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/ 2 FEB 2007

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*Received after cut
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Belfast City Centre Regeneration Directorate
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27 January 2007

To whom it may concern,

I firstly would like to thank you for recently coming to the West Belfast Partnership Board Offices 11 January to present your area strategy ideas to our Economic Development Sub Committee.

Whilst we welcome all initiatives that encourage regeneration in any part of Belfast, our Board strongly believe that your approach to regenerating the North West Quarter requires some re-thinking. We are very anxious of the fact that consultation is taking place for Part Two of the Regeneration plan before any efforts have been made to address the proposals raised in Part One.

Although we, as a Partnership Board, were consulted and did respond as part of the wider consultation relating to Part One, we felt that our comments were by and large ignored in the final report. It has since emerged during our meetings with the Castle Street Traders organisation, that they were not even consulted. They feel that they have been neglected in the consultation process relating to Part One. To make matters worse in discovering your plans to shelve any development in this area until 2011, whilst the areas indicated in Part Two are now being discussed.

The West Belfast Partnership Board, like those traders in the Castle Street area, are very concerned that all the appropriate statutory agencies will continue to ignore this very obvious neglect that has existed in this area for many years. This area outlined in Part One is the main Gateway to and from West Belfast, through which tens of thousands of people travel each day. We as a Partnership Board stand firmly behind their wishes and feel there must be further discussion around intentions to delay any such work until 2011 in the Part One area and consultation with these traders needs to begin immediately.

At a recent meeting in the West Belfast Partnership Board, we were informed that failure by Westfield of Castle Court to contribute positively has resulted in the delay to begin any such work in the Castle Street, Bank Square and King Street area. This is totally

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unacceptable and those traders feel a fresh approach to Westfield is required ensuring their involvement in future discussions with Westfield.

Whilst the regeneration of all other parts of Belfast continue at a rapid rate, the West and North gateways to City Centre are neglected by a range of statutory agencies resulting in dereliction, dilapidation, much under occupancy and most importantly no investment. The West Belfast Partnership Board propose that multi agency approach to implement a scheme whereby current traders in the Castle Street, King Street and Bank Square areas can avail of immediate financial assistance to enhance their premises. The same approach is also required to hold the landlords of dilapidated and unoccupied premises to account. It would be contradictory whilst to address the calls for regeneration from genuine businesses whilst vacant land and such premises are allowed to remain in such conditions. We also believe that the boundary line indicated on maps in the Part one proposals, need to be extended to the neighbouring side streets, where much potential exists.

In our discussions with traders located in this area, it has become apparent that delays in planning decision making have become part of the problem as opposed to contributing to the solution. We are calling on fast tracking and flexibility when dealing with attempts by private investors to contribute to enhancing the area's economic and social appeal.

Part Two Response:

Consultation:

To assess the overall potential for regeneration of this part of the City Centre, we feel wider consultation with the local community should have been an essential part this report. We support the St Patrick's and St Joseph's Residents Associations' efforts to rebuild their community.

Like in Part One, the Castle Street and King Street Traders were not consulted. Any plans for Part Two will most certainly impact on the nearby Castle Street, King Street areas and such a group most certainly are key stakeholders in the North West Quarter.

Like already mentioned above when referring to Part One, the issue of Land ownership is a critical dimension of regeneration and could usefully have been incorporated into the document in relation to the potential for integrated activity and specific interventions or investment.

Land Use & Housing:

We don't believe that efforts to impose some kind of 'neutral zone' are a good idea. It is being suggested that by leaving social housing out of the future plans that this may 'neutralise' the area. Social Housing is a priority for the St Patrick's and St Joseph's Residents Association as a real need in the area. We have a housing crisis in West and North Belfast and plans **not** to encourage mixed tenure housing projects in this area are

contradictory to policy with no reference to experiences and successes from other cities in relation to inner city living or city centre regeneration.

Such a development may be seen to be politically influenced. We cannot allow this area to become pickings for wealthy investors whilst existing community associations cannot get much needed Social Housing. We should be encouraging to help rebuild the St Patrick's and St Joseph's community and this can only be achieved through dialogue with such organisations that are on the ground. Failure to have input from these groups will never address the disadvantage issues and will further marginalise. We would recommend further exploration to address need and disadvantage. There are no references to initiatives that have addressed the provision of integrated social housing or the potential for the development of mixed tenure developments. It should also be noted that elsewhere apartment style family accommodation has been successfully developed.

Whilst strong references are made to multiple deprivation in the wider area including the smaller neighbourhoods of Peter's Hill and Carrick Hill especially in terms of social housing tenure, unemployment etc, there is no real indication as to the influence the area may have on the final masterplan.

Land Use Mix:

This section provides detail as to the spread of land uses within the Part Two area and highlights the more mixed nature of the area in comparison to the Part One retail core. There is very limited consideration of the general commercial sector and the potential for such uses in the short to medium term that the masterplan is likely to address. Like mentioned above, when referring to Part One, an immediate financial package from a range of agencies and a planning flexibility approach is essential to deal with the immediate problems of deprivation and dereliction. The introduction of mixed uses and the relationship to the broader evening economy approach could usefully have been considered in conjunction with housing support initiatives such as Living Over the Shop in both North Street and Donegall Street areas.

Economy and Enterprise:

More emphasis is required in encouraging Social Economy initiatives encouraging a mix of community and private sector enterprise initiatives. Job creation is essential in these areas for existing communities and will further assist the rebuilding of inner city communities. There is also massive potential for home grown industries such as the promotion of the creative industry sector to be incorporated in to the existing buildings, which are of course in much need of repair. There is limited reference to the benefits of cluster arrangements and the potential characteristics that could support these uses or sectors. It is not clear whether or not the potential for the evening economy and the leisure aspects of city centre regeneration have been effectively considered within the document.

Culture and tourism:

There are existing tourism and cultural developments for the city centre and the surrounding communities and there are no references to these. There is no reference to the Belfast City Council's Cultural Tourism policy or the work in relation to

enhancements of visitor and information signage which is badly required if people are serious about enhancing the area's cultural and political tourism potential.

There is no reference to the close proximity to the proposed Gaeltacht Quarter area on Falls Road and the potential of existing Political Tourism initiatives which could enhance connections linking North and West ie Castle Street, Peter's Hill and beyond. These would link to the cultural trails created by the Fáilte Feirtse Thair in their tourism initiatives and its on going work with Coiste Political walking tours on nearby Falls Road and their associations with Shankill Tourism and EPIC.

Design:

The plan should identify the important design elements to be retained in the Quarter including the buildings that will form the basis for business continuity in the area as redevelopment takes place. The character areas should be broader than the pure design with reference to the types of uses that can influence the design or utilise the elements of the urban fabric that should be retained.

Priority Actions:

Important linkages need to be explored between Part One area and Part Two and it would have been anticipated that further analysis of the issues identified from the consultations in 2005 in relation to part one would have been carried out. It is difficult to look at both parts in isolation in any future plans. The absence of an appropriate draft timetable for the development and implementation of the final master plan is a fundamental weakness of the report and the priority actions. This has been clearly identified as a major problem in failing to act in Part one and will clearly become an unpopular plan if proposals are not implemented soon. This only highlights the areas neglect in comparison to other areas of Belfast where much regeneration has taken place over a number of years.

Yours sincerely


Caoimhín Mac Giolla Mhín
Economic Development Officer