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Getting you around



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The Director
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29th September 2008

Dear Sir/madam

Re: Submission from Shopmobility Belfast on the Belfast City Centre West Regeneration District Draft Regeneration Plan

Please find enclosed our written comments on the above consultation. I hope it meets with your approval and if you require any further information please contact me as soon as possible.

Many thanks for your help and assistance.

Yours faithfully

Ann Collins MBE
Director
Shopmobility Belfast



Comments on

Belfast City Centre

West Side regeneration Plan

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September 2008

Introduction

Shopmobility Belfast is a charity that provides equipment, electric scooters, wheelchairs and electric wheelchairs to those with mobility problems due to short time illness, age or disability. This is provided free of charge and enables people to use the social, commercial and cultural facilities of Belfast and surrounding areas more easily with dignity and independence.

This work is carried out from a number of centres within the Belfast city centre and our organisations headquarters have been situated at Westgate House, Queen Street/Castle Street for the past four years.

From Westgate we administer Castle Court, Victoria Square, Europa Bus Centre and our maintenance Centre at Smithfield as well as provide a shopmobility service to the city centre. We have found the present location to be excellent for our users and their families to obtain equipment, information and assistance in a building that is accessible to all no matter what their disability or difficulty. This is in line with current Government policy and we have built up a good working relationship with Government, Belfast City Council, funders and other voluntary organisations.

Comments on the Consultation

Shopmobility Belfast seeks to comment on this consultation on the basis of improving the lives of those with disabilities in general and our own experience of providing a service to disabled people in the area. We have actively encouraged as many groups and individuals to respond to the document.

In line with other organisations we are disappointed that the consultation document was not in line with Government practice in term of accessible design. It should be clearly understood that any improvements are accessible to everyone. Beginning with "Access for All" principles would remove the need for major rectification after plans have been developed.

- It is with disappointment that we observe that disabled people and old people, and equally importantly their

organisation, have not been considered as stakeholders. This absence of consideration of these groups is reflected in the issues and priorities identified by pre-consultation. This absence of consideration was also evident at the inaccessible launch of this consultation paper. In particular the absence of any statement in the document highlighting the need to ensure improvements made are accessible to everyone causes concern.

- The consultation paper does not seem to fit in with the Masterplan for the Streets Ahead project highlighted the benefits of creating mobility hubs in the city centre where disabled people and older people could park, get on or off a bus, get a taxi and access services like Shopmobility. It also proposed that an accessible eco-vehicle could be introduced to help people access the pedestrianised core of the city centre. It is disappointing for Shopmobility Belfast that this draft Plan does not even acknowledge the idea of mobility hubs. Our Board of Trustees are particularly worried that one of the proposed sites for a hub is the current Headquarters of Shopmobility Belfast. Seemingly under the draft plan this whole building in which we are situated is the "Core Redevelopment Opportunity". Shopmobility Belfast is concerned that this not only reflects the lack of engagement with disabled people and older people during the development of this Plan but also a lack of joined up thinking with regard to the overall plan for Belfast city centre.
- The proposals put forward for the West Side Regeneration and with the existing plans for Streets Ahead (including the pedestrianisation of Donegall Place and parts of Donegal Square) will substantially reduce access for the car and bus into the core of the city centre. To access our Shopmobility service people with mobility problems need to be able to get to our service to use it. Pushing vehicles out the periphery of the city may be a worthy thought but it will result in the exclusion of many disabled people and older people from the city due to impossible walking distances. Shopmobility Belfast strongly recommends that the DSD and other key bodies such as Roads Service rethink these proposals. The Board of Trustees appeal that any changes to access and

movement in the city centre takes into account and makes provision for those disabled people and older people who have no choice but to travel by car and bus.

- Proposals for further pedestrian areas in the City Centre and the restrictions on access for cars and buses will have a negative impact on the disabled and elderly and this does not seem to be acknowledged in the consultation paper.
- A large number of disabled people have difficulty travelling distances and need as close as possible access by car or bus to their destination. The Blue Badge Scheme is in acknowledgement of this and has provided concessions for disabled people enabling them to park close by their destination. Recommendations indicate that for some disabled people walking more than 50m can be extremely difficult. Improvements to Metro services in Belfast also mean that disabled people may be able to use the bus to go into the city. No provision to acknowledge this factor is in the consultation paper.

CONCLUSION

Shopmobility Belfast welcomes the opportunity to respond to the current consultation on plans for regeneration of the west side of Belfast city centre. We have raised concerns in our response about the potential impacts of the proposals on the mobility of disabled and older people and the impact this will have on their lives. We are concerned with where Shopmobility Belfast fits into the overall planning of Belfast City Centre. Shopmobility Belfast appeals to the Department to give serious consideration to the issues we have raised and we are happy to answer any queries the Department may have about the issues we have raised and/or meet with officials to discuss our concerns.

Ann Collins, MBE
Director
Shopmobility Belfast

30th September, 2008