



MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP
FOR ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT
ENVIRONMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

MAG

Response to DRD Consultation

Off-Street Parking (Function of District Councils) Bill

DRD CONSULTATION
OFF STREET PARKING (FUNCTION OF DISTRICT COUNCILS) BILL
For submission by 8 August 2014

MAG - The Ministerial Advisory Group

MAG is the government's publicly appointed multi-disciplinary group which advises the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the implementation of the Architecture and Built Environment Policy.

This advice is offered within the Policy's Guiding Principle 2, Heritage,

“Pursue good urban and rural design, targeting the creative re-use of existing and historic buildings at risk, as well as public open spaces and regeneration.”

and Objective 1, Delivery of Good Design, which states

“Make guidance and support from professional advisers available to officers in the public service.....”

Three Hundred and Thirty Eight Public Open Spaces in Historic Town Centres

The Bill will apply to approximately 338 public open spaces which are mainly located in historic town centres, many of which are over 400 years old.

Restrictive Regulations

The current regulations, control of which the Bill indicates is to be retained by DRD, restrict the use of these public open spaces for 168 hours each week. Yet charges and associated enforcement only apply to limited times during the working week.

The Need for Change

Specific reference to the need for change is made on page 31 of the MAG report, “Civic Stewardship.....doing more with what we've got”, which was published in November 2013 and is available to read or download at

http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/civic_stewardship_symposium_-_interim_report_-_final.pdf

Local and Appropriate Regulation

MAG advocates that in addition to the responsibility for owning and maintaining these public open spaces and enforcing parking as appropriate locally, District Councils should undertake the responsibility for writing regulations which are suitable for the particular place, rather than being required to use regulations written in central government.

Multi-Use Places

The survival and development of town and city centres as multi-use places for the widest possible constituency of local people and visitors depends on appropriate stewardship of public open spaces.

Assumption

The Bill in its name and present form assumes that off-street car parks will remain in their present use. Beneficial use beyond car parking and beyond the normal working hours will be obtained when it is understood that these places are not "car parks" as such but instead are public open spaces.

A Myriad of Additional Activities

There is potential for a myriad of additional activities to take place if the regulations are changed to allow these. For example, these important and often strategically placed town and city centre public open spaces could host evening or weekend activities as well as being used for parking cars during the working or shopping day. Markets, concerts, art exhibitions, children's play, youth activities, vintage and veteran vehicle shows, flower shows, vegetable growing competitions, cultural and civic events could all be hosted in these 338 very important places. In addition, to bring additional energy into the town centres, these public open spaces could be used by the hundreds of passionate communities of interest that are associated with every town and city centre. These passions may be for charitable activities, cycle club race starts, running clubs, walking groups, agricultural shows, exercise and fitness groups, local history tours and overnight stays of motorhomes or caravans to aid tourism and the evening and weekend economies of town and city centres. The uses of these places are only dependent on the imagination and energy of people and their passions.

Multi-Functional Places

The Bill should specifically recognise and encourage the multifunctional capability of public open spaces in towns and city centres. Rather than designating these places as "off street car parking places" the Bill should identify them as "Public Open Spaces" with regulations able to be defined locally to suit specific needs of town and city centres and the vast array of interests that would benefit from using these important public open spaces.

Social Inclusion, Equality and Tackling Poverty

NISRA figures based on the 2011 Census indicate that across Northern Ireland, some 23% of households do not have access to a car.

http://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census/key_stats_bulletin_2011.pdf

The figure is much higher in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, many of which are situated near town and city centres, where poverty and social exclusion are concentrated, creating large inequalities. Public Open Spaces should be accessible and useful to all. The regulations and terminology of use should not be framed to favour just car owners and users. Many people who are currently subjected to poverty would benefit from being just a walk or cycle ride from these places which instead of being deserted at nights and weekends, could bring societal benefits with alternative trading opportunities and events open to all, not just people with access to a motor car.

A New Name for the Bill

Following the above recommended amendments, the Bill could usefully be renamed the Public Open Spaces (Functions of District Councils) Bill.

Further Advice

MAG is pleased to offer further constructive advice as required.

Arthur Acheson**Chair of MAG****30 July 2014**