



Response to Belfast City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan Belfast City Council

April 2015

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft regeneration strategy.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation seeking to improve health and wellbeing, by identifying ways to tackle inequalities in health and create healthy urban environments. The organisation's key role is to fulfil the requirements of Belfast as a World Health Organization Healthy City, and to act as the link between Belfast and WHO Europe. Within the city, the key roles for Belfast Healthy Cities are to facilitate intersectoral collaboration, and to work with partners to share evidence, build capacity and test new concepts and ways of working relevant to the core themes. Belfast City Council is a key partner within the partnership. Key partners also include Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, DHSSPS, DOE, DSD, NIHE, Public Health Agency, QUB and UU.

The Healthy Cities approach is based on the social model of health, which emphasises that health is the outcome of wider social and physical living conditions. The core role of Belfast Healthy Cities is to facilitate intersectoral collaboration to improve health and wellbeing, through sharing evidence, building capacity and testing new approaches and ways of working. Healthy urban environments is a long standing core theme of the programme, which has contributed to increasing understanding locally of how planning shapes public health and health outcomes. The aim of the HUE programme is to identify ways of developing urban environments that support physical, mental and social health, and includes working with partners to identify, explore and test how a joined up approach and investing in supportive environments can help deliver healthier people and communities. The comments on the draft guidance are made in this context.

General comments

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the systematic approach to regeneration used in this process. The approach moving from strategic policies to proposals and projects provides a helpful framework for translating policy into practice. It is particularly helpful to give an indication of how strategic proposals at the city level might translate to the more local level.

Eight policies seems, however, a large number considering the Council's full remit. The proposed policies are also clearly interlinked, which indicates they could be streamlined into three coherent and strategic policies. This would involve linking policies 2, 6, 7 and 8 into a single policy on 'Creating the environment to grow the population'; joining policies 1 and 5 into a policy on 'Creating the conditions for learning and enterprise' and focusing policies 3 and 4 into 'Creating the connections to showcase the city'.

Belfast Healthy Cities believes that a consolidation also would help with creating a clear long term aim and prioritising actions. While the action plan concluding the framework is very helpful in itself, it would be helpful to assess the actions as a whole and identify the key issues required to regenerate the city centre with long term sustainability in mind. For example, in this light it would seem relevant to create the living and transport environment to support a growing population as a priority, alongside developing the retail offer.

Overall, the framework would benefit from a long term vision and aspiration, which is not explicit in the draft. For example, some emphasis is put in the draft on attracting back office functions of major international companies to Belfast, and developing new office space to accommodate this. Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome a greater focus on building on existing and unique assets, such as St George's Market, the industrial and maritime history. In this context, the proposals to animate the river and connect it more closely to the city centre are very positive. A stronger emphasis on creative proposals, such as the five a side pitches mentioned in the draft, would be very welcome and offer opportunities to differentiate Belfast from its competitors.

Belfast Healthy Cities also believes it is important that the final framework considers connectivity both within the city centre, and to the city centre. In particular, it is important to ensure that appropriate linkages are created between the five 'special action areas', to avoid inadvertently segmenting the city centre further. It is also essential to identify how the inner city neighbourhoods could become better connected to the city centre, in a physical as well as psychological sense. There is currently a sense of disconnect in these areas, which will need to be addressed to sustainably develop the city. For example, it may be possible to explore mixed use and/or commercial development along the arterial routes, to increase active frontage and also improve job opportunities. Locating social housing along these routes, however, is likely to underline a sense of division, which both will increase inequalities and ultimately reduce the viability of the city centre.

The example of Kuopio in Finland demonstrates a successful approach to revitalising the city centre through creating an environment attractive both for local residents and visitors¹. It can be noted that the Kuopio model included removing one way traffic systems in favour of one lane, two way streets, which served to both improve connectivity and reduce speed. Parking was integrated as a central element in order to facilitate easy access to the city centre (a parking garage was built under the main square), but the city centre explicitly prioritises pedestrians and cyclists. The city has also prioritised public transport linkages between the city centre, the inner city and inner suburbs, to reduce reliance on the car and strengthen accessibility for people on lower incomes.

In relation to incomes, Belfast Healthy Cities would strongly welcome a more detailed context for the framework, in terms of demographic trends and socioeconomic conditions. The draft notes that there is limits to the retail growth, but Belfast Healthy Cities believes a more detailed analysis is essential to set the city centre in its context

¹ an outline of this approach is available at https://www.kuopio.fi/web/information-about-kuopio/news?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_rh4X&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-2&p_p_col_pos=1&p_p_col_count=2&_101_INSTANCE_rh4X_struts_action=%2Fasset_publisher%2Fview_content&_101_INSTANCE_rh4X_assetEntryId=781965&_101_INSTANCE_rh4X_type=content&_101_INSTANCE_rh4X_urlTitle=kuopio-invests-strongly-in-the-city-centre&_101_INSTANCE_rh4X_redirect=%2Fweb%2Finformation-about-kuopio%2Fnews

and avoid creating a middle class 'ghetto' in an otherwise impoverished city. This is essential not only to tackle inequalities, but also to create an economically viable and vibrant city. Profiling undertaken in preparation for the local government reform would be useful in this context.

Belfast Healthy Cities is currently working with Belfast Health Development Unit to develop a tool that can be used to explore how initiatives affect poverty and inequalities. Should it be helpful, Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to explore opportunities to pilot this tool on the regeneration framework.

Child friendly environments

Belfast Healthy Cities supports a more child friendly approach across Belfast with Child Friendly Places an area of work within the HUE programme. As such, strongly welcomes the policy areas focusing on creating a green, walkable, cyclable centre; connecting to the city around and shared spaces. These are some of the particular priorities for local children as identified through Belfast Healthy Cities' work.

Belfast Healthy Cities Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children initiative has engaged directly with over 400 primary school children to seek their views on their local environment, which identified a set of five priorities these, are currently used as the basis for an emerging strategic Child friendly places framework.

These five priorities echo children across Belfast and are outlined in a '*Children's Voices: a Charter for Belfast*' these are:

- **Greenspace:** Greenspaces should be good quality, well maintained spaces where children can spend time with friends and family. Children value green space and recognise that it is important in terms of social interaction, pride in the local neighbourhood and opportunities for play and physical activity.
- **Open space:** Open spaces should be safe spaces where children can play and spend time with friends. Play parks are welcome but small open good quality spaces close to children's homes are also welcome.
- **Clean & safe environments:** Children see clean environments as essential to making their neighbourhoods more pleasant and attractive to live in. They are also aware of how others view the areas in which they live and are concerned about dog fouling, broken glass and graffiti.
- **Liveable & connected communities:** Vacant houses should be occupied and derelict land used for children and community activities. Connected communities support independence.
- **Reduced traffic:** Roads should be safer with less cars and increased traffic calming. Traffic has an impact on where children play, walk and cycle. Children recognise the effects of heavy traffic; including congested streets and parking difficulties, noise and air pollution.

The Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children project has focused primarily on inner city Belfast schools, and children in these areas have stressed they would in particular welcome a greater focus on pedestrian connections to the city centre. The evidence indicates that especially older children see the city centre as an attractive

destination, but currently feel cut off (physically and mentally) because of the poor connectivity. Children typically responded about heavy and noisy traffic. As such the proposals to control traffic and enhance pedestrian provision are very welcome. Children also focused on cleanliness and greenery. Key issues were lack of spaces for children to call their own, safety, importance of street cleansing and the positive impacts of flowers, trees and plants.

Some feedback from children includes:

"We don't have any greenspaces to play in"

"It would be good just to have somewhere to 'hang out' with friends"

"I like to play on the street but sometimes I don't feel safe"

"It's hard to know where cars will come from and all the parked cars make it less safe to walk because we can't see the traffic very well"

"It's ok to play around home...but it would be good if we had places we could go to, now we just play on the street"

The emerging framework is based on consultation with children from across Belfast and provides the contextual analysis, evidence and details of the actions required to respond to the issues raised by children to implement this framework.

As part of this framework Belfast Healthy Cities along with partners are exploring a number of sites in Belfast to identify a site to create a concrete demonstration of child friendly space within the city.

Over the last four years Belfast Healthy Cities have organised and run a number of KidsSpace events. The KidsSpace model focuses both on testing potential uses of child friendly space through a short term event, and gathering evidence from participating children and families on their priorities for the city centre. Events have been hosted in locations including Cathedral Gardens, Writers' Square, City Hall grounds and Urban Soul.

Recently, four events were held in Castle Court and Victoria Square as part of the month of Family Friendly Initiatives in February and March 2015. A questionnaire was used to consult with people in relation to the city centre and covered a number of areas including greenspace, open spaces, clean and safe environments, liveable communities and traffic. Areas to note include greenspace and traffic - one third of people being concerned about lack of available greenspace in the city centre. In addition, over one third of people were particularly concerned about traffic arrangements in the city and inadequate walking and cycling routes.

Some comments from parents include:

"We need less traffic with better bus routes, better reliability and more frequency of buses"

“I would like to see more family friendly spaces; play, music, climbing, seats to cater for kids/adults, toilet facilities, coffee docks and the like. Also, some more greenspaces with an enclosed space for children to play.”

“I would like more greenspace and public space. We need a public park to create more wholesome, family friendly space that is not based on commercial space.”

“More initiatives for family engaged arts and cultural projects/events would ensure spaces are utilised to their best potential.”

When asked about how the city should feel some responses included:

‘Alive, vibrant, welcoming and safe’

‘Cultural, safe, clean friendly and busy’

‘Safe and accessible’

‘Family friendly, open, welcoming and cultural’

Combined evidence from the previous KidsSpace events highlights that families would visit the city centre more often and stay longer, if it worked better for children. It also shows that children and families would prefer a series of small spaces, e.g. seating or sculptures which children are allowed to climb on, interactive public art, ‘secret’ elements etc., rather than traditional child friendly elements such as a play park. Green space – of all shapes and sizes - is also highly sought for; families would particularly welcome space where children can run off steam or alternatively get respite from busy streets and shops. A series of micro/mini spaces running from City Hall towards UU has consistently been raised as a priority wish by both children and families.

Belfast Healthy Cities highlights the importance of child friendly spaces within cities, as cities that work for children work for everyone.

Age Friendly environments

The Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing project developed a tool for assessing local walking environments and gathering older people’s experience of walking in their neighbourhood, and has engaged with over 100 older people to date in piloting the tool. The key finding from this initiative was that a greater focus on the pedestrian environment, in particular the location of crossing points and dropped kerbs, would significantly support older people to stay active and engaged in their community for longer.

Walkable environments

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the proposals to strengthen pedestrian connectivity in the city centre. As noted in the draft framework, Belfast city centre in particular is very compact and walkable, and improving pedestrian connectivity can significantly help link the centre city with the inner city neighbourhoods. This, in turn, will help improve health and wellbeing, as walking is an affordable and accessible form of physical activity, which also can increase life on the street, in turn improving social wellbeing and safety.

Improving pedestrian links is also helpful for strengthening equity in health, as walking is an activity almost everyone can participate in, regardless of age, fitness level or income. In addition, there is strong evidence that walkable environments revitalise the local economy, as it is easier for pedestrians (and also) cyclists than car users to stop off to visit shops and services. The ‘three urban fabrics’ model, also developed in Kuopio in Finland, offers a useful model of how to integrate active, public and private car transport modes. The model has been developed in the city over the last three decades and has since influenced thinking for example in the Finnish capital Helsinki, which is undergoing rapid growth and undertaking significant urban extensions.²

Belfast Healthy Cities is currently exploring examples of ‘walking cities’, with a view to developing options for a local approach to this. A key element will be identifying ways of connecting initiatives to encourage walking and cycling from a health perspective with urban planning and regeneration, in order to support the development of supportive environments for all. Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to share evidence and examples of promising and successful models from other WHO Healthy Cities, should that be helpful.

Conclusion

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the city centre regeneration framework, as an important tool for developing a city centre that drives regeneration across the city. Creating a supportive environment that encourages use of the city centre, in preparation for increasing the city centre population, is a key element of this that also can contribute to creating a liveable city and a unique visitor destination. However, it is essential that the process seeks to engage all city residents and seeks to tackle the persistent social and economic disadvantage in the city, as a basis for a viable and vibrant regional capital.

² See e.g. <http://www.nvfnorden.org/lisalib/getfile.aspx?itemid=4819>