



*Celebrating 21 years
Working together for a healthier Belfast*

Response to Draft Addendum to PPS7: Safeguarding the Character of Residential Areas

4 March 2010

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft addendum to PPS7.

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

Key points

- Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the addendum to PPS7, which has significant potential to enhance living environments in a sustainable, economically effective way that also supports health and wellbeing. This response outlines how the proposed policies can support health and wellbeing.
- Belfast Healthy Cities believes guidance to developers and enforcement is required to maximise positive impacts. We stress that effective implementation systems must be in place to ensure guidance is both adhered to and enforced.
- Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to work with Planning Service to provide further evidence and support, to ensure the policy can achieve its objectives in a way that also supports health and wellbeing.

Policy LC1

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the proposal to safeguard local character, environmental quality and residential amenity. Established residential areas often have a strong identity and in many cases also a strong sense of community, which is supportive of mental wellbeing as residents have local support networks and feel connected to their neighbourhood. Changing the character of the area through increasing density can disrupt these social networks, and can also create tension, in particular if new development is aimed at a sociodemographic group different from the existing population. The risks of such gentrification involve increased social unrest and can lead to increased need for healthcare as well as policing and related services.

At the same time, greater housing densities can support efforts to regenerate an area, by increasing the viability of local business, which can reduce the need to travel and strengthen the sense of community by encouraging social interaction. Where greater density is considered, it is essential that the local community is engaged in developing proposals and their views are given appropriate weight.

We also welcome the expressed priority given to reuse of existing buildings, rather than redevelopment. This can, firstly, strengthen the established or historic character of the area, and increase visitor interest, which can support a local economy and also mental and social wellbeing. In line with the above, we would also suggest that this regenerative effect can be maximized by considering appropriate uses other than housing, including community space and small local business. Such mixed use can in particular revitalize the social support structures within the community by offering meeting places. It can also reduce the need to travel and encourage active travel, which further promotes social interaction and is essential for tackling climate change.

Reuse is also more environmentally sustainable than redevelopment. It can therefore contribute to mitigating climate change, which constitutes a significant health as well as ecological and economic risk.

It is essential that new dwelling units are built to adequate sizes and that design considers the importance of factors such as privacy and daylight. Firstly, as noted in the document this makes the development more economically sustainable as the units are more likely to remain attractive. Secondly, adequate space is essential for health and wellbeing. In a European study, a range of factors were found to influence levels of depression: “missing daylight” (increasing the chance of depression by 60%); “bad view out of window” (increase of 40%); “disturbance by noise” (increase of 40%); “sleep disturbance by noise” (double chance for depression) and “no place in the dwelling to be

alone” (increase of 50%)¹. In addition, limited space for quiet study can harm children’s chances of doing well at school, which has a lifelong impact on their opportunities, in particular employment prospects and also their health and wellbeing.

Policy LC2

Belfast Healthy Cities supports the provisions in policy LC2. As noted above, sufficient internal space and privacy is vital for health and wellbeing and we stress that it is essential to ensure the policy is enforced, especially in relation to minimum floorspace requirements. Guidance to developers, outlining the reasons why minimum criteria are crucial, may be required, combined with support through pre-application meetings.

With regard to amenity space, private or semi private gardens and other greenspaces are equally vital and we strongly support proposals to protect this during conversions and extensions.

The benefits of greenspace are multiple and significant. Greenspace offers a place for stress relief and recreation. It has been shown that just having a view of trees can help people in social housing cope with stress, which can have multiple benefits from reducing physical health risks to encouraging social interaction and reducing anti social behaviour.² Gardening can support both physical and mental health, and if gardens are used for food production, they can significantly contribute to food security. This is essential both in itself, and as a factor in tackling climate change, which will affect food production globally. Semi private greenspaces, eg. gardens of converted apartment blocks, can further offer important spaces for social interaction and strengthen a sense of community and social capital. Gardens are also vital for supporting biodiversity and good air quality in urban areas and act to support urban drainage systems in a natural, sustainable way (also see Policy LC3).

We would, in addition, note that converted buildings should be required to be as accessible as possible, ie. where appropriate incorporate lifts and avoid internal stairs. This is important in the context of an ageing population, as older people are more likely to have mobility limitations. In other respects, the demographic change contributes to the projected rise in one and two person households and is likely to increase demand for smaller dwellings which require less maintenance. Especially buildings carefully converted to multi dwelling use can support the

¹ WHO Regional Office for Europe (2006) *Large Analysis and Review of European housing and health Status: Preliminary Overview* WHO: Bonn p21

² Kuo, F., 2001. “Coping with poverty: impacts of environment and attention in the inner city.” *Environment and Behaviour* 33, 5–34.

social inclusion of older people, by offering opportunities for informal social interaction.

Finally, we would suggest that communication and collaboration with transport planners is important to deal with the potential risk of congestion, where residential densities are increased. Such intensification can, in particular, warrant changes and potentially increases to the provision of public transport, which not only tackles congestion, but also can improve access to jobs, education and services, especially for more disadvantaged groups. Safe footpaths, and cycleways, linking the neighbourhood to public transport and directly to other areas can similarly reduce congestion, and bring added benefits including encouraging physical activity and social interaction.

Policy LC3

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes and supports the proposal to prioritise the use of permeable paving, as a key way to reduce localized flood risk. In addition to major economic losses, floods also constitute a health risk, which is likely to increase in the context of a changing climate. While floods are associated with few direct deaths, there is growing evidence that those affected by flooding are at greater risk of long term ill health, in particular mental ill health.³

With reference to comments made above, however, we would welcome greater emphasis on maintaining greenspace as a highly effective sustainable urban drainage mechanism, with added benefits. Even individual trees, shrubs and green verges contribute to drainage, and we suggest these effects should be noted in the policy, to allow planners to recommend and encourage developers to incorporate green elements into landscaping.

³ Few, R, M Ahern, F Matthies & S Kovats. *Flooding, health and climate change: A strategic review*. Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, November 2004.
<http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wp63.pdf>