

BELFAST CITY CENTRE WESTSIDE REGENERATION DISTRICT DRAFT REGENERATION PLAN

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Belfast City Centre Management Company Response

1, Introduction & Background

This response is on behalf of the Belfast City Centre Management Company, a public/private sector partnership set up to bring together key stakeholders within the city centre with the following mission statement:

"BCCM will assist key stakeholders to create coherence and unity of purpose so that Belfast becomes a vibrant, exciting, cosmopolitan city centre with its unique character and style that puts people at its heart"

Strategic Priorities 2008/09

BCCM will work through a partnership to deliver in the following strategic priority areas:

1. Urban Management;
2. Safer;
3. Character & Style;
4. Economic Activity.

BCCM works in partnership with a range of geographic focus groups within the city centre area, including the following in and adjacent to the West Side area:

- Fountain Street Area;
- Castle Street Area;
- Queen street ;
- Major Multiple Retailer Group, drawn from Donegall Place and Royal Avenue.

BCCM has consulted with the representative groups within the city centre in putting forward this submission and these representative groups have welcomed DSD's attempts to put forward a Masterplan for the West Side Area as this is clearly an area suffering from pockets of inner city neglect. The West Side represents a significant opportunity for the city centre, in particular recognition of the area's uniqueness as an independent shopping and historical interest destination.

2, Geographic Boundary of the Site

These consultations have indicated that the regeneration plan site should be promoted/ marketed as a fully inclusive area with opportunities for the economic expansion of the city centre area.

Concern is noted that the CastleCourt service yard area acts as an obstacle to the connectivity and economic sustainability of the area. Whilst this location lies outside the geographical boundary of the West Side Plan, we would request DSD to review boundary to encompass the full length of Berry Street and investigate mechanisms to re-open this street.

3, Retail & Accommodation Led Regeneration

Our consultations indicate a broad welcome for DSD's strategy of regeneration in the West Side, as it takes into account and recognises the established independent retail sector.

Our discussions with local stakeholders demonstrate their commitment to the re-invigoration of this area, repopulated by retail use, interspersed with commercial and possible housing use. There remains a major opportunity to engage with Westfield, as a developer with a £300m development proposal currently seeking planning permission on the parameters of the West Side area.

BCCM would propose that any housing provision should contain social and affordable housing elements and adequate car parking provision.

4, Higher Education Led Regeneration

There is a major opportunity to include the Belfast Metropolitan College into the West Side Masterplan and to add value to the West Side Masterplan through opportunities in higher education led regeneration, in line with other cities, which have higher education institutions within their city centre boundaries. The close proximity of the University Of Ulster's Belfast campus should also be acknowledged. These two major campuses present an opportunity for student-based accommodation in the West Side area which would support the economic vibrancy of the area.

5, Character and Style

The character and style of the area must be enhanced. Our consultations indicate strong support for retail use on ground floor with housing and commercial use/housing above retail premises. Whilst the introduction of private housing into the West Side regeneration plan area has been welcomed, any introduction of ground floor car parking is considered improper use of ground floor space, leading to 'dead' and dangerous frontage.

6, Day Time Economy

Major employers and attractors in the area include the wealth of independent retail, particularly in College Street and Queen Street. This uniqueness of the area should be promoted and strengthened. Equally a further attraction to the area is the multitude of quality multiple retail options in Wellington Place and Donegall Place.

With regards to the potential for market stall designation, we would encourage the location of street trading in tertiary or dedicated market areas. We would oppose additional designated sites in high footfall areas where businesses have high rates and overheads.

With the forthcoming investment by DSD in the Streets Ahead programme, any proposals to designate additional sites may hinder accessibility and detract from the streetscape. BCCM would propose that any designated street trading should be in a dedicated open area such as Bank Square. Any designation should take into consideration stall presentation and style as well as a high standard of merchandise to be offered for sale. We would reiterate that street trading stalls are not desirable in high footfall areas.

One of the key concerns in the Castle Street/Fountain Street areas is anti social behaviour. On street drinking, begging and homelessness are daily occurrences and require strategic involvement from key agencies such as DSD, BCC, PSNI, DHSS and NIHE. We would strongly urge the DSD to take cognisance of these social issues and champion a mechanism for relief and resolution. Anti social behaviour in these areas need addressed as part of the regeneration process.

7, Evening Economy

The evening economy footfall and tourism potential in the area is enhanced by the nightlife in the West Side area, in particular Copperfields, Mourne Seafood, the Fountain Bar, La Boca, Madden's, the Queen's Bar, Cosgrove's, the Hercules, Kelly's Cellars and the Sitting Room. This nightlight has a strong customer base, particularly shoppers and tourists.

Our consultations with the groups represented in the West Side area have highlighted the need for connectivity and strengthening linkages with Donegall Place/Royal Avenue and also across to the new Victoria Square development, as well as the re-opening of Berry Street onto Royal Avenue linking to the Cathedral Quarter.

As mentioned previously, the Castle Street/Fountain Street area suffers from anti social behaviour. The impact of on-street drinking, begging and homelessness has a detrimental impact on the night time economy and the decision of whether businesses partake in late night opening.

8, Historic Buildings & Areas

The following buildings have been identified as being in need of historic interest which should be preserved, with potential to put onto a tourism trail:

- Queen's Arcade;
- Queen Street Police Station;
- Bank Buildings;
- St Mary's Church
- Linen Hall Library;

- Bank Square

The consultation recognises the retention of as many of the historically significant buildings as possible and the possibility of re-use. BCCM would advocate and encourage the reuse of existing buildings of merit in preference to the occupation of new buildings (the former warehouse above Kelly's Eye Bingo Hall as acknowledged in the consultation, but also the Queen Street Police Station and the empty floor spaces above Poundstretcher). BCCM believes that many vacant landmark buildings offer architectural merit and their outstanding location offer great potential to developers for many possible uses such as office, retail, leisure, or combination with living space. BCCM recommends that the Department for Social Development, Belfast City Council and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should engage to establish a way forward on this issue with the view to seriously exploring the introduction of Living Over the Shops in Belfast city centre.

BCCM welcomes the regeneration plan's acknowledgment that this area can be seen as a gateway to the 'Gaeltacht Quarter'. Any such promotion would greatly enhance footfall in the city centre, particularly tourist related, and benefit the Castle Street and King Street areas. Further, the new Ibis and Gateway hotels will complement redevelopment.

9, Car Parking

Car parking within the area could well form part of a retail-led regeneration scheme, to drive shoppers and visitors to the West Side area. Where possible, car parking provision should take account of best practice in terms of underground parking, currently being implemented in other parts of Belfast. As previously stated, ground floor car parking provision is considered contrary to encouraging vibrant and safe public areas.

10, Public Realm

BCCM supports the development of improved pedestrian public realm and complementing the Streets Ahead initiative including the provision of high quality surfacing, tree planting and street furniture.

The proposed new street linking Queen Street with Fountain Street is welcomed. The opportunity exists at the junction of the proposed new street and Fountain Lane to create a distinctive pedestrian meeting point with an individual identity for the area. This could enhance connectivity in the city centre. In addition, the proposed open space at Fountain Street end of the new street would provide an opportunity for 'café culture' and use of open space. With regards to the introduction of a public art feature in this area, BCCM would particularly support a water feature which would reflect the nature of the 'Fountain Area' and enhance the feeling of local uniqueness. This would also complement the working clock which is currently sited at the Fountain Centre.

11, Pedestrianisation & Traffic

The report rightly gives prominence to pedestrian movement, but stops short of proposing pedestrian priority where this is important. One suggestion is that in areas of pedestrian priority that speed limits should be no

more than 15 mph or better still have such areas designed to physically limit vehicle speeds to less than 15 mph.

The document acknowledges the large number of vehicle movements in Castle Street, which is reflective of the area being a major gateway to the West of the city. Of concern to BCCM is the prolific illegal vehicular access after 11am to Fountain Street, College Street and Chapel Lane. To counter this activity we would endorse the installation of rising bollards at key locations.

12, Summary /General Comment

BCCM welcomes the West Side Regeneration Plan. As this plan develops, our main areas of concern are:

- Berry Street re-opened;
- Anti social behaviour (day and evening);
- Encouraging Living Over the Shops;
- Re-use of notable buildings;
- Retail use on ground floor frontages;
- High quality design;
- Connectivity with Victoria Square and the Cathedral Quarter;
- Effective traffic management issues.

30 September 2008