## Contents

1. Introduction ............................................................... 5
2. DSD’s Regeneration Remit, Statutory Authority & Policy Objectives .................................................. 7
3. North West Quarter Masterplan Objectives ............. 9
4. Guiding Principles ...................................................... 11
5. Approach ............................................................... 13
6. Analysis ............................................................... 15
7. Concept Plan .......................................................... 25
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This masterplan for the North West Quarter (NWQ) 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 North West Quarter (NWQ) of Belfast City Centre, to maximise the retail led physical, social and economic regeneration of the area. The NWQ is identified on the plan below.

1.2 The Department for Social Development (DSD) commissioned GVA Grimley in July 2004 to undertake the preparation of the NWQ masterplan.

1.3 The Masterplan has been prepared in two parts. This report focuses on Part One which is included within the Main Shopping Area (MSA) as defined in the Belfast Urban Area Plan (BUAP 2001). This area is also within the Primary Retail Core as defined in the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (Draft BMAP). Notably Castlecourt Shopping Centre and Smithfield Market are contained within the area, which is bounded by Millfield, North Street, Royal Avenue and Castle Street. The main objective for the Part One area is to maximise the retail-led regeneration opportunity within this area.
1.4 The draft Part One masterplan was developed through the direction of a steering group chaired by DSD, comprising representatives from government departments including DOE Planning Service, DSD’s Belfast Regeneration Office and the Valuation & Lands Agency. Belfast City Council was also represented on the steering group.

1.5 Part Two of the masterplan aims to integrate physical, social and economic regeneration of the wider North West Quarter of the City Centre outside the Main Shopping Area which extends to the north of North Street and to the west of Millfield and Carrick Hill. The entire area is bounded by Donegall Street/Clifton Street, Royal Avenue, Castle Street/Divis Street and the Westlink. It is anticipated that the report on Part Two of the masterplan will be published by DSD later in 2005. However, it is important to note that consultation has commenced over the wider area in order to set the context for the detailed core area strategy.

1.6 The context for this masterplan has been provided by the RPS, which establishes a city-centre context within which the Part One Masterplan is set. This is referred to in chapter 2.

1.7 DSD launched the draft masterplan produced by GVA Grimley 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.

**Vision**

1.8 Government’s vision is to strengthen Belfast City Centre as Northern Ireland’s premier regional shopping destination providing a high quality, safe urban environment, which is attractive to investors, employees, residents, shoppers and tourists. The Vision for the North West Quarter is to create a revitalised mixed use quarter which optimises the area’s economic, tourism and leisure potential, creates appropriate new shopping development and brings direct benefit to the adjoining residential communities in North and West Belfast.

Essentially, DSD aims to:

- create a vibrant competitive city as a centre for business, learning, culture, retail, leisure and living;
- enrich the City’s shopping offer;
- improve connections for pedestrians within the City Centre; and
- enhance public spaces and street environments.

1.9 DSD has prepared two masterplans, for both the North West and North East Shopping Quarters, in recognition of the importance of a holistic approach. Both masterplans have been developed in close collaboration, guided by the Regeneration Policy Statement.
2. DSD’S REGENERATION REMIT, STATUTORY AUTHORITY & POLICY OBJECTIVES

2.1 DSD’s policy objective for regeneration, in pursuance of the Department’s statutory authority, is to promote and implement a comprehensive approach to tackling social, economic and physical regeneration and redressing 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 Department recognises that the area to the north and west of Castlecourt requires appropriate investment. The Department believes that the North West Quarter has considerable potential to provide additional retail development, where retail would be a primary use in a mixed-use context. The Department also notes that the promotion and implementation of any significant retail-based regeneration scheme in this area is likely to require the Department’s statutory authority.

As stated in the RPS, the Department believes that the future regeneration of this area will require careful thought to ensure that:

- the extended North West area as a whole is regenerated in a way which maintains and strengthens the unique character of the area and maximises the potential for mixed-use comprehensive development for this area;
- the ‘blocking’ effect which the current Castlecourt Centre has had to connectivity and urban regeneration to the rear of the Centre is avoided;
- the regeneration better connects the area to North and West Belfast removing blight and securing neutral space for all sections of the community in which to live, work, shop and enjoy leisure time; and
- the regeneration complements the Victoria Square and proposed North East Quarter Schemes by expanding the retail offer across the City Centre at a pace which maximises the potential of the City Centre but recognises the need for a sequenced approach in order to secure the maximum opportunity for the retail market and the consumer.
2.5 The RPS sets out objectives for the North West Quarter Masterplan in Chapter 3.

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

Equality Statement

2.7 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.

2.8 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 NWQ, 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.

2.9 Any steps taken to redevelop the NWQ emerging from this Masterplan will be further screened and an Equality Impact Assessment undertaken if appropriate.
3. NORTH WEST QUARTER MASTERPLAN OBJECTIVES

3.1 The North West Quarter of Belfast City Centre is an important area in regeneration terms as it connects the City Centre to the communities of North and West Belfast. It provides the potential to consolidate and expand the retail offer provided by Castlecourt, which already accounts for approximately 65,000 sqm of shopping and parking and acts as a retail anchor to the west of the City Centre. However, the area to the north, west and south of Castlecourt requires appropriate investment and could provide further retail through retail-led mixed-use development.

3.2 In delivering any new mixed-use development, DSD will apply the principles set out in the Regeneration Policy Statement for the City Centre. DSD aspires to retain the historic character of the area as the traditional street grid to the north of North Street and to the rear and south of Castlecourt is largely intact. In addition the area has a number of fine Victorian buildings and strong urban design attributes.

The Regeneration Policy Statement for the City Centre requires that the masterplan for the NWQ:

- considers the nature, scale and timing provision of additional retail facilities, having regard to the priority accorded to the Victoria Square Development and retail developments elsewhere in the City Centre;
- promotes 24 hour access to the City Centre;
- explores the potential for a mix of uses including residential development;
- explores the potential for retaining and developing a market function in the area;
- ensures a high degree of connectivity with Royal Avenue and North-South towards Castle Street;
- provides advice on the viability/deliverability of different development mix options;
- significantly upgrades the pedestrian environment and improves pedestrian circulation and linkages;
- resolves conflict between car parking, service traffic and pedestrian movement;
- encourages active ground floor uses to bring life to the streets;
- promotes a scale and form of development that protects and strengthens the heritage and urban form of the area, with potential for statement buildings at the intersections, creating a distinctive sense of place;
- respects and where possible reinstates the historic street pattern, ensuring that new buildings front on to these streets, in order to create a sense of living space;
- puts in place design guidance to inform the development process;
- considers and addresses social exclusion;
- maximises connectivity north and west to the adjoining residential neighbourhoods;
- includes guidance on public realm investment;
- provides a co-ordinated approach to regeneration which takes account of proposed accessibility and transport arrangements including proposals for the development and improvement of the public network;
- draws upon exemplars of good practice for similar neighbourhoods in other UK and European cities; and
- clearly defines the role of the Department and other public sector bodies in the regeneration of the area.
Illustrative examples of schemes in other European cities;
4. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

4.1 Good masterplanning principles emphasise the need to create a sense of place, an atmosphere that engages users of the area linked with a strong commercial brand.

4.2 In the North West Quarter, this is a difficult balancing act. The historic street pattern and urban form developed to accommodate a particular mixture of residential, shopping and business uses. Modern retail development standards bring requirements in terms of mix of occupiers (including anchor stores), size of units, servicing, car parking and access, that need careful design to fit with the traditional urban form and character.

4.3 The approach taken in designing the Castlecourt Shopping Centre is characteristic of the 1980s push for internal shopping malls which ignore the historic character of the place. Best practice in urban design practice has rightly moved away from this approach, which involved the wholesale demolition of areas to accommodate a very large block of building. Expert guidance now recommends a more considered approach, carefully knitting together old and new. This aims to maintain active streetscapes throughout the whole area, providing an interesting environment with a richness of detail and experience and activity throughout the day.

In considering the appropriate form of retail-led development for the area, the following critical factors were identified:

- Design - shopping must be an interesting and exciting experience. Retailers want space that suits their needs and the product should help achieve wider social objectives;
- Footfall - is essential to the success of retailing facilities. We must create a ‘shopping circuit’ or ensure that the scheme becomes part of an existing one;
- Tenant mix and critical mass - tenant mix must act as an attraction and offer choice to shoppers in context of surroundings;
- Safety - shopping must be safe and relaxed;
- Access - circulation and movement must be convenient; and
- Special - we should seek to create a special shopping experience, not more of the same, utilising independent retailers, a range of support uses - cafes, bars, leisure etc.

4.4 The approach has been predicated on successful retail-led regeneration in other European cities, including Beursplein/Netherlands, Nijmegen/Netherlands, Potsdamer Platz/Berlin, Solingen/Germany, and Manchester, England. Account has also been taken of the guidance provided by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and other related agencies, complemented by experience in ensuring successful, viable and vital shopping centres as part of a mixed use future.

4.5 The Victoria Square scheme, in terms of shopping centre design and aspiration, will move quality standards upwards in Belfast in line with leading edge urban and shopping centre design. This is necessary to give the City a competitive edge and it is essential that this edge is maintained in the design of subsequent retail-led developments.
4.6 Therefore, having regard to good practice, the regeneration objectives set out in the RPS, the character of the area and the need to maintain the design standards set by the Victoria Square Development, the guiding development principles for the NWQ are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Preservation and reinforcement of distinctiveness, enhance identity and create a richer experience;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban Structure</td>
<td>Response to urban grain, building lines, creation of spatial variety. Hierarchy of networks, compatible scale and density;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Realm</td>
<td>Create high quality streetscapes and public squares as a backdrop for the development. Accommodate local events, cultural activity;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Movement</td>
<td>Create an accessible, safe, 24 hour environment that is easily navigable, maximise active frontage, permeability, choice of routes, pedestrian priority and exploit landmarks and vistas;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Change</td>
<td>In the interests of sustainability and gradual evolution, create flexible, reusable, building structures to mitigate the need for future wholesale redevelopment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-use</td>
<td>Incorporate a mix of uses, civic components and variety of materials, spaces and places;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable</td>
<td>Work with natural features and strengths. Aim to enhance rather than compromise the future;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add Value</td>
<td>Create value in the social and environmental sense, as well as economic;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Strive to create a thriving inclusive city destination, not just a gated community of shoppers enclosed and exclusive; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote Sustainable Economic and Social Regeneration of the North West Quarter</td>
<td>In line with DSD’s regeneration objectives set out in the Regeneration Policy Statement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. APPROACH

Two Part Process

5.1 The NWQ masterplan consists of two parts as illustrated on the following map. Part One addresses the area that lies within the Main Shopping Area (shaded dark green), bounded by Millfield to the west, North Street to the North, Royal Avenue to the east and Castle Street to the south. The main objective here is to maximise the retail led regeneration opportunity within this area.

5.2 Part Two aims to integrate physical, social and economic regeneration of the entire North West Quarter which extends to the Westlink on the West, Clifton Street/Donegall Street to the North, Royal Avenue to the East and Castle Street to the South.
5.3 Although Part Two masterplan will be finalised at a later stage, it is important to note that initial consultation has been undertaken over the wider area to be developed and tested.

Part One Detailed Approach

5.4 GVA Grimley, in preparing the draft masterplan, undertook an intensive analysis and consultation process to enable options for the future of the area to be developed and tested.

5.5 Belfast City Council was a key statutory consultee. Various stakeholders also contributed to the consultation including, the Department of Regional Development, Department of Environment’s Planning Service and Environment and Heritage Service, DSD’s Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, Belfast Regeneration Office, DSD Housing Division, Laganside Development Corporation, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Belfast Institute of Higher and Further Education, Local Enterprise Companies, North Belfast Community Action Unit, North Belfast Partnership, West Belfast Partnership and the Greater Shankill Partnership.

5.6 Prior to the publication of the draft masterplan, discussions were held between the consultants and representatives from the private and public sectors, including Westfield Shoppingtowns Limited (owners of Castlecourt) and Smithfield Centre Limited as significant landowners, Belfast Chamber of Trade and City Centre Management, Debenhams and other major retailers.

5.7 Similarly, adjacent communities were engaged in the consultation process. This will be expanded upon in the preparation of Part Two of the masterplan.

5.8 Input from this process led to an analysis which provided the platform upon which the various masterplan options were developed. These were evaluated against adopted criteria (from the RPS) and a development concept was recommended for consultation purposes.

5.9 GVA Grimley completed the draft masterplan for the NWQ, which was published for public consultation on 28 February 2005. This consultation period ended on 23 May 2005.
6. ANALYSIS

6.1 The consultants’ detailed analysis of urban design, transport and economic/market analysis enabled the formulation of a series of options leading to the selection of the recommended development concept. This is summarised below.

Urban Design

6.2 The Urban Design response follows the application of the ‘best practice’ philosophy referred to above in the integration of major new retail facilities into City Centres. The notion of active, inclusive, accessible, well connected public realm is core to this philosophy.

From an initial examination of the study area it is clear that:

- A physical shift of the City Centre function in an easterly direction has occurred;
- There are three distinct areas - the Retail Core Area, Library Quarter & residential areas to the west of Millfield and Carrick Hill;
- The network of Royal Avenue, Donegall Street, North Street, High Street/Castle Street and Waring Street/Rosemary Street creates a strong urban structure to the City Centre and provides strong connections between the North West Quarter, North East Quarter and the City Centre as a whole;
- Millfield and Carrick Hill form a natural edge to the City Centre;
- Three areas of retail change have emerged: Victoria Square, Castlecourt and the Royal Avenue retail scheme (formally Cathedral Way). Their physical interconnection is critical to ensure they function as destinations within a City Centre retail framework;
- The design of the Castlecourt Shopping Centre ignored the historic urban grain of the area and has significantly reduced the permeability in the core and wider area, affecting the vitality of areas to the north in particular, but also to the south;
- The historic urban grain to the south of Castlecourt and the north of North Street is relatively intact and should be protected and complemented to increase wider integration with the City Centre as a whole. The fabric to the north of Castlecourt has been destroyed although the street structure is intact. Any new development should respect this structure and link it back into the fabric to the north;
- Castlecourt is in a prime retail location in terms of being highly accessible for service vehicles and cars, combined with prime frontage on Royal Avenue;
- There is a lack of public open space within the City Centre as a whole and the North West Quarter in particular. The opportunity exists to provide a high quality public open space, in the context of a clearly defined network and public realm structure, which could act as a catalyst for private investment; and
- A new public open space would also enhance the public realm framework, which is critical in the integration of the North West Quarter with the wider City Centre. This in turn increases the overall attractiveness of the City Centre as an investment location and as a place to live/visit.
Urban Grain and Hierarchy of Streets

6.3 In 1860 Belfast City Centre had a distinct hierarchy of streets as illustrated on the adjacent plan. A comparison of the city centre in 1860 with the current pattern shows that much of the earlier street layout and block size remains intact today. The major change is where the Castlecourt Shopping Centre has introduced a much larger footprint of building that breaks the characteristic rhythm of urban grain. It also destroyed the secondary set of lanes, severed naturally connecting routes and removed a key open space, the former site of Smithfield Market.

6.4 Directly north of Castlecourt the street pattern has been eroded in part through the introduction of the market at the corner of Winetavern Street and Smithfield Square North. A finer grain block structure remains to the south of Castlecourt around Marquis Street, Chapel Lane and Castle Street.

6.5 Comparing the historic street pattern with that of today shows a marked decrease in the range of linking routes with fewer choices available to pedestrians, which is exacerbated at night by the closure of routes through Castlecourt. This has marginalised, in commercial terms, the areas north and south of Castlecourt. It is therefore important to examine how the division created by Castlecourt can be repaired and townscape quality improved to create a commercially attractive environment.
6.6 Part of the NWQ masterplan falls within the Belfast City Centre Conservation Area - the Haymarket area, Royal Avenue and the Urban Block bounded by Royal Avenue, Castle Street, Berry Street and Marquis Street. In recognition of this, the promotion of an appropriate scale and form of development that protects and strengthens the heritage and urban form of the area is essential.

6.7 The analysis diagram illustrates the building scale as two levels of storey heights, indicating their different impacts on the adjacent streets and open spaces. Changes of building scale can be a useful device for providing focal points or adding an interesting contrast to the street scene. There are two existing dynamic Art Deco buildings, the Bank of Ireland and the former Sinclair’s Department Store, which add to the quality of the environment.

6.8 A key element to creating a quality environment is the appropriate scale and form of buildings that enclose streets and squares. A good example is Royal Avenue where the similar height of buildings and strong cornice lines provide a consistently high degree of enclosure to the street. The scale of Castlecourt and associated car park is retained on all façades and sits within areas of lower buildings to the north and south. The unequal heights on either side of Berry Street and Smithfield Square North accentuate the sense of Castlecourt as an ‘alien’ insertion into the area.

6.9 The large-scale demolition of buildings has destroyed the adjacent streets and spaces, diminishing the degree of containment. There are opportunities to restructure the relationship between buildings and spaces, heal the urban form and define some new places of real character.
Quality of Frontages

6.10 The majority of building frontages in the area detract from the overall urban character and contribute little to a pedestrian friendly environment. The general quality of the urban fabric appears poor with unattractive shop-fronts, a lack of interesting detail and poorly designed alterations and boundary walls around yards.

6.11 The exception is Royal Avenue where consistency of massing and interesting facades provide a civic street of good urban quality. In addition, small pockets of existing buildings have potential to make a good contribution to the streetscape if renovated, to preserve and reinforce the heritage of the area.

Open Space:
Positive Elements

6.13 The open space in the area is created by the sequence of streets with few larger squares or focal spaces. The whole zone has a hard urban character with very little planting. The St Mary's Church Grotto off Chapel Lane is the only green area.

6.14 There are no properly structured urban spaces in the area but there is a key opportunity to provide a new square in this quarter around which a sustainable framework of streets will connect more widely.
Open Space: Negative Elements

6.15 The principal areas of negative character all have the common feature of a lack of containment and active ground floor uses, providing a spatial experience that does not conform to a tight urban grain. Other elements that de-value the character of open spaces include the dominance of traffic and associated signage and lack of arrival or gateway spaces.

Views and Landmarks

6.16 The majority of good views are mid-distance views around Royal Avenue and a small number of interesting short distance views. These are both general views taking in the distinctive streetscape and views to key facades or buildings:

- Royal Avenue is terminated by the City Hall to the south and the “Art Deco” bank on North Street, to the north. This building should be seen as a key landmark and treated accordingly;

- Views along Castle Place to the North West Quarter focus on the fine building façade at the corner of Royal Avenue and Castle Street;

- The brick façade of buildings at the corner of North Street and Royal Avenue form a focus to views from the north and draws the eye into Royal Avenue; and

- Special to Belfast are long distance views to the west, of the enclosing range of hills. Upper levels of development would clearly benefit from this.

There are many poor views into and across derelict development sites. In addition note should be taken of:

- Poor containment and lack of focal points looking west out of the retail core to the housing beyond;

- Long distance views across the roofs of buildings to the car park on King Street, which forms a backdrop to the smaller scale streetscape in front;

- Poor rooftops, seen from higher ground on Millfield when approaching the City Centre; and

- The major south to north vista along Great Victoria Street is terminated by a mediocre cluster of old and new buildings. The key sites at the ends of Castle Street and Berry Street should be viewed as possibilities for a landmark building.
Alleyways and Arcades

6.17 Secondary narrow linking routes still exist in the area and, in a number of cases, have been developed as arcades. Haymarket and nearby Queens Arcade and Donegall Arcade are good examples. These clusters of shops provide a different scale of offer to the main streets and often contain specialist or fringe retailers that contrast with the larger multiples.

Façade Design

6.18 A large number of buildings, particularly those fronting main streets, employ a similar hierarchy of applied detail to articulate their façades. The main characteristics follow a ‘classical’ range of motifs, such as string courses, strong cornice lines, attached pilasters, raised window and door surrounds and an ascending scale and order from ground floor to attic storey. This gives a consistency of detail within the area as well as providing a valuable richness of design detail.

Corner and High Level Features

6.19 The detailing of eaves lines and roofscapes vary in the City Centre. The main streets tend to be more ornate with examples of dormers, balustrading and parapets. As the buildings on principal streets are generally higher the roof only becomes evident from oblique longer distance views or when seen from the upper storeys of buildings. In secondary streets, such as the area immediately to the north and south of Castlecourt, the building designs are simpler, lower and the roof becomes more dominant, with eaves lines flush with the building façade.
6.20 One element that does repeat is the use of corner turrets and domes, which form both principal and secondary focal points. These are often copper clad. Seen in mid and long views they draw the eye through the streetscape, and are a useful point of orientation within the grid of the City Centre. The dome on the City Hall is a fine example, although other less dominant examples exist.

Transport

Public Transport

6.21 Bus services utilise the major roads including North Street, Royal Avenue and Castle Street. Measures to be considered for introduction or expansion include:

- Bus-only access to certain streets or sections of street (for example, it may prove feasible to restrict traffic movements in Castle Street to bus-only and service vehicles);
- Provision of high quality passenger waiting facilities, incorporating information services regarding bus operations;
- Provision of frequent, high quality bus services; and
- Good access to the retail areas and with pedestrian links serving the centre.

Pedestrians and Cyclists

6.22 The pedestrian and cyclist environment is poor, with limited facilities. It is important that as part of any new public realm design, provision is also made for pedestrians and cyclists, both in terms of access to the area and facilities within the area. Measures, which should be considered, include:

- Provision of suitably located and high quality cycle parking;
- Wide footways, free from parked vehicles and servicing vehicles;
- Suitable direction signing;
- High grade pedestrian crossings both on the adjacent and local roads;
- Pedestrian areas should be free from parked vehicles;
- Good, direct linkages for both pedestrians and cyclists, within and to adjacent areas; and
- Increase pedestrian/cycle permeability through and within the area.

Road Network and Function - External Road Network

6.23 Millfield is part of Belfast’s City Centre Ring and as such is a major carrier of traffic, catering for both short and longer distance movements and acting as a major orbital distributor around the central area.

6.24 Castle Street and North Street, both tend to act as distributor/access roads providing connections between the major highway network and the more central areas. Castle Street is also part of the west – east axis of the Belfast Cross. Proposals currently exist which, if implemented, would increase pedestrian priorities in this corridor at the expense of general traffic during conventional shopping hours.
6.25 Royal Avenue is also part of the north–south axis of the Belfast Cross and currently has working day restrictions, which are intended to permit access only to buses and servicing vehicles (though these are also subject to time restrictions).

Road Network and Function - Internal Road Network

6.26 In addition to the major highway links, the area also has an internal network of minor routes providing access into the more central part of the area from the external network. These streets currently provide access to car parks, both multi-storey and surface, off-street service areas individual properties and areas of on-street parking.

6.27 Some of the streets have been pedestrianised in an attempt to reduce the permeability of the area to cars and consequently, to improve the environment for pedestrians and cyclists. (This complements the proposal in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Transport Plan to further regulate parking controls within the city centre).

Market Potential

6.28 During the last 15-20 years, the Belfast Metropolitan Area has experienced a significant amount of new retail development, but mostly in non-city/town centre locations. Consequently Belfast is now considered to be under-provided in retailing terms relative to its status as the "Regional Capital". The policies contained within the draft BMAP and DSD’s Regeneration Policy Statement and Masterplans, will reinforce Belfast City Centre’s position within the retail hierarchy as the primary shopping destination in Northern Ireland. Furthermore it is hoped that the re-emergence of Belfast City Centre as the premier shopping destination, will attract leading European and International brands.

Quality

6.29 Health checks, undertaken as part of the Draft BMAP technical appraisal, state that Belfast City Centre is generally fairly healthy. However one weakness which emerged is the fact that there is a qualitative need for a greater range of major stores which will help distinguish it further from lower order town centres. In addition to this, it is also considered important to safeguard Belfast’s well established independent retail market which underpins a unique product offering which helps promote the diversity of retail offering.

Capacity

6.30 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 NWQ 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 NWQ and the NEQ will be considered.
6.31 Therefore the urban design and retail market analysis concludes that the North West Quarter is a particularly appropriate location for large scale shopping. The preferred scenario is to secure a large scale, street-based, quality development, with a comparison retail anchor to provide an effective counterbalance to Victoria Square. This development will also complement the proposed retail offering in the North East Quarter area.

The retail-led development in the North West Quarter will:

- Assist in the re-emergence of Belfast City Centre as the Premier shopping destination;
- Aim to safeguard the independent retail market offering;
- Consolidate the shopping core to maintain a compact city;
- Complement Victoria Square and North East Quarter schemes by expanding the retail offer; and
- Encourage mixed use in all developments;
  - residential to generate “city living”, especially above shops and focused around the public spaces with partial fronting on North Street, Royal Avenue and Castle Street. This will breathe life and vitality into the area and help develop the evening economy;
  - office uses are considered more suitable in the area north of North Street and within the North East Quarter area; and
- Result in a new tourism destination being established which will strengthen the existing tourism circuit.

Conclusion of Analysis

6.32 In summary the consultants’ team concluded that there is potential for major new shopping/mixed use development which re-establishes a street based approach with connections through and to the North/South and the East/West. A number of options were prepared to incorporate these principles.
NWQ Concept Plan

KEY
- Retail
- Retail-Led Mixed Use
- New Public Space
- Parking
- Active Use at Ground Floor
7. CONCEPT PLAN

7.1 In collaboration with the Steering Group, the consultants’ team developed a series of options, which were developed and tested against the Guiding Principles and the criteria set in the Belfast Regeneration Policy Statement. The concept harnesses the strategic principles and has been prepared to guide future development without being prescriptive.

7.2 It must be emphasised that this plan is intended to act as a framework or guide. It illustrates principles for interpretation by the designers on any subsequent scheme.

7.3 The adjacent strategic concept diagram demonstrates how a new quarter of the city might be designed by recreating the historic urban grain with a new city square at its heart. The core philosophy is to provide high quality public space as a setting for a retail-led mixed use quarter. The new city square must be strongly connected back to Royal Avenue and form a natural extension to the primary retail circuit.

The spaces between the new blocks should exhibit the characteristics of real streets, with day-long access, external quality materials and a clear legibility between street grid and block layout.

7.4 There is an opportunity to recreate a significant public space in this quarter of Belfast as a setting for a unique and compelling shopping environment. This new city square would become the new heart of the North West Quarter and become a destination in its own right as a key meeting place, a point of arrival in the city from the west, a place of entertainment, a place of refreshment, a place of special environmental quality and, with the correct blend of uses, a place to live. It would generate a critical mass of retail frontage, probably on more than one level with residential and civic components enriching the mix.

In addition the square could help regenerate the Library Quarter as it’s only one block away from North Street, a thoroughfare of major significance to both the North West and North East Quarters.

7.5 The overarching approach would allow for the reconstruction of the urban grain with a network of streets and squares clustered around Castlecourt development. The public realm framework would contain a retail led, mixed-use and dense quarter, which would create a ripple effect on neighbouring regeneration especially north of North Street and south of Berry Street.

7.6 Creating new links through Castlecourt is particularly important because of the regenerative effect it would have on the areas immediately south of the centre through increased footfall and activity.

7.7 It should be noted that implementation of the concept plan will require the removal of Smithfield Market. The Market currently provides a retail offer for independent traders within the City Centre objectives.

As the development process is taken forward, Government will take into consideration the needs of the independent traders in the wider context of the City Centre regeneration objectives.

7.8 The following summarises the objectives which have been given consideration in the development of the concept plan.
Uses

- Provide greater opportunities for active and passive use of streets and open space, e.g. sitting, watching, meeting, cafés, events;
- Encourage a mix of uses that provides a more sustainable environment and encourages city living with residential above shops and around public spaces;
- Encourage a mix of uses that encourages movement and activity throughout the day and evening;
- Integrate the emerging new street pattern with a strong shopping plan, based on sound, established retail planning principles. This will be essential to ensure that ‘best practice’ urban design principles are underpinned by a sustainable, evolving commercial strategy; and
- Attract at least one key ‘anchor’ store, to house a major retailer to help reinforce urban form and activity.

Urban Form

- Re-establish an urban grain that respects historic block sizes;
- Form the edge of city blocks with buildings that provide strong enclosure to streets, through appropriate scale and massing;
- Promote building frontages that positively address the street, with active uses at ground and first floors;
- Re-establish a density of buildings appropriate to the City Centre whilst consistent with commercial aspirations;
- Develop a network of connecting open spaces through the area and adjacent areas;
- Promote open streets and squares, rather than covered malls, although the concept of shelter in urban space should be addressed;
- Develop a sequence of focal spaces and focal points at key locations to encourage legibility and movement through the area, responding to key desire lines and commercial patterns of use; and
- Provide a sense of arrival at the City Centre along Millfield, through gateway features or focal spaces.
Circulation

• Generate a variety of routes linking activity clusters with the City Centre;

• Generate links that reinstate north-south movement, currently obstructed by the Castlecourt Shopping Centre;

• Reduce the barrier effect of Millfield between the central core and adjacent areas by establishing better connections and promoting active frontages;

• Vary the type of routes to allow primary and secondary links, building on the historic hierarchy of streets and lanes;

• Promote a pedestrian-friendly environment by giving prominence to pedestrians and cyclists over vehicles (as promoted in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan);

• Rationalise service routes and car park access points, where possible, to downgrade their physical and visual impact; and

• Analyse the circulation patterns through and around Castlecourt to examine possibilities for stronger links and penetrations through the existing built form.

Character

• Ensure buildings have a plot size and rhythm that respects historic precedent;

• Promote a basic range of materials for buildings and open space that build on the dominant character of the area;

• Encourage a hierarchy of façade detail to provide a richness of built form that respects the repeating themes already present in the area; and

• Develop an integrated approach to signage and provision of street furniture.
Benefits of the Concept Plan

Implementation of the concept plan has the potential to achieve:

- a reinforced City Centre at the top of the retail hierarchy;

- the major expansion of the retail offer (the consultants' report indicates an optimum level of 60,000 sqm of additional retail floorspace). Timing, sequencing and the specific quantum will be subject to the further consideration referred to at paragraph 6.30;

- the strengthening of the shopping “dumbbell effect” between the South East (Victoria Square) and North West;

- the creation of new opportunities for mixed use including approximately 20,000 sqm of additional residential floorspace (approximately 275 units);

- the provision of up to 2,400 additional jobs;

- the development of a new tourism focus;

- new public realm throughout, including revitalisation of Bank Square;

- a new Square at the heart of the area;

- the revitalisation of North Street and Castle Street by enabling North/South movement;

- the enhancement of access and connectivity to the adjacent neighbourhoods at Peter’s Hill and Carrick Hill;

- the opening up of Berry Street and revitalisation of the streets to the South of Castlecourt; and

- a catalyst for the development of the area north of North Street, the Library Quarter.