

DUP Response to Draft Equality Impact Assessment

Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Park Draft Master Plan

Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood - A Shared Site

The Democratic Unionist Party in North Belfast would like to put on record its very strong view that the development of the Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood is hugely important to the whole of the constituency and also to the wider Belfast community.

We believe strongly that decisions taken in relation to this site will set precedents for the city as a whole and will impact on the development of the rest of the area, particularly the North West Quarter, the Cathedral quarter and the Library area. It is therefore vital that the Northern Ireland Executive sends out a clear signal in the decisions taken about the development of the site that it is to be a shared site and should be a beacon for other developments in its inclusion of all the peoples and communities who live adjacent to it or use it for work or leisure.

Without strong adherence to this fundamental principle we feel that the site will not fulfil its potential as the catalyst for the regeneration of some of the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland.

This will undoubtedly be a strong test of the Executive's commitment to its Shared Future strategy. However given the context of this site and its history it would be unforgiveable if this development were to become a mechanism for the reinforcement of division rather than a pathway for the future.

Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood – adjacent communities and infrastructure

The DUP has been lobbying for additional resources in order to ensure the regeneration of the two communities that live contiguous to the site i.e. the Lower Shankill and the Lower Oldpark. The Department for Social Development has been very slow to respond to the needs of these communities despite the fact that Shankill is ranked No 1 in the multiple deprivation statistics and Crumlin is ranked No 4. The Draft Master Plan talks about an iconic restoration of the site and its regenerating potential. It is impossible to believe that this can be achieved with such deprivation existing in local communities. Indeed, if we go further away from the site to New Lodge and Duncairn these communities come in at numbers 5 and 12 on the scale.

DSD and the Northern Ireland Executive cannot hope to realise the full potential of the site if there are no efforts made to tackle inequalities in health, housing, education and employment. Even before the Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood sites can be developed there is an urgent need to regenerate local communities and the Department for Social Development should be bringing forward plans for this immediately.

The DUP further believes that there must be plans to develop the connections between the Crumlin Road Gaol/ Girdwood and the city centre. Currently the connections are disjointed by major traffic intersections, vacant land and a deteriorating streetscape. Despite this there is huge potential to build upon.

Donegal Street and Carlisle Circus are natural connecting routes on which are some of Belfast's best buildings, including St Patrick's Church, Clifton House, the Indian Community Centre, Clifton Street Orange Hall and Carlisle Memorial Church. This route has huge potential in connecting the site to the City Centre and in drawing tourists and visitors to the Gaol. However they will only be successful if there is a policy of inclusion and sharing of the space of all of the communities who have vested interests within the locality.

Economic Development

The DUP believes that the promotion of economic development should be the most important element of activity on the site. All of the communities adjacent to the site experience high levels of disadvantage in both employment and education. The creation of wealth through employment is a fundamental need in the area. However for this to be successful there must be shared and equal access to the site. The inclusion of segregated housing will almost certainly rule this out.

The DUP would challenge the Department for Social Development to show examples of successful economic regeneration where a site is not shared and housing is seen to be the prerogative of one community over the other. The DUP would contend that there are potential inequalities if there is not a strict adherence to a truly shared future for the site.

Mixed Use Development

The DUP has very grave concerns about the way that this part of the EQIA has been presented. The document goes into much detail about the housing need in North Belfast between the two main communities. However the Shankill community, which is contiguous to the site and closer than most of the areas identified within the EQIA, does not merit even a passing mention.

Not only would we contend that this is misleading in the context of judging the equality impact but it sends out a very negative message to the Shankill community about the Department's attitude to their housing need. In effect, since the EQIA ignores the need for housing for the Shankill community, the message is simply that no one from this Protestant community need apply.

The Department needs to urgently look at this exclusion of a whole community and we would contend that the EQIA needs to be re-issued in a totally inclusive way. We will be contacting the Minister and OFM/DFM directly about this glaring omission. If there is to be confidence in the Unionist community about the process, and even the Advisory Panel spent a lot of time in consulting the Shankill community, then this must be corrected forthwith.

In general terms the Unionist community has strongly voiced the preferred opinion that there should be no housing on the site. They have little confidence that any housing would be shared and the exclusion of the Shankill community from the statistics in the EQIA has reinforced this view. The consultation responses leave the department in no doubt as to this view yet it is not reflected within the EQIA.

Indeed the phrasing of 6.50 that “housing stress within Protestant areas in North Belfast can be accommodated within existing plans” automatically precludes this community from the site. In these circumstances the DUP believe that the Department, by the inclusion of housing, will merely reinforce division and create a further interface. It will reinforce inequality and the right of access to people from the unionist community to all of the facilities on the site.

Health

The DUP would strongly support the expansion of health services on the site. The Mater Hospital provides services to all the communities and is a vital component of health care within the North Belfast area. The hospital has a number of sites on the main Crumlin Road on which it has a proliferation of temporary buildings. In order to address the isolation of the Lower Shankill community from the main arterial route the DUP would support an expansion of the hospital within the site and the provision of housing on these sites.

Accessibility – Arc Road

There is real concern about the proposal to form an arc road which effectively cuts the site in two. This, potentially, will interfere with the access of the Unionist community to all aspects of the site. It also proposes to exit on to the Crumlin Road at an already busy junction which already has substantial housing. The road as currently envisaged would definitely have an adverse impact on the communities living in Shankill and Lower Oldpark and would be the focal point of much opposition.