



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Health and Environmental Services Committee
Subject:	Strategic Study of the Holyland and the Wider University Area
Date:	9th January, 2012
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1.0 Relevant Background Information

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| 1.1 | The Committee is aware of the issues in the Holyland area of the city in respect of over densification of housing units and high levels of antisocial behaviour. A Holyland Inter-agency Group (IAG), led by the Council, was formed in 2005 to facilitate a coordinated approach to delivering services and interventions in the area, as well as to influence policy change. |
| 1.2 | In recognising the complexities associated in finding longer term solutions, the Council passed a motion in December 2009 calling for a strategic study of the area. A sub-group of the IAG, led by the Council, appointed Colin Buchanan & Partners in September 2010 to undertake the strategic study to develop proposals for a long term comprehensive strategic plan for the Holyland and wider university area (set within a citywide context). |
| 1.3 | The detailed Baseline report based on the evidence gathered has been published and copies are available in the Members' Library. Following the evidence gathering, analysis of best practice in other cities and significant consultation with stakeholders, a draft strategy has been produced. Partner organisations have been reviewing the draft strategy and interventions to assess the implications in terms of the feasibility and resources. |
| 1.4 | During this period, further consultation sessions have been held, including the annual DEL Stakeholder Forum on the Holyland (27th October) and a session with residents groups in the area (November 2011). A briefing with Councillors from the Balmoral and Laganbank electoral areas was also held. This provided an opportunity to inform all stakeholders of the direction of travel for the study and enabled further input on the feasibility and potential impact of the proposals. |
| 1.5 | The Study has taken longer than originally anticipated to complete. An underlying guiding principle has been the need to ensure that the Study is more substantial than a strategy for an area and to demonstrate a realistic way forward with the commitment of all partners. This approach has required significant consultation and negotiation at every stage to ensure that information is as accurate as possible and that proposals are feasible and time bound. Fundamental issues around current legislative responsibilities and existing partner commitments have also added to the complexity of balancing short term needs of stakeholders with longer term planning for the area. In line with this underlying guiding principle, a series of workshops are scheduled in January, with each the partner organisation to identify key actions to take forward the proposed interventions. |

2.0	Key Issues
2.1	<p>The Strategic Study of the Holyland and wider university area has focused on the Holyland area but places it firmly within a city-wide context. It has therefore been aligned to the development of the Belfast Masterplan and the Learning City concept as an economic platform for the City is a core theme and driver for the Study recommendations.</p>
2.2	<p>The draft strategy is based on the fundamental need to alter the dynamic of how the area currently functions and, through a series of interlocking interventions, take forward two strategic aims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ accommodating students within the City; and also ▪ bringing about neighbourhood / housing renewal to restore the functional integrity of the Holyland area and to better connect it to the city as whole <p>An outline of the draft interventions is attached.</p>
2.3	<p>It requires acknowledgement that the absence of a coherent policy on the production and supply of student housing has not only resulted in an over-reliance on the private rented sector but has also reduced the capacity of the partners, despite the provisions of the HMO Subject Plan, to effectively intervene or systematically influence the scope, scale and pattern of accommodation used by students.</p>
2.4	<p>The key issues emerging from the strategic study include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The relocation of the UU has the potential to have a positive impact on regeneration and connectivity in the city as well as an impetus to resolve some of the issues in the Holyland and wider university area. It is a timely opportunity to leverage support for a city wide approach to student accommodation and the development of a learning city. ▪ There is support for the development of an integrated housing strategy for the city, incorporating student accommodation; however, collaborative working between the academic institutes is critical. ▪ Belfast has a low level of university controlled student accommodation when compared to other cities which has created a reliance on the private sector, therefore providing greater housing choice through purpose built student accommodation not only has the potential to support renewal in the Holyland but also to reinvigorate the city centre. ▪ The proposal to identify candidate streets, creating New Homes from Old has been generally well received; there is potential to reconvert suitable HMO properties within the Holyland area over time. ▪ Consolidating management of HMOs and the interface with neighbouring streets will be important in managing the area. <p>Other issues highlighted by the study include environmental problems in the area such as noise disturbance, car parking, traffic management and street cleansing.</p>
2.5	<p>The Study has focused on developing long term solutions to the issues in the Holyland and wider university area and there are significant challenges in moving forward which include working across traditional organisational boundaries and moving beyond current statutory requirements; high community expectations around the delivery of recommendations; the current financial environment and existing legislation such as the ongoing issues associated with the registration of HMOs and the gaps in legislation/ policies to tackle flat conversions and space standards. Tackling these issues requires a long term collaborative approach from all agencies and is likely to need support and input from the NI Assembly.</p>

2.6	Partners have expressed commitment to support the strategic aims and proposed interventions but the actions require more detailed work programming and ownership to be shared amongst the organisations. To complete the strategy, a series of facilitated workshop sessions with partners has been scheduled in early 2012 to identify key actions that will be required to help make the interventions a reality. A session focusing on the interventions targeting the Holyland and wider university area and including wider representation from the IAG is also proposed as well as further engagement with residents.
2.7	Throughout this process it will be important to take cognisance of the developing Belfast Masterplan, the Stimulus Package and the developments underway in other partner agencies; such as the DSD review of HMOs, the impact of student fees, the development of the UU campus at the Cathedral Quarter etc. The Study proposals have implications for the Holyland and wider university area, the city and regionally which emphasises the necessity of support from the NI Assembly. It is anticipated that the final Strategic Study Report, once agreed with partners, will be presented to relevant central Government Department Ministers (principally, DEL and DSD). The timescale for this is mid march.
2.8	Given the complexity and nature of the issues, a radical or quick-fix solution will not be possible. It will require all the agencies to continue to work in partnership with residents, students, landlords and businesses to bring about positive and long-term change in the area. There is; however, an ongoing commitment from partner agencies to continue to manage the area through the Interagency Group and Interagency Implementation Plan which is currently being refreshed to take account of the findings from the study.

3.0	Resource Implications
3.1	The Council has contributed £15k towards the Strategic Study with the remaining £47k being contributed by the NI Housing Executive, Strategic Investment Board and the three academic establishments (QUB, UU and BMC).
3.2	Although many of the proposed interventions require investment from a range of partners, the Council may be asked to consider securing some financial resource to assist in leveraging funds for potential environmental /public realm works, which will be important in demonstrating visible changes to the long term residents.
3.3	The financial and reputational costs to the city and partners are considerable. Management of the current regime is costly – indicative costs amount to some £2.7m in 2010 alone, whilst costs associated with specific mitigation events such as St Patrick’s etc. amounted to circa £324k. These escalating costs cannot be sustained. The Council employs a significant resource in staff time to manage the current issues within the area, on an annual basis and in managing specific events such as St Patrick’s Day, Freshers, Hallowe’en etc.

4.0	Equality Implications
4.1	There have been Good Relations issues within the Holyland area and any strategy and implementation plans developed as a result of the Study will take account of Section 75 requirements.

5.0	Recommendations
5.1	<p>The Committee is requested to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) note the progress with the study; and (ii) endorse the two strategic aims and to note the supporting interventions for accommodating students and restoring the Holyland area

	Key to Abbreviations
<p>BMC – Belfast Metropolitan College DEL – Department of Employment & learning DSD – Department of Social Development IAG – Holyland Interagency Group QUB – Queens University, Belfast UU – University of Ulster</p>	

	Documents Attached
<p>Draft Interventions</p>	