

**PHYSICAL REGENERATION CONCEPT MASTERPLANS:
CONSULTATION RESPONSE TEMPLATE**

Please return your response to the following address by 17 February 2010:

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MASTERPLAN

Please indicate which Masterplan(s) your response refers to:

Inner East	
York Road/Shore Road	
Crumlin Road (Including Lower Oldpark)	
Lower Shankill	
Lower Falls	
All	X

URBAN DESIGN PRINCIPLES (SECTION 2)
Do you agree with the Urban Design Principles underpinning the relevant area or areas' masterplan proposals, as set out in Section 2 of each masterplan document?
Yes/No
If not, please provide further comments.
<p>Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the approach to underpin the Masterplans with an explicit and coherent set of urban design principles, and broadly agrees with these.</p> <p>We particularly welcome the proposals to strengthen connectivity, increase open and green space, enhance walkability and favour mixed use. Improved opportunities to walk and cycle have perhaps the greatest potential to increase levels of physical activity at a population level, which is essential to prevent and treat obesity and associated conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke and some forms of cancer. All of these principles also support stronger social cohesion by offering opportunities for informal social interaction, which is essential for mental wellbeing and can help reduce anti social behaviour and similar problems. Easy access to green space has been shown to increase physical activity and reduce obesity, especially among children, and also offers opportunities for relaxation and stress relief. In addition, green space provides other health and environmental benefits, such as a source of natural shade and cooling, a 'sink' for pollutants – importantly including CO₂ – and natural drainage, reducing the risk of flooding and alleviating pressure on built infrastructure.</p> <p>We are less convinced, however, about the principle to introduce 'landmarks' or 'gateway developments'. There appears to be a clear possibility that these sites go against the urban design principle of celebrating historic resonance, focus on serving visitors rather than local residents and inadvertently emphasise the split from the city centre. This may induce a sense of alienation for local residents, which is harmful for mental wellbeing. We would also question the need for four or five major landmarks - together the Masterplans propose a minimum of four 'iconic bridges', which appears not in keeping with the size and character of Belfast. At minimum, it is essential that landmarks are developed in close collaboration with local residents and stakeholders, to ensure that they respect local needs and wishes and fit with the local fabric.</p>

EXISTING CHARACTER AND ROLE (SECTION 3)
Do you consider that the analysis of the relevant area or areas' Existing Character and Role, as set out in Section 3 of each masterplan document, is fair and accurate?
Yes/No
If not, please describe any inaccuracies or gaps in the analysis?

The analyses use emotive, and often negative, language, without making it explicit whose assessment is being expressed. While the purpose here is to highlight areas for improvement, it is important to make clear whether the assessment is the consultants' opinion or agreed with stakeholders, as the basis for opinions may differ (eg. describing Newtownards Road as 'only a thoroughfare' may not concur with local residents' views, while suggesting that shops on Falls Road 'mainly serve the local population' may be read as marginalizing same in favour of visitors).

Belfast Healthy Cities believes it is vital that the assessment of the areas is agreed with local stakeholders. In our view, the focus of the Masterplans should be on the local population, and on improving the physical infrastructure in a way that allows local residents to stay, while supporting their health and wellbeing.

Belfast Healthy Cities, in partnership with Belfast City Council, is currently leading a project to develop a set of indicators for regeneration and health, intended to help strengthen the focus on how regeneration projects affect health, wellbeing and health equity, through use of local area data and statistics. The project is based on a Health Impact Assessment of the East Belfast Strategic Regeneration Framework, and the final indicator set is being developed in collaboration with all five Area Partnerships in Belfast. It will consist of a flexible model that can be adapted to suit the focus of very different projects. The project outcome will be presented to BRO later this year and we would be pleased to provide further information on how regeneration projects can help improve health and wellbeing.

VISION & OBJECTIVES (SECTION 4)

Do you agree with the vision and key objectives identified for the relevant area or areas, as set out in Section 4 of each masterplan document?

Yes/No

If not, please provide further comments.

This response considers all five Masterplans from a health and health equity perspective. Therefore, our comments will be general in nature and focus on common elements.

We would firstly emphasise that the Masterplans, and physical regeneration generally, must be a complement to wider social, environmental and economic regeneration. As noted in the documents, all five areas considered fall among the most deprived neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland, and need joined up support from a range of sectors to improve future opportunities and prospects. This is essential to ensure that the Masterplans contribute to strengthening health equity, ie. create environments that allow and support people from all backgrounds to reach their full potential. Health inequalities, differences resulting from differential living conditions and opportunities, are not only unjust, but also lead to major economic and social costs for society, in terms of greater need for healthcare, benefit dependence and poor social cohesion associated for example with anti social behaviour and disorder.

In practice, this means for example that job creation must be complemented by initiatives

aimed at supporting employability, which range from training and work experience to building self esteem and offering support services such as childcare. BRO has a role in building the required partnerships and ensuring facilities are available to provide such services. This is vital to ensure the Masterplans contribute to strengthening equity and sustainable communities, and must take place especially if the aim is to attract new residents to the area, as is the case in several of the Masterplans. Without broad regeneration, there is a considerable risk for gentrification, which may force current residents to leave and perhaps face more severe disadvantage. Gentrification can also create tension between old and new residents, especially if there is a significant income gap between them or if existing residents are unable to benefit from development in their neighbourhood. Importantly, investing in social regeneration can create sustainable job opportunities, strengthen a sense of community and pride in the area, and thus support a positive spiral of prosperity.

We welcome the proposals to improve the public realm, in particular objectives aimed at improving active travel and public transport opportunities. We are also pleased that the Masterplans recognize the importance of physical activity and open space for children. We would suggest that there may be scope to further increase the provision of open and play spaces in all of the areas, as this is largely lacking and the potential health as well as economic benefits are significant. To maximise these benefits and ensure usage, however, it is crucial that new public squares and open spaces are considered as core to further planning and regeneration (rather than desirable optionals), and located at sites that all population groups perceive as safe, meaningful and acceptable. For example, facilities for children are best located away from junctions and busy roads. In addition, to the extent possible spaces should be open rather than fenced in, to encourage use and support a sense of wellbeing.

Street planting brings many of the benefits offered by bigger green spaces; it has for example been shown that simply having a view of trees can improve people's ability to cope with stress. This, coupled with the aesthetic quality, can have a particular benefits for mental wellbeing in areas affected by multiple deprivation, and together with improved lighting encourage physical activity and more social use of streets. The proposed 'green links' would therefore be a very positive development for the entire city; there may be scope to draw on expertise and experience developed within the Connswater Community Greenway project.

Belfast Healthy Cities also supports mixed use development, as a way of reducing the need to travel, encouraging active travel and strengthening local communities. We are, however, concerned about the retail led approach to regenerating the Masterplan areas, for a number of key reasons. Firstly, the target market of any new retail outlets is unclear. The local population in each of the areas currently has limited spending power, and increasing the retail offer may serve to reduce mental and social wellbeing by highlighting this. Focusing on visitors, meanwhile, appears to go against the principles of retaining local character and strengthening local communities and may reduce local wellbeing in a similar way. Secondly, the current economic crisis has highlighted the vulnerability of retail; jobs created may not be sustainable. These jobs are also largely

low grade, and may offer limited health benefits. Meanwhile, an increased offer of cafés and bars may encourage unhealthy lifestyles, and especially bars are associated with increased costs to police and emergency health care. An alternative approach, centred on local services and skill building, is outlined above. Social enterprise could provide an appropriate model with considerable social as well as economic benefits.

In relation to the above, we appreciate that a key aim of several Masterplans is to attract new residents to the area, while the emphasis on private sector housing suggests these groups would differ in age and socioeconomic background from current residents. We reiterate that such renewal must be associated with improving life opportunities for existing residents – and must also take into account the availability and capacity of key local services such as schools. We would also suggest that affordable and social housing must be a key component of regeneration in each area, to achieve genuinely mixed tenure with its associated benefits and ensure continuity within the existing community. In this context, allocation of housing land across tenures must be equitable; for example land adjoining higher speed roads may be more suitable as business space (this has specific reference to the Lower Falls Masterplan, which proposes social housing on the current Grosvenor Playing Fields site that is located at a level lower than Grosvenor Road, which acts as a main feeder to the Royal Hospital).

All housing should be expected to adhere to the highest standards, in terms of lifetime homes as well as energy efficiency. This is essential to ensure equity, and also to prevent significant refurbishment or retrofit costs in the future.

THE WAY FORWARD (SECTION 5)

Do you agree with the proposed way forward for the relevant area or areas, as set out in Section 5 of each masterplan document?

Yes/No

You may wish to consider the following 4 areas in particular and provide comments.

Proposed Mix of Uses

We refer to comments made in response to Section 4.

We would also like to stress that further development of detailed plans must be undertaken in collaboration with local stakeholders, in ways that contribute to neighbourhood renewal plans and taking into account proposals in the Strategic Regeneration Frameworks for each area.

Access and Movement Proposals

Catalyst Projects

Public Realm Improvements

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Do you agree or disagree with the overall objectives, analysis and recommendations of the masterplanning exercise? If you disagree, please provide details.

We note the Masterplans include limited proposals to deal with the immediate approach to the city centre, ie. Millfield, Bridge End and the York Street junctions, although it is recognized these areas are unwelcoming and difficult to negotiate. It is important that linkages between these Masterplans and Masterplans for the city centre Quarters are clarified so that this issue can be dealt with in an integrated way. To achieve this, engagement with DRD and Roads Service is also required. In dealing with these partners, it is important to emphasise that footpaths and cycle lanes are an integral part of the transport system, which can ease pressure on the road network but must take into account the needs of more vulnerable road users.

It is very welcome that the Masterplans have aimed to provide clarity and a way of connecting the myriad of regeneration plans in Belfast, and that the confusion resulting from this complexity is recognized. However, the Masterplans focus largely on the arterial routes, while there is limited links to proposals for the inner city areas in their entirety. It is important that a balanced approach is taken throughout the areas, to avoid disadvantaging the parts further away from the arterial routes. This applies in particular to transport networks; streets and paths must be connected in ways that make sense to local people, and consistent quality must be assured over the medium term.

Overall, there appears to be significant opportunities for experimenting with novel approaches and creative uses of space, which could be capitalized on more fully and which would help implement the urban design principles outlined at the outset. Green space could be viewed as an investment in wellbeing (which provides returns eg. through lower need for health care rather than monetary profits), and elements such as community food gardens, open air gym equipment and natural play/biodiversity areas could be incorporated; especially longer term, these could also provide employment opportunities. We stress again that evidence shows green space must be within easy reach from people's homes and workplaces to be used. This means focus should be on smaller spaces developed as integral parts of neighbourhoods, rather than grand spaces developed as citywide attractions.

As an example, Connswater Community Greenway has the potential to significantly improve health and wellbeing for people in inner east Belfast by offering a new physical environment, and is therefore much more than a tourist asset. Similarly, plans for Giant's Park can provide new opportunities for people in north Belfast, although the access issue must be resolved – in this instance a new (foot)bridge is necessary.

Finally, we would stress the importance of considering sustainability in procurement. We are aware that tenders often specify the source of materials, for example Chinese granite. Priority should be given to local (Northern Ireland sourced) materials and providers; this can support employment as well as reduce the burden on the environment.

FURTHER INFORMATION	
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If you are submitting any information for consideration by the Department please provide details below.	
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Signature	
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Date	
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