BELFAST CITY CENTRE
Northside Urban Village Regeneration Framework

Creating a new future for the neighbourhoods of Brown’s Square, Carrick Hill and the Press/Library Quarter

Together, tackling disadvantage, building communities

May 2009
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1. This Regeneration Framework (the “regeneration framework”) for the North West Quarter Part 2 area of Belfast City Centre constitutes proposed supplementary guidance to the Department for Social Development’s (DSD) 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 Part 2 area of Belfast City Centre, to maximise the physical, social and economic regeneration of the area. The North West Quarter Part 2 area is identified on the plan opposite, figure 1. It comprises the neighbourhoods of Brown’s Square, Carrick Hill and Press/Library Quarters.

‘Belfast City Centre Northside Urban Village’

2. In taking forward the regeneration of this area, DSD proposes to promote the area as the ‘Belfast City Centre Northside Urban Village’. DSD believes that this designation conveys our vision to build on the historic character and rich community life of this area on the edge of Belfast City Centre by creating a new urban village with the potential to improve the quality of life, well-being and prosperity of those who live in the area.

3. DSD proposes that the future regeneration of the North West Quarter Part 2 area should be taken forward within the context of this Regeneration Framework rather than through a masterplan approach. DSD is of the view that a framework approach to regeneration better suits the needs of the area as it will provide for phased implementation over a number of years based upon market response to development opportunities and the availability of funding. In implementing the framework, DSD would aim to select a preferred developer or a consortium of developers with experience in delivering inner-city regeneration.

4. DSD recognises that the north side of Belfast City Centre is an important area in regeneration terms as it connects the communities of North and West Belfast to the city centre. It also provides significant scope to retain the historic character of the city centre as the old street grid, particularly to the north of North Street, is largely intact. In addition, it has a number of fine Victorian buildings plus strong urban design attributes.
Figure 1. North West Quarter Part 2 Area.
5. **DSD** is of the view that the future regeneration of the area should adhere to the following key regeneration principles:

- improved connections from the city centre to the adjoining residential neighbourhoods in order to address blight and secure shared space for all sections of the community in which to live, work, shop and enjoy leisure time;

- development proposals should address the range, mix and location of uses recommended by this regeneration framework in order to maximise the physical, social and sustainable economic regeneration of the area;

- development proposals should respect the historic character of the area by reflecting the old street grid and the Victorian architecture;

- social exclusion should be tackled through physical development addressing problems associated with disadvantage such as housing need, unemployment, ill-health, benefit-dependency and educational under-achievement; and;

- development proposals should give regard to environmental sustainability in their design and use of materials for construction.
6. 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.

7. DSD’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 DSD to assist in the assembly and vesting of lands for the purpose of comprehensive development. DSD’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 the Northern Ireland Executive’s New TSN objectives in relation to combating unemployment and increasing employability.

8. DSD 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 the regeneration policy objectives, priorities and plans set out in the DSD Belfast City Centre Regeneration Policy Statement (RPS) published in April 2004. The objectives for the North West Quarter Masterplan are set out in Chapter 3 of the RPS. The RPS also makes clear the other key Northern Ireland Executive policies that are relevant to the exercise of DSD’s statutory authority.

9. DSD recognises that the North West Quarter Part 2 area requires appropriate investment. The Department believes that the area has considerable potential to provide mixed-use development, as set out in this regeneration framework. The Department also notes that the promotion and implementation of any significant comprehensive development in the area is likely to require the Department’s statutory authority.

**Equality Statement**

10. DSD 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. The Department has conducted an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on the draft framework. The Final EQIA report is available on the DSD website at www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/urcdg-urban_regeneration/urcdg-publications.htm. The Department has given due consideration to all representations made during the consultation process and has amended this final regeneration framework accordingly. In implementing the regeneration framework for the Northside Urban Village, the Department will take account of the points expressed during the EQIA consultation in order to address potentially adverse differential impacts in the Framework and to further promote equality of opportunity across the Section 75 Groups.
Background

11. The North West Quarter, as its name implies, lies to the north-west of Belfast City Centre, part of it comprising a significant retail component of the city centre (Castlecourt). It has a range of characteristics, including the remnants of a Victorian warehouse district, late twentieth-century housing, an education campus and a series of surface-level car-parks.

12. The North West Quarter is contained by Clifton Street and Donegall Street to the North, the A12 (West Link) to the west, Divis Street/Castle Street to the south and Royal Avenue to the east.

13. The proposed Northside Urban Village within Part 2 of the North West Quarter comprises two distinct areas – The Press/Library Quarter and the West City Fringe.

14. The network of streets in the Press/Library Quarter creates a strong urban structure that is part of the city centre and provides strong connections between the North West Quarter and the city as a whole.

15. Millfield and Carrick Hill run north/south through the area and create a natural edge to the city centre.

16. The historic grain of the city is evident in the Press/Library Quarter, where the street layout is intact and a number of buildings have survived that are indicative of the scale and mass of the area. To the west of Millfield/Carrick Hill, little of the historic grain remains (although there are some remnants of Victorian terraces), and it has been replaced with a less legible street arrangement.

17. There is a lack of public open space within the city centre and the North West Quarter in particular. The opportunity exists to provide high-quality streetscape and public realm that could act as a catalyst for regeneration in the area and strengthen its integration with the city centre.

Character

18. The proposed ‘Northside Urban Village’ has two distinct character areas that are separated by the north/south route of Millfield and Carrick Hill. These character areas are defined by a combination of uses, street layouts, building mass and scale and landmark buildings or spaces.

19. To the east is an area that has the remnants of Victorian warehousing but is dominated by the open spaces of surface-level car-parks. Bounded by North Street in the south, Carrick Hill to the west, Donegall Street to the north and Royal Avenue to the east, this area
has a strong street structure in a legible grid pattern. Its character is also defined by its use, which is dominated by the Belfast Telegraph newspaper printing press and offices between Donegall/Little Donegall Streets. Another important use and building of significant architectural merit is the Belfast Central Library, which includes a newspaper archive. The warehouse character of the area is best seen around Union Street, Little Donegall Street and Library Street. The buildings are predominantly between three and five storeys, usually with a one-and-a-half or two-storey ground floor. They are located on the back of the footpath edge. The streets are generously wide and accommodate car parking parallel to the kerb and allow large vehicles to pass.

20. To the west of Carrick Hill/Millfield is a predominantly residential area of two-storey housing (Brown’s Square). Mixed in to this are remnants of light industry and similar employment and to the south of this area is an education campus at Millfield – Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC). The residential areas vary in style and age from Victorian terraces through “Radburn” estates and 1980-90s houses. The street layouts include cul-de-sacs and in places the backs of houses face on to them. Generally these are difficult places for visitors to find their way around, with few landmarks and clear views down the streets.

21. It is considered that this residential area has two distinct characters, and this is strengthened by Peter’s Hill, a wide street running east/west. To the north, the Carrick Hill area is dominated by late twentieth-century residential buildings. To the south is the Brown’s Square area, which is more mixed-use and includes larger light-industrial uses, terraced houses and other late twentieth-century housing.
**Landmarks & Views**

22. Through the North West Quarter and on its edges, there are buildings, façades and spaces that are readily identifiable and help give visitors a sense or orientation within the area and engender a sense of pride for residents, be they people who live or work there. The locations of these contribute to mid-distance views into the area from outside, or more local, short-distance views within the area. Additionally, there are significant views from specific locations out of the area.

23. Significant buildings include:

- the former Bank of Ireland building on the corner of North Street/Royal Avenue. This forms a strong focal point when looking north along these streets, and the striking white stone and Art Deco style of the building topped with the copper-clad turret creates an impressive image;

- Belfast Central Library – a fine civic building that has public access and consequently is very active;

- Belfast Telegraph/Press on the northern edge of Royal Avenue. The Telegraph building (office) is a fine Victorian structure. Associated with this is the printing press, which has become a landmark building;

- Library Street/Little Donegall Street. The junction of this is well contained by the Library and Press buildings, with ‘Frames’ snooker hall creating interest through its triangular plan form. The space created has a strong sense of enclosure and ‘place’.

24. There is a series of significant vistas and views down main streets to the surrounding countryside. These include along Clifton Street, Peter’s Hill (and along Shankill Road) and Castle Street.

**Open Space**

25. There is limited public open space within the area that has a defined use, with two play areas in the residential areas (on Regent Street and Brown Street). On Peter’s Hill there is a large green open space, but it has no identified use beyond creating a visual/aural buffer to the residential area. However, immediately adjacent to the Press/Library Quarter there are two large urban spaces – Writers’ Square to the south of St Anne’s Cathedral and the Cathedral Gardens to the east of it.
Access Movement

26. The main streets help to define the character throughout the area. The Westlink (A12) is a regional road that has a high level of traffic on it. It is cut into the ground and this reduces its visual impact from ground level (in plan view/aerial photographs it is seen as having a strong presence) but this creates a strong physical barrier, there being specific locations across it (Clifton Street, Peter’s Hill and Divis Street). The main local routes that divide the area into its smaller districts are Carrick Hill/Millfield, Clifton Street, Peter’s Hill, and Divis Street. These are important ‘city’ routes facilitating movement through the city. They are heavily trafficked during peak hours but are observed to be much quieter outside these times. Generally they are wide streets of four to five lanes, and it is this physical size that characterises them and means they become boundaries to the areas contained within them.

27. More local streets that are still important on the city scale include Donegall Street, North Street and Royal Avenue. However, these are not as wide as the other city routes and have more streets accessing them. As such, they have a human scale rather than a vehicular one. Royal Avenue is a very important street in the urban structure of the city centre. For much of its length it is a bus-only route and has retail located along it, creating a definite character.

28. In the Press/Library Quarter there is a series of local streets that accommodate movement through the area. Based on a grid pattern, these are easy to navigate around and as they are relatively short, they create a strong sense of place and feeling of moving from one place to the next. Again, this smaller scale creates a more intimate sense of place than the city routes and reinforces the character of the area.

29. The streets within the Carrick Hill area and Brown’s Square area are residential in character. They include cul-de-sacs, ‘loop’ roads and in places the backs of houses face on to them. Generally these are difficult places for visitors to find their way around, with few landmarks and clear views down the streets. Compared with the Press/Library Quarter, they have few connections to the city routes.

Constraints & Weaknesses

30. Generally the area appears fragmented, with little quality development. This is reinforced by a high level of vacant buildings and the large vacant plots used for car parking. Major routes create strong barriers that impede movement through the whole of the area (particularly Carrick Hill/Millfield and Peter’s Hill) and to adjoining areas (West Link).
31. There is generally a poor environmental quality through the area; the major routes are highly engineered and have little sense of scale related to the pedestrian, lacking street trees, quality lighting and street furniture.

32. It is considered that the poor environmental quality is a threat to the area and if steps are not taken to improve the area, it is likely to degenerate at an accelerated pace.

33. The potential for poor-quality or inappropriate development is considered a threat within the area.

**Strengths & Opportunities**

34. The Press/Library Quarter is a considerable asset for the city centre and indeed Belfast as a whole. It has the vestiges of a strong character based on its historical building fabric and there appears to be a developing evening economy based on a cluster of pubs, bars and clubs. The proximity of the area to the University of Ulster’s Belfast Campus and the retail area appears to be appealing to younger people and the market is responding to this in some initial way.

35. The junction of Little Donegall Street and Library Street is a high-quality urban form and improvements to the environmental quality could be a catalyst for the development of the wider quarter. It has the potential to develop into a high-quality public space that could create a link between the open spaces adjacent to the University/Cathedral and the potential open space promoted in the North West Quarter Masterplan (Part 1).

36. Throughout the area there are a number of vacant sites that have potential for redevelopment with uses that complement the immediate area. These would have the advantage of being easy to develop as they have no buildings on them and they could potentially be developed with a mix of uses, introducing new uses into areas that may promote economic prosperity in the area. If they were to be developed at a higher intensity than existing areas, then they would provide additional economic return.

37. The residential areas to the west of the area have a significant strength related to their proximity to the city centre, being less than 800m from the City Hall – equal to a ten-minute walk for a healthy adult. This puts many facilities within reach of these areas so that people can live, work and play within a ‘walkable neighbourhood’.

38. More detailed opportunities include improvements to façades, the development of improved pedestrian facilities on the city routes, the greening of the city routes through street tree-planting, the conversion of buildings to accommodate new uses and new development to reinforce the urban structure by strengthening the edge of the urban blocks with new buildings.
39. This section of the regeneration framework presents a broad vision for the future development of the area. A Concept Plan is also presented to articulate the vision for the various character zones within the area.

**Vision**

40. DSD’s vision for physical development of the proposed ‘Northside Urban Village’ is:

To build on the strong historic character and rich community life of the area by encouraging the development of a high-quality urban form which complements the richness and scale of existing buildings and brings vitality to the area. Urban blocks which front onto the main streets will be strengthened and historic buildings converted for higher value uses. Building façades will be improved and a network of safe, green and attractive pedestrian routes provided to encourage economic prosperity to the area.

**Concept Plan**

41. A Concept Plan, figure 2, (overleaf) has been prepared to illustrate in broad terms how the physical regeneration vision for the area can be taken forward for each of the character zones. The purpose of the Concept Plan is to focus on the character areas and outline how local connections can be improved, built edges strengthened and the manner in which the area can interact with the surrounding area through regeneration as a new city centre urban village. Character areas have been defined that respond to the existing urban structure and uses and their location within the wider city area, as set out overleaf.

**Press/Library Quarter**

42. The Press/Library Quarter area is proposed as a location for urban living combined with an evening economy that will attract creative industries, social economy enterprise, tourism, cultural and arts development. This is in response to the emerging uses of the area and its proximity to the University of Ulster York Street campus. The smaller warehouses may be suitable for conversion to other employment uses related to creative industries and could act as starter and incubator units. Others may be suitable for development/conversion to flats of a ‘loft’ style.

43. New development in the area should respect the existing good-quality buildings. They should aim to create a strong building line to the back of the footpath, have storeys that match through to adjacent buildings and should not exceed the height of the local warehouses.

44. At the centre of this area there is the opportunity to create a high-quality public space at the junction of Little Donegall Street and Library Street that should become a focus and future heart of the Press/Library Quarter.
Figure 2. Northside Urban Village, Concept Plan.
Brown’s Square and Carrick Hill residential areas

45. ‘City-edge’ living is proposed in the Brown’s Square and Carrick Hill residential areas. The proximity to the city centre (approximately a ten-minute walk) means that these areas can be considered to be part of a wider ‘walkable neighbourhood’.

46. The focus should be on developing new mixed-tenure housing and the potential exists for higher density of built form than currently exists. This would allow for buildings of four storeys and potentially five or six storeys in locations that will enhance the urban structure. These developments should also consider providing additional local amenities in the form of small shops and/or independent and niche retail developments.

47. Developments must be of a high quality and aim to enhance the public realm with specific attention to improving accessibility and connections within the area and to its immediate neighbours. The opportunity to create stronger links to the residential areas to the west of the A12 (Westlink) should be explored. This might be through improving the pedestrian and cycling environments on existing roads (Clifton Street, Peter’s Hill, Castle Street).

48. Alternatively new bridge links could be explored and the development of an iconic structure could promote the wider western city fringe, creating a perception of confidence for the area. Any transportation proposals will comply with the Department for Regional Development’s Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP), particularly in relation to residents’ parking and car parking for those with mobility impairments.

Millfield

49. The area to the north of Castle Street, including the current Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) Millfield campus, is recognised as a location for education and employment. DSD recommends that any new development in this area should primarily encourage employment opportunities in business sectors supportive of the educational facilities and potentially offer training and placement opportunities for students attending the BMC. Any new development in this area should also respect the setting of St Stephen’s and St Luke’s Church.

Potential Regeneration Benefits Arising From The Regeneration Framework

50. This regeneration framework would potentially generate the following level of development/employment across the Northside area:

- 827 residential units, with 20% designated for affordable housing
- 23,100 sq m office/business use
- 8,100 sq m retail/leisure/restaurant use
- 2,750 sq m educational use
- an estimated 1,700 jobs.
This section presents the urban design and land-use plan for the proposed ‘Northside Urban Village’.

DSD recommends that future proposals for site development in the area should reflect the following urban design and land-use principles. The urban design principles follow the broad principles set out in the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (Appendix A) but include more detailed parameters arising.

**Building Height**

A maximum of five to six-storey development is proposed. This could be higher along the North Street frontage. The aim is to retain the urban village/warehouse-style character and discourage the proliferation of tall buildings.

**Building Footprint**

The building footprint should comprise 60-70% of the total site area. In the North Street frontage in the Library Quarter it is likely to be higher due to the pattern of build form, which is likely to constitute around 80-90% of the total site area.

**Residential Development**

The average residential unit size is assumed to be 80-100 sq m. This provides scope for a range of property sizes ranging from studios to family housing. The Department will ensure that a range of residential accommodation will be provided, and will also ensure that appropriate facilities are provided for residents, including play facilities for children where new family housing is provided.

All new residential development will conform to DOE Planning Service’s and DSD/NIHE’s policies on housing.

**Retail Development**

Retail development assumptions are based on the number of units which the market can support in each area/site. DSD has assumed 150 sq m per retail unit. A total of 8,100 sq m retail/leisure/restaurant use is envisaged by the regeneration framework.

**Leisure Use**

The provision of leisure uses (including cafes, bars, entertainment) is based on the number of premises the area/market could support. DSD has assumed 250 sq m per unit.

**Office/Business Use (including Creative Industries)**

For office/business start-up units DSD has assumed 200 sq m per unit, which the market could support in the area.
Open space/public realm improvement

59. Open space/public realm improvement measures are proposed along main streets and at gateways/junctions, and include proposals to create a new public space/square at the junction of Library Street/Little Donegall Street.

Tourism, Culture and Arts Development

60. The opportunity for tourism, culture and arts development within the area should be exploited particularly in relation to maximising the potential of Belfast Central Library. DSD also supports the concept of a heritage/tourist trail, to stimulate increased footfall in the area and link it with the historically important former Crumlin Road Gaol site.

Potential Catalytic Regeneration Projects

61. The concept plan illustrates how the urban structure of the area could be strengthened and a series of catalytic projects considered.

62. These measures should include public realm improvements, and in the first instance focus on the city routes. Carrick Hill/Millfield should be improved through street tree-planting (of a boulevard nature) and combined with public art and improved surface treatments. It would be beneficial to introduce additional pedestrian crossings to improve connectivity between the east and west edges.

63. A significant project would be related to the junction of Carrick Hill/Millfield, Peter’s Hill/North Street. This is an important location where the character changes from city centre to the city edge, with subsequent changes in land use and urban scale. As such, it acts as a ‘gateway’ to the centre and there is significant opportunity for development at this point, with open ground found on three corners of the junction. It would be appropriate for development on these plots to be of a scale associated with a gateway to the city centre.

64. Additional ‘gateway’ sites exist (at a smaller scale) on the College Street/Castle Street junction, where the Belfast Metropolitan College Millfield Campus goes some way to creating such an event, and Clifton Street/Carrick Hill, where any development will need to respect the setting of St Patrick’s Church.

65. Smaller projects can also act as catalysts for redevelopment. Of note is the potential for a new public space at Library Street/Little Donegall Street and public realm improvements on the Royal Avenue/North St junction that can act as a local gateway to the area.

Linkages with other Regeneration Masterplanning in North and West Belfast

66. DSD will take forward the implementation of this regeneration framework having regard to: the proposals set out in the Draft Masterplan for the former Crumlin Road Gaol/Girdwood Military Barracks; and, the emerging proposals for regeneration of neighbourhoods adjacent to the North West Quarter Part 2 area.
67. This regeneration framework is adopted as supplementary guidance to DSD’s Regeneration Policy Statement for Belfast City Centre. Implementation of the framework is subject to market response, available funding, economic appraisal and satisfying all statutory requirements.