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Development Department
Economic Initiatives

Our Ref: S.W.Q

Pamela Davison

3506

12 September 2008

Department of Social Development
Belfast City Centre Regeneration Directorate
2nd Floor
Lesley House
25 Wellington Place
Belfast
BT1 6GD

Dear Sirs,

Re: **Belfast City Centre
West Side Regeneration District
Draft Regeneration Plan**

Please find attached Belfast City Council's response to the above document. Council's response must be considered as draft pending approval at full Council.

Council look forward to receiving the final Masterplan in due course.

Yours sincerely,

**Pamela Davison
Estates Surveyor**

Belfast City Council, Development Department,
The Cecil Ward Building, 4-10 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BP
Tel: 028 9032 0202 Text phone: 028 9027 0405 Fax: 028 9027 0501

**BELFAST CITY CENTRE
WEST SIDE REGENERATION DISTRICT
DRAFT REGENERATION PLAN**

RESPONSE



Belfast City Council
September 2008

Belfast City Council Response to West Side Regeneration District Draft Regeneration Plan

Introduction

A Regeneration Plan for the West Side of the City Centre is to be welcomed as it provides a planning vision and development framework for the area.

Belfast City Council supports the high quality development proposed and offers the following comments in the response to the Draft Regeneration Plan.

Guiding Development Principles

Belfast City Council accept and support all of the guiding development principles as a method for regeneration of the South West Quarter. The emphasis on smaller scale development schemes and residentially – led mixed use schemes will help to provide consumer variety and an alternative to the retail led regeneration schemes in other parts of the city centre. Belfast City Council will make more detailed comment on how these principles are realised in our comments on the Preferred Concept Masterplan and the benefits of the Masterplan.

Preferred Concept Masterplan

Improved Pedestrian Realm

Belfast City Council fully supports the development of improved pedestrian realm and building upon the “Belfast: Streets Ahead” initiative including the provision of high quality surfacing, tree planting and street furniture. Belfast City Council would recommend that a comprehensive strategy is put in place for all streets within a plan incorporating simple easily identified signage with better connections to the rest of the city.

Improved Linkages

Improved linkages between the South West Quarter and the rest of the city centre are vital. The Masterplan should highlight how the proposals will actually link into the Masterplans for the adjoining quarters. Although Belfast City Council do not have any open spaces within the plan area Belfast City Council manage the City Hall grounds, the premier open space in the city centre and Belfast City Council would support improved connections and linkages between this space and the South West Quarter.

Streets and Squares

Belfast City Council supports the development of a new pedestrian street between Chapel Lane and Fountain Lane but would suggest that the provision of suitable public art, lighting and seating rather and a water feature are explored.

Details regarding future maintenance of the open spaces need early resolution.

Residential Use

Belfast City Council would propose that the housing provision should contain social housing and not just affordable provision at 20%. Belfast City Council would propose that ground floor car parking is resisted to provide active street frontages. The Courtyard Garden proposed with residential units above will have little light.

New Street

The opportunity exists at the junction of the proposed new street and Fountain Lane to create a distinctive pedestrian nodal meeting point with an individual identity. This would enhance the experience of shopping and moving around the city centre.

Promotion of Independent Retail

It would be helpful to include the results of the analysis for independent retail contained within the commercial review. A delivery mechanism for the control of independent retail is required. No controls through planning policy identified to deliver the retention and extension of the provision of smaller retail units within the plan area. Details of the Re Store and any other initiatives would help bring certainty to investors and occupiers. Some consideration needs to be given to the impact of Victoria Square on Donegall Place the displacement effect has led to vacant properties more suited to larger high street multiple retailers. For those areas identified as being most appropriate for independent retail additional branding/marketing to make the area distinct similar to the work within Cathedral Quarter would be essential.

The improved public realm works must support and not restrict or impede access or visibility of units.

The possibility of a market is good but this must complement the existing St George's and Smithfield markets and the proposed open air markets across the city.

Repair of the Urban Fabric

Active schemes are required to make things happen at the derelict and vacant sites identified. The College Avenue frontage opposite R.B.A.I is particularly in need of animation. Proposals to improve existing occupied buildings such as Progressive House would be welcomed. The poor quality buildings within this area are not necessarily all the private owners fault as the statutory agencies in giving permission for low grade buildings have a responsibility and a future role in ensuring high quality buildings are built. The plan area is part of a conservation area though at present this would not be recognisable.

More co-ordinated approach to quality of development and planning gain required.

Better Transport Management

The plan should make reference to the implications of the City Centre Routing Study as this could have significant impact. Until DRD Roads Service proposals are confirmed better transport management can only be fulfilled in part. The Queen Street/Castle Street junction details of the site acquisition strategy for the bus route should be included in the masterplan. Further information on how the plan will resolve the aspiration for car parking by future residents is required.

Creation of a More Secure Environment

A strategy for vacant space is required with incentives to see early re-development of those areas which are vandalised and off-putting to pedestrians.

Underground parking and courtyards as public spaces will improve the environment.

A strategy to prevent continuance of temporary car parking permissions would improve the environment. What plans are in place to improve the unsightly multi storey car park ?

Greater detail required on proposals for outward facing frontages onto Fountain Street, Fountain Lane and Castle Street what incentives/schemes will be put in place for owners and occupiers?

The Core Development Opportunity

Details of land acquisition proposals, actions of Department for Social Development and timeframes required to make this happen need to be included in the Masterplan. It would be useful to have the appropriate tools ie. planning gain, site briefs, incorporated in the Masterplan.

Further key Development Opportunity Sites

Timescales and identification of Department for Social Development actions to assist in the development of all these sites is required. The wall of the service yard at Castle Court could be improved with an art piece that could help draw people through from Royal Avenue.

Bank Square

Clear identification of how proposals for the South West Quarter will link to North West Quarter Part I should be shown within this plan.

A detailed list of Department for Social Development actions including incentives will help bring certainty to the market and assist developers as they review the proposals.

Benefits

The benefits outlined are dependent on the plan being accepted by Planning Service and being implemented. It is noted that the Highway Benefits appear to be aspirational with no sense as to whether they would be delivered by the masterplan. There is really no clear indication how the masterplan will be delivered by Department for Social Development and what encouragement, if any, will be given to existing property owners to upgrade their properties.

To achieve the successful refurbishment of key buildings there is a need to have a pro-active approach to help property owners achieve the aims of the Concept Plan. This could involve the following measures:

- 1) LOTS Living Over the Shops Scheme. It would be important to encourage the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to be involved in implementing the LOTS in this area to deliver the reuse of the vacant upper floors for residential use.
- 2) Urban Regeneration Guidelines for the West Side Regeneration District would be a useful next step to encourage the appropriate external upgrading of building facades to preserve and enhance the character of the area.
- 3) Property Improvement Grant for external façade works.

Promotion of Community involvement in all aspects of the regeneration process is vital. Recognition of the community interests of the small number of existing residents together with the business interests of landowners and business tenants at an early stage will ensure ownership and acceptance of the initiatives and developments included in the Masterplan.