Contents

1 Introduction 2

2 DSD’s Regeneration Remit, Statutory Authority and Policy Objectives 3

3 Regeneration Objectives for the North East Quarter 4

4 The North East Quarter 5

5 Approach 7

6 Guiding Development Principles 7

7 Summary of Analysis and Emerging Vision 8

8 Concept Plan 12

Additional copies of the Masterplan are available on request from:
Belfast City Centre Regeneration Directorate
Department for Social Development
2nd Floor
McKelvey House
25 Wellington Place
Belfast
BT1 6GD
Tel: 028 90 277646
Fax: 028 90 277655

This document is also available on the Department’s website
www.dsdni.gov.uk

This publication is also available in various formats.
For more information, please contact the Department for Social Development.
1 Introduction

1.1 This masterplan for the North East Quarter (NEQ) of Belfast City Centre constitutes supplementary guidance to the Department for Social Development’s Regeneration Policy Statement for Belfast City Centre (‘the RPS’), adopted by the Department in April 2004. It sets out further guidance on the proposed range, mix and location of uses for the NEQ of Belfast City Centre, to maximise the retail led physical, social and economic regeneration. The NEQ is identified on Plan 1. It is bounded by Royal Avenue to the west, Donegall Street to the north-east and Castle Place, Waring Street and High Street to the south.

1.2 In accordance with the RPS, an appraisal of the proposals put forward by developers for the NEQ was carried out in June 2004. The appraisal concluded that none of the proposals fulfilled the objectives for the NEQ set out in the RPS. Subsequently, in October 2004, DSD commissioned Drivers Jonas with Benoy to prepare a masterplan for the NEQ of Belfast City Centre.

1.3 DSD launched the draft masterplan produced by Drivers Jonas on 28 February 2005, and a 12 week consultation period followed on from this. A range of consultation responses were received which have all been given full and careful consideration by DSD.
2 DSD’s Regeneration Remit, Statutory Authority and Policy Objectives

2.1 DSD’s policy objective for regeneration, in pursuance of its statutory authority, is to promote and implement a comprehensive approach to tackling social, economic and physical regeneration and to redress disadvantage in cities and towns across Northern Ireland.

2.2 The Department’s statutory regeneration authority derives from: Part VII of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 (as amended by the Planning (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, Article 31), which provides the legislative basis for comprehensive development schemes, land acquisition and disposal of land, and the extinguishment of public rights of way; and the Social Need (NI) Order 1986 which provides the statutory basis for granting financial assistance to projects in areas of special social need and undertaking environmental improvement schemes. The statutory powers referred to above are exercised in the public interest by the Department to assist in the assembly and vesting of lands for the purpose of comprehensive development. The Department’s powers are exercised in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. In exercising its powers the Department also has a duty to promote equality of opportunity as required by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and to give regard to Government’s New TSN objectives in relation to combating unemployment and increasing employability.

2.3 The Department therefore plays a central role in developing and co-ordinating the implementation of urban regeneration programmes throughout Northern Ireland including Belfast City Centre. The Department’s approach to the regeneration of Belfast City Centre will be in adherence with its statutory authority and having regard to Government’s regeneration policy objectives, priorities and plans set out in the Belfast City Centre Regeneration Policy Statement (RPS) published in April 2004.

2.4 The RPS also makes clear the other key government policies which are relevant to the exercise of DSD’s statutory authority.

Equality Statement

2.5 The Department for Social Development is fully committed to complying with Section 75 obligations of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which deal with the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations.

2.6 DSD has screened the masterplan to determine if it has an impact or is likely to have a significant impact on equality of opportunity for any of the nine equality categories under Section 75. Given the conceptual nature of this Masterplan, and the neutral location of the NEQ, DSD is satisfied at this stage that there are no significant implications for equality of opportunity, and therefore that an Equality Impact Assessment is not required.

2.7 Any steps taken to redevelop the NEQ emerging from this Masterplan will be further screened and an Equality Impact Assessment undertaken if appropriate.
3 Regeneration Objectives for the North East Quarter

3.1 The RPS sets out the Department’s regeneration objectives for the NEQ. This Masterplan has been guided by these objectives, which state that any scheme in this area should:

- provide a form of retailing that complements Victoria Square for occupiers;
- enable reciprocal benefit between the two schemes;
- consolidate and enhance Castlecourt as a key shopping centre;
- be outward-facing;
- demonstrate its potential to pump prime the wider regeneration of the Cathedral Quarter. This is a function of external appearance, pedestrian connectivity and mix of uses;
- present an appropriate, high quality frontage to Royal Avenue;
- provide a mix of uses other than retail;
- respect the fine urban grain of the area;
- respect the built fabric, character and historic street form of the Cathedral Quarter Conservation Area character and policy with particular attention to bringing the listed buildings back into productive use;
- bring about the regeneration of the tertiary retail sector of the City centre;
- not prejudice plans for the wider regeneration of Cathedral Quarter through inappropriate form and scale;
- put in place appropriate connections to the Cathedral Quarter, Laganside and the Victoria Square area; and
- meet and accord with relevant planning policies and highway requirements.
4 The North East Quarter

4.1 The core of the NEQ is one of the most historically significant quarters of Belfast. It has however suffered from under-investment for many years and the full potential of the area is not being realised.

4.2 The NEQ lies within the Belfast City Centre Conservation Area and the Cathedral Conservation Area which are illustrated on Plan 2. The NEQ is entirely designated as a Conservation Area which has an impact on the scale and type of development proposed.

4.3 Laganside Development Corporation has been promoting regeneration initiatives for the adjacent Cathedral Quarter. Government’s vision is to transform Cathedral Quarter into a vibrant mixed-use cultural quarter for the city. Progress has been made and physical regeneration projects are proceeding, promoted by Laganside. Work is also ongoing to establish facilities for the performing arts and wider arts sector in the area.

4.4 An appropriate retail led scheme in the NEQ is considered by DSD as an essential catalyst to achieve the regeneration of area. The right form of development would not only enhance the overall shopping offer within the city centre but also significantly improve linkages and pedestrian flow to and through the area and bring back into use key historic and listed buildings. These factors would all help to improve economic activity within
the NEQ. It would potentially improve pedestrian flow to the adjacent Cathedral Quarter.

4.5 It is important that there is a comprehensive approach to the regeneration of the NEQ, as piecemeal redevelopment may not achieve the wider regeneration objectives of the City Centre as a whole, and the adjacent Cathedral Quarter. In addition any scheme needs to be of sufficient size and value to generate funds to pay for the costs of refurbishing any retained buildings (see paragraph 7.2) and make a material step change in enhancing the character and transforming the public perception of the area.

4.6 The NEQ is within the City’s main shopping area, as defined by the Belfast Urban Area Plan (BUAP), and within the primary retail core defined by the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (draft BMAP).

4.7 Lower Garfield Street provides a key link to the Cathedral Quarter and currently includes a number of vacant, but historically attractive buildings which are in need of upgrading.

4.8 Although not within the NEQ, the Cathedral and opportunities to enhance the area around this key landmark building, will have a significant impact on any proposals for the NEQ.

4.9 The area has a strong historical pattern of buildings, streets and alleyways which have largely remained unchanged over time.

4.10 There are a number of listed buildings within the NEQ including the fire-damaged North Street Arcade.

4.11 The existing mix of uses is varied and includes independent retailers, offices, a limited number of bars and restaurants as well as a large number of buildings that are vacant, un-occupied and in need of considerable investment to bring them back into reuse.

4.12 The challenge will be achieving a solution which balances restoring and retaining important historic buildings with attracting a sufficient level of private sector investment to fund a scheme which pays for the restoration of buildings and changes the image of the area.
5 Approach

5.1 A draft masterplan was developed on behalf of DSD by a multi-disciplinary team, led by Drivers Jonas (Property Consultants) and including Benoy (Urban Designers and Architects) and WS Atkins (Transport Consultants).

5.2 The team worked with the NEQ Masterplan Steering Group. This Steering Group comprised representatives from the following statutory bodies: DSD, Department of the Environment (DOE) – Planning Service and Environment and Heritage Service, Department for Regional Development (DRD), Belfast City Council, and Laganside Corporation.

5.3 Prior to the publication of the draft masterplan, discussions were held between Drivers Jonas and a number of private, public and community stakeholders. Feedback was received from the Community Arts Forum (CAF), Ulster Architectural Heritage Society (UAHS), Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM), Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce (BCTC), William Ewart Properties Ltd and Deramore Property Group.

5.4 In tandem with this, an urban design study was undertaken. This considered the physical characteristics of the area. Following on from the urban design analysis, commercial review and further consultation with the Steering Group, a range of masterplan development options were tested, and a preferred concept plan recommended.

5.5 Drivers Jonas completed the draft Masterplan for the NEQ, which was published for public consultation on 28 February 2005. This consultation period ended on 23 May 2005.

6 Guiding Development Principles

6.1 The guiding principles for regeneration in the NEQ are set out below.

6.2 These evolved from the consultants’ knowledge and analysis of the area and the City as a whole and also guidance from CABE (Commission for Architecture in the Built Environment) and good practice across the UK and Europe. It is anticipated that these principles will underpin the type of future development DSD would support.

These principles are:-

• character preservation – reinforcing the distinctiveness and identity;

• destination creation – to include shopping and a mix of complimentary uses such as housing, restaurants, bars, cafes, public and cultural uses;

• retention where possible of historic buildings and facades;

• commercial attractiveness – ensuring that the proposals are capable of attracting investment into the area;

• traffic calming – to prioritise pedestrian linkages and encourage ‘people not cars’;

• quality public spaces;

• encouraging a 24 hour environment; and

• promote sustainable economic and social regeneration of the North East Quarter – in line with DSD’s regeneration objectives set out in the Regeneration Policy Statement.
7 Summary of Analysis and the Emerging Vision

7.1 The Masterplan vision is to create a vibrant mixed use area, with a particular emphasis on the creation of new shopping opportunities within the NEQ. This new shopping element (combined with other uses) is required to attract private sector investment in the area and create a destination which will appeal to shoppers and visitors alike.

7.2 Where possible, the development should retain important historic and listed buildings and bring back into beneficial use parts of the quarter which have remained derelict or unused for many years.

7.3 This could include opportunities to introduce arts based or cultural activities within the area to further enhance the adjacent Cathedral Quarter.

7.4 The harnessing of development opportunities in the NEQ presents a unique opportunity to enhance this area’s special heritage and character – it is therefore important that any development in the area proceeds on the basis of protecting its distinctive character of buildings and streets whilst ensuring that priority is given to pedestrians.

Urban Design and Movement

7.5 The urban design analysis completed by the consultants is summarised below.

Physical Characteristics of NEQ

7.6 The built character of the NEQ is most apparent along North Street, Donegall Street and Lower Garfield Street where key buildings, frontages and street lines animate the architectural quality of the area.
7.7 Key buildings and façades include the former Northern Bank building, 56-60 North Street, Bradell’s on North Street, the First Presbyterian Church, 29-25 North Street, 21-17 Castle Place, 1-19 Royal Avenue and 16-24 Donegall Street.

7.8 Within the NEQ there are a number of derelict and under-utilised sites and buildings that have the potential to increase the current use mix, and enhance the continuity of streetscape.

7.9 The large surface car park accessed off North Street significantly detracts from the area. Some quality historic buildings have fallen into disrepair, and are vacant, such as 2-14 Lower Garfield Street and the former Northern Bank building. It is important that such key historic buildings are retained and enhanced as part of the masterplan process.

Mix of Uses

7.10 The southern and western areas of the NEQ contain the majority of the NEQ’s retail offer. As the NEQ extends north, the quality and amount of retail deteriorates and the dominant use becomes offices, with large office developments focussed around Writers’ Square. There are a limited number of cafes and pubs particularly along North Street.

7.11 There is a need to increase the mix and quality of uses in the NEQ. Residential use is limited, and there is considerable potential to develop a city centre residential community by bringing into use under-utilised upper floors. This would increase vibrancy and security within the NEQ. It will also be important to inject other uses such as restaurants, bars, sports and arts facilities to enhance the day-long life of the area.

Access and Movement within the NEQ

7.12 Royal Avenue is a primary route, but has a pedestrian focus with a shared landscape surface across its width and vehicular access is restricted to buses and loading. The remaining routes are vehicle focussed, carrying two-way traffic and suffering from a high level of both legal and illegal on-street parking.

7.13 The key problem street is North Street. This is a one-way route linking Bridge Street with Royal Avenue and is a busy through route. The large surface car park on North Street increases traffic movements. North Street can become very congested and acts as a physical barrier cutting through the NEQ.

7.14 Pedestrian movement across the area suffers from poorly managed loading regulations, and a limited number of pedestrian only ‘lanes’ and routes that mirror road routes. As pedestrians progress north through the NEQ their ability to permeate the area significantly reduces with no direct lateral routes linking Rosemary Street with Lower Garfield Street and beyond, or linear routes between North Street and Donegall Street (North Street Arcade now being fire-damaged).

7.15 Achieving pedestrian permeability will be a key part of the successful regeneration of the NEQ.

Car Parking

7.16 The car parks present within the NEQ are under-utilised key development sites. They break the urban grain and create visual intrusions. These sites need to be developed, in order to contribute to the area’s character rather than detracting from it.

Urban Qualities

7.17 When comparing the urban grain of the NEQ in 1860 with that of today much of the early street layout and block sizes remain intact. Block deterioration only occurs along North Street and Donegall Street, due to surface car parking and the poorly defined Writers’ Square. The key changes that have occurred have reduced the routes that cut through blocks to provide pedestrian permeability. This is particularly noticeable between Rosemary Street and Lower Garfield Street. The historic ‘laneways’ running north south between Rosemary Street and Castle Place have also been damaged or replaced.

Existing Built Form/ Enclosure/ Scale

7.18 The loss of historic buildings and gaps in the streetscape have led to a reduction in the sense of enclosure. Writers’ Square in particular, whilst a potential asset, is poorly defined in scale and form, and fails to respond to the potential of the Cathedral’s west front.
The scale of existing buildings within the area range from one to five or more storeys.

7.19 Existing focal points and landmarks within the NEQ include:
- The former Northern Bank building and the adjacent road junction;
- The First Presbyterian Church;
- North Street/ Royal Avenue junction; and
- Views along Rosemary Street.

Visual landmarks beyond the NEQ include:
- St Anne’s Cathedral from Writers’ Square;
- Royal Avenue to the former Bank of Ireland;
- Royal Avenue to City Hall;
- High Street to Albert Clock; and
- William Street into the Library Quarter.

7.20 It is important that any future development options for the NEQ complement and utilise these key spaces, views and landmarks.

7.21 The retention of key buildings will form the basis from which an improved urban grain and streetscape should be developed, with the potential for large scale building removal or adaptation. It is important that redevelopment comprises a comparable scale and form to ensure that the NEQ is repaired and enhanced, rather than destroyed.

**Commercial Issues**

7.22 The consultants’ analysis of commercial issues is summarised below.

7.23 The key city centre retail provision is concentrated in a fairly tightly defined area comprising Castlecourt shopping centre, Royal Avenue, Donegall Place and the streets surrounding Arthur Square. Donegall Place provides the traditional prime pitch. It is linear, orientated north/south with a view to City Hall and Donegall Square to the south. Beyond this core area, the quality of the shopping environment deteriorates significantly. The majority of retail provision is secondary and/or has a bias towards independent or service industry occupiers.

7.24 Although the level of national retailer representation has slowly improved in recent years, there remains an under-representation of department stores, higher quality retailers and international brands. However, this is now beginning to change and Victoria Square will have a major impact on shopping patterns and pedestrian movements within the City as well as significantly improving the retail offer. There is also evidence of the beginnings of a ‘café culture’ within the city although activity outside the main shopping hours is still very limited.

7.25 The NEQ is a transitional zone within the city centre. The western boundary has frontage onto the prime retail section of Royal Avenue, but moving east, the retail offer falls off dramatically. Vacancy levels within the NEQ are generally high by comparison with the rest of the city centre – a number of units are compromised by their size and configuration, and therefore do not easily satisfy modern retailer requirements. This wide spread of differing market conditions across the masterplan area presents opportunities to harness the strength of Royal Avenue and permeate those retailing conditions further into the quarter, whilst recognising that the provision of suitable retail units presents significant challenges.
7.26 Account has been taken of the analysis of the retail capacity included in the Draft BMAP technical supplements. This work indicates that Belfast is under performing in its role as the primary regional shopping centre and concludes that there is a need to further support new retail growth in the area. The quantum of potential retail floorspace in the NEQ should be subject to further consideration, and informed by the Department taking market soundings on this issue. Once investigations have been carried out on these matters, the quantum, timing and sequencing of development in the NEQ and the NWQ will be considered.

7.27 Managing the timing of any development within NEQ and other areas of the city is very important to ensure a) the success of Victoria Square and b) that development happens within the city in a phased and commercially acceptable manner.

7.28 Certain key commercial issues were highlighted during the preparation of the draft masterplan. In particular:

- whilst retention of key buildings and facades is important, new development is also required to provide the type of space that will be attractive to potential tenants and occupiers;
- any new development needs to be of a sufficient critical mass to create a new retail-led, mixed use destination in the city centre and to attract potential developers and investors. An anchor store is likely to be an important element of any new scheme and this should be located in a position which draws shoppers and visitors through the quarter;
- The specific form of retail offer needs to complement rather than compete with the current and proposed provision in the city. The consultants have concluded that, subject to paragraph 7.26, there remains scope for a more specialised scheme aimed at high quality retailers. DSD recognises this as the optimum solution for the NEQ.
- the introduction of sufficient residential space is important and will encourage city centre living in this area and ‘kick start’ an evening economy – this will increase the area’s attractiveness to potential restaurant and catering occupiers, particularly facilities that can achieve early / late evening activity when the area is currently underused; and
- although it would be preferable to include significant car parking within the site, it may not be practical or viable to do so. From a commercial perspective, car parking is a vital element of any new retail led scheme. It is unlikely that an anchor store will be successfully attracted to this location without some on site parking or parking within close proximity. Any proposals for car parking within the NEQ will be provided within the context of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Transport Plan (BMTP).

7.29 The type of uses which could help achieve this vision are:-

- shops aimed at high quality occupiers including provision for a large store to draw pedestrians into the area and encourage other retailers to locate here;
- housing;
- offices – potential business accommodation, studios and workshops; and
- restaurants, bars and cafés.

Other potential uses could be:-

- public buildings;
- tourist information;
- cultural and arts uses;
- educational uses;
- cycle facilities; and
- public transport solutions.
8 The Concept Plan

8.1 Having considered the draft masterplan developed by the multidisciplinary team, and the consultation responses, DSD considers that there are two potential options, set out in the concept plans shown below in Plans 3 and 4, which illustrate how Government’s regeneration objectives for the NEQ could be achieved in a commercially viable scheme. They demonstrate different ways of ensuring that the principle of North Street Arcade is retained. The Department considers it premature to finalise the masterplan’s position on the alignment of North Street Arcade in advance of the completion of a structural engineer’s report. This would be reviewed further at a later stage, in light of the engineer’s report.

8.2 It must be emphasised that these plans are indicative, and are intended to act as a framework or guide. They illustrate principles for interpretation by the designers on subsequent schemes.

8.3 The main elements of the concept plans are highlighted below:

- a new shopping street which has an entrance on Royal Avenue, directly opposite the entrance to Castlecourt Shopping Centre;
- an anchor store located between North Street and Donegall Street in a prominent position with frontage on both sides. There is also potential for the anchor store to include a side entrance which could create a link into Writers’ Square and the Library Quarter;
- the principle of the North Street Arcade is retained, which creates a new east-west link between North Street and Donegall Street, and also connects into Writers’ Square;
- residential and office accommodation is located above the new shops and Lower Garfield Street has been identified as a new restaurant destination;
- a potential multi storey car park location has been identified to the west of Writers Square, which could provide in the region of 300 spaces. This car park could be surrounded by ground floor shops and residential and/or offices on upper floors;
- re-definition of Writers Square which essentially ‘frames’ the space. Other public realm improvements include an improved setting for the Cathedral and First Presbyterian Church and the introduction of a public square adjacent to the Northern Bank building;
- the Northern Bank building is a suggested venue for a new mixed use and/or arts venue; and
- Donegall Arcade is a potential location for a later phase of redevelopment – this could include the creation of a new public courtyard surrounded by a mix of restaurant, residential, office and retail uses.

Key Benefits

8.4 The implementation of the concept plan has the potential to achieve:

- the major expansion of the retail offer (the consultants’ report indicates approximately 20,000 sq m of additional retail floorspace). Timing, sequencing and the specific quantum will be subject to the further consideration referred to at paragraph 7.26;
- improved linkages with the Victoria Square development and the rest of the City;
- potential for further shopping development in the longer term;
- the major expansion of commercial and residential uses (the consultants’ report indicates approximately 35,000 sq m of commercial / residential uses);
- the provision of up to 1,400 jobs;
- car parking provision to support the shopping, housing, offices, restaurants, cafes and bars, both on and off site;
- potential to retain the North Street Arcade to improve linkages through the area;
- retention and re-use of key listed and historic buildings;
- strengthening of key linkages through the site;
- opening up and improvement of Writers’ Square and public space around the Cathedral;
- new pedestrian linkage through the site from the Library Quarter;
- creation of new public spaces within the scheme;
- opportunity to encourage re-use of Northern Bank building for mixed use and/or arts and cultural use;
- potential to act as a catalyst for creation of new tourism/cultural focus for this part of the city;
- potential to reinforce and create new linkages into the NWQ and Library Quarter; and
- opportunity to improve connectivity and pedestrian linkages between the NWQ and NEQ.