a strong basis for the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) and support the economic strategy. There should also be a stronger emphasis on developing active travel, especially in urban areas. While environmental improvements to roads are part of the required package, it would be very welcome to see priority given to innovative measures such as increasing the road space dedicated to walking, cycling and public transport, and developing networks of footpaths, cycle lanes and bus routes that connect residential areas with key services and local hubs.

Green and open spaces support health relatively directly, by providing opportunities for physical activity and stress relief, as well as absorbing pollutants. Green spaces also provide natural meeting places and opportunities for children to play, which support mental and social wellbeing and can strengthen communities. All of these functions can, importantly, serve to reduce demand on public services, by reducing need for health care and potentially also anti social behaviour. This can be particularly significant in more disadvantaged areas, where people tend to have poorer health, and also face higher barriers to using high quality green space (including factors such as personal safety concerns and poor pedestrian connections, which can be more significant than physical access). In addition, green spaces can generate new economic and job opportunities in a range of sectors from food production to tourism. Again importantly from an equity perspective, the green economy offers potential for job creation at a variety of skill levels.

In short, green space is important in itself, but also for the significant added value it provides. We believe protecting and developing green infrastructure should be given stronger priority throughout the RDS, to maximise this potential.

Belfast Healthy Cities, along with partners including the Belfast Area Partnerships, Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, NIHE and the Public Health Agency have developed a set of indicators that can be used to monitor how physical development and regeneration initiatives affect the health and wellbeing of people in the target area. These indicators are intended to support developers and commissioners to make sure that initiatives provide best value for money, both in terms of people and regenerating the area in general, and pilots are currently ongoing on major regeneration projects in Belfast to test and refine the approach. We would be happy to provide more information on the indicator set, which will be formally launched in May 2011.

Settlement hierarchy, proposed settlement clusters and economic corridors

In relation to the proposed structure for regional development, Belfast Healthy Cities agree with the principle of a settlement hierarchy, as this can help preserve the character of different types of settlement, and also support effective service delivery. Within this context, it is appropriate that the RDS focuses on development in Belfast and Derry. Strong and prosperous regions require dynamic driver cities as focal points and catalysts, and the natural places for this are the two main cities. We also agree that identifying clusters of settlements is appropriate, as planning for wider areas can take a wider picture and avoid negative impacts of back to back development.

However, it appears unclear how the cluster approach fits with the economic corridors proposed in the Spatial Framework section in Chapter 4. While the clusters offer an opportunity to focus on supporting vibrant and sustainable local communities and develop effective local service delivery systems, the economic corridors notably do not promote or reflect any kind of coherent community, but primarily indicate the main movements of goods to and within Northern Ireland.

As Belfast Healthy Cities understands the aim of regional development to be to enhance communities and improve living conditions, we believe that the economic corridors approach should be viewed as supporting the clusters, rather than a leading approach in itself. A useful approach might be to map the main cities, clusters and rural areas against the key corridors, and identify the specific strengths and needs of each area, including potential areas of isolation. This would provide a clear basis for guiding development to the area most suited for it, and would also provide a helpful reference for sub regional planning officers.

Opportunities to strengthen health and the economy through strengthening targeting within RDS

Generally, the RDS could make more of the proposed settlement hierarchy approach. In particular, there is an opportunity to use it to target development of different types to specific areas, which currently is not taken. Belfast Healthy Cities would stress that such an approach does not threaten, but may in fact more effectively contribute to balanced prosperity, as it offers the opportunity to spark regeneration and revitalisation through a level of specialisation. With the currently outlined approach, there is a risk of missing opportunities by homogenising the region. There is also a risk of inadvertently working against the stated aims, such as reducing reliance on the car and tackling climate change, in particular if the approach serves to strengthen the existing trend of separating areas of employment growth from areas of residential growth.

This, in turn, can have negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of people in Northern Ireland, for example through affecting obesity, people's opportunities to meet and build strong, cohesive communities, and access to local services. There can also be negative consequences for regional equity, as more disadvantaged people and households are less likely to be able to either afford transport or relocate to job growth areas. Over time, this may also create imbalances in the rates take base of different clusters.

As an example how a more targeted approach might work, it may be desirable to focus business development linked to agriculture in the western region. Professional services, which are less reliant on immediate access to logistics networks, could be directed towards key towns around Belfast where a high proportion of the professional population lives. Some of the northern or central clusters could also support professional services, while a concentration of creative activity already is developing organically in the North West around Derry.

Advantages of the approach

It is important to note that highly mobile international businesses increasingly prioritise a good living environment for staff as a criterion when selecting location, and this is where many areas of Northern Ireland could capitalise on the natural

attributes of their surroundings, including the attractive environment and the relatively short distances between local centres. The potential of this could further be strengthened through development of the public transport network, alongside the proposed development of the green infrastructure.

In this context, it may also be desirable to adjust the housing figures in a way that more decisively targets residential development in desired ways. The key issue with the current model for calculating housing need is that it tends to reflect recent migration trends (as reflected by population change figures), rather than proactively look into future strategic aims and opportunities.

The key advantage of a strategy with specific, differential aims for each area/cluster is that it enables the area to build on existing strengths to tackle weaknesses, and that it supports the development of unique characteristics within each area. It is important to stress that a unique offer is increasingly important in the global competition for business, while a focus on existing local strengths can be used as an incentive for home grown small and medium business. In addition, it is important to note that successful cities and regions, in Europe as well as the US, are increasingly built around a deliberately selected theme. For example, Stockholm in Sweden has identified sustainability as its core theme, and alongside improved environmental conditions, has attracted significant numbers of new residents, as well as new businesses in particular in the innovative technologies sector. The achievements in sustainable development have also won Stockholm many international accolades, with accompanying international interest. The Öresund region, incorporating cities in south western Sweden and the Copenhagen area in Denmark has achieved similar results through a focus on education and technology, while the example of London as a global financial hub is well known. Similar developments are also underway in a number of major US metropolitan regions led by the Brookings Institute.¹

From a health and wellbeing perspective, a key advantage of a sub regionally targeted strategy is that it builds on existing communities, and enables the development of a strong sense of identity and community, which underpins mental as well as social wellbeing. It also improves equity, by focusing on creating job opportunities available to all population groups in the area, and supporting access to good education throughout the region. There are also important health and wellbeing benefits to be had from reduced need to travel, which have been discussed above. The benefits could be particularly strong if accompanied by a stronger emphasis on mixed land use throughout the region. The advantages of mixed land use are well outlined in the draft, and Belfast Healthy Cities strongly supports this as an important way for creating sustainable, livable communities.

Strategic guidance for Belfast and the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area

¹ See eg. http://www.brookings.edu/events/2011/0411_metropolitan_business.aspx

In the context of the strengthened settlement hierarchy approach outlined above, there is significant potential to develop Belfast as a sustainable, livable regional capital city with sustainable economic potential through the proposals set out in the RDS.

Belfast Healthy Cities supports proposals intended to promote mixed use, protect the natural setting in particular of Belfast City, and develop public transport and active travel. As Belfast City is a compact and walkable city, while the BMUA as a whole also is comparatively compact, developing alternative transport and green spaces could act as a basis for strengthening and highlighting the character of Belfast as a conurbation of local communities. For example, the proposals for rapid transit, and major development of greenways will introduce the opportunity to develop a region of local communities and hubs of local services, but well connected to each other through green spaces, active travel networks and public transport corridors. Such a focused approach can also act as the basis and incentive for repopulating the city, which is important both for economic and social vitality.

In light of this, it would therefore appear possible to go beyond for example environmental street improvements to improve facilities for walking and cycling, and aim for a new transport hierarchy giving priority for active travel and public transport. Significant work has gone into developing an Active Travel Strategy for Northern Ireland through the Transportation Policy Unit within DRD over the last year, during which time the need for a new approach has been repeatedly stressed. At a local level, Belfast Healthy Cities is one of a range of partners developing ambitious proposals for taking active travel forward within Belfast City.

Belfast Healthy Cities also support proposals to regenerate Belfast city centre and tackle deprivation in inner city communities. However, we believe a closer analysis of the causes of deprivation and the requirements to tackle these is needed. Significant work in this area has been undertaken to date, and existing local knowledge and expertise is available. It would be important that the RDS outlines opportunities to engage local people in developing innovative new approaches, and also recognises the need for social regeneration alongside physical regeneration in this.

In relation to city centre living, in particular families will need access to a range of services currently not easily accessible in Belfast city centre, such as schools, primary health care and play space. It is also important to consider uses other than retail in the city centre, to ensure that people of all backgrounds can use the city centre and contribute to its role as the heart of a vital and vibrant city and region. A mixed use city centre promotes physical as well as mental access, which is one key factor in tackling deprivation and disadvantage: evidence for example from England indicates that people from more disadvantaged areas are less likely to perceive city centres as viable destinations, due to their focus on retail . Where retail is developed

further, it is important to build in flexibility to enable other uses of the space, as a safeguard due to the volatile nature of retail led regeneration.

In conclusion, Belfast Healthy Cities supports a significant number of the aims of the RDS and believes there is potential to achieve very positive outcomes for people's health and wellbeing through these. We are, however, concerned that the proposed concrete delivery may conflict with some of these aims and result in inadvertent negative outcomes. We believe the RDS could be strengthened by a clearer vision for what regional development aims to achieve, by prioritising the relative strengths, weaknesses and needs of separate settlements and settlement types and by increasing emphasis on the integration of land use planning with transport and other service planning.