Subject:	City Centre Regeneration: Developing a Strategy for Car Parking
Date:	13th May 2015
Reporting Officer(s):	John Mc Grillen, Director of Development Siobhan Toland, Lead Operations Officer, Health & Environmental Services
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Is this report restricted?	Yes		No	X
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes	X	No	

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	Members will be aware of the importance of the city centre to Belfast's prosperity and as a driver of the regional economy. City centres are where investment impact can be maximised, where rates are generated and where momentum can be built to support growth in the surrounding neighbourhoods. The draft Belfast City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan has been produced as a framework for change through which the new council, with its place-shaping powers and greater responsibility for planning and regeneration, can achieve its bold vision for a thriving city.
1.2	As a result of Local Government Reform the Department for Regional Development (DRD) transferred all its off-street car parks (excluding Park and Ride/Park and Share) to councils on 1st April 2015. The Council is therefore now responsible for the operation of 30 car parks which were previously operated by the DRD.
1.3	The City Centre Regeneration Strategy & Investment Plan considered access, traffic flows and car parking provision in the city and identified that there were significant opportunities for improvement; such as the consolidation of car parking provision and the real time provision of information about parking availability. To address these issues the Council will need to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, together with Transport NI and the

	DRD, to develop and implement a city centre parking strategy.
2.0	**Recommendations**
2.1	Members are asked to consider this report and agree to the commissioning of a strategy and action plan aimed at improving city access, traffic flows into and around the city, and city centre car parking within the context of the emerging City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan. Members should note that the public consultation on the draft City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan closes on 28 May.
3.0	**Main report**
3.1	Key Issues Transport NI biannual surveys would indicate Belfast currently has more than enough car parking serving the City centre, estimating in excess of 10,000 publicly available off-street parking spaces (Urban Strategies 2014). In addition, an earlier study indicated that parking provision in Belfast city centre was significantly greater than in other UK similar cities, such as Dublin, Manchester, Bristol or Edinburgh. However, supply is fragmented being made up of large numbers of low capacity surface car parks with no real time information for drivers on availability. This means free spaces can be hard to find which adds to traffic congestion and creates a barrier to visitors accessing the City centre. Furthermore a large area of the city centre is being taken up by unattractive surface car parks which should be put to better use.
3.2	It should be noted under Local Government Reform on the 1st April the DRD transferred all its off street car parks (excluding Park and Ride/Park and Share) to councils. The Council therefore is now responsible for the operation of 30 car parks previously operated by the DRD. 15 of these car parks are within the City Centre, most of these are located around the inner ring road. It is estimated the Council now operates around 13% of the off street car parking spaces in the City Centre.
3.3	Recognising the importance of appropriate car parking for cities, the draft Belfast City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan includes a proposal for the Council, together with Transport NI and the DRD, to develop and implement a city centre parking strategy as a matter of high priority. As a result of the analysis carried out by Urban Strategies and the consultant team, it proposes that this should involve the consolidation of

car parks and real time advertisement of parking availability as well as being set within the context of alternative transport provision in the city, such as the Belfast Bike Share Scheme and Rapid Transit.

3.4 To support the City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan; a city centre car parking strategy is likely to consider:

3.5 **Traffic Flows**

Despite the improvements that have been reported in relation to the Belfast On the Move project, there are still concerns raised about congestion into and around the city. A car parking strategy can help to reduce congestion in several ways. Firstly, it can provide alternatives to driving into the city by providing parking outside of the centre that is near to alternatives means of accessing the city core such as public transport, park & ride, cycling etc. Secondly, it can ensure parking is located in the right places to meet demand and minimise journey times by directing drivers efficiently into and out of key areas. Finally, it has been reported that there is ample parking in the city centre and the actual problem is caused by a lack of information about current parking availability. This causes significant additional traffic as drivers travel around the city centre searching for a space. A strategy that includes better signage and live information about parking could significantly reduce unnecessary traffic.

3.6 **Underdeveloped areas**

Much of the city centre feels incomplete, as development is interrupted by vacant sites, many of which are utilised as surface car parks. The clustering of these sites creates large, undefined areas around the edges of the centre. New growth in the city centre needs to expand into these areas and connect them to the core.

3.7 **Need for green space**

The centre is lacking in green space. Rationalising parking into fewer larger capacity sites will open up land for development. There is a great opportunity to provide a sizable new open space in the north end by reclaiming the parking area around St. Anne's Cathedral for green space and linking it to Buoys Park and Writer's Square. Such a large open space could be used for events, festivals and celebrations.

3.8 **Improve accessibility to the City Centre**

Car parking can be perceived as a barrier to outer Belfast and Northern Ireland residents accessing city centre shopping. Anecdotally, drivers report that they cannot find a space and businesses have raised the apparent problem of adequate parking to serve city centre

retail. Quantitatively, there is more than enough parking with excess of 10,000 publicly available off-street parking spaces in and around Belfast City Centre in addition to extensive on-street parking and numerous private car parks. However the provision of these spaces is fragmented into numerous low capacity surface car parks owned and operated by a range of stakeholders with inconsistent pricing and information. Therefore while occupancy of the total available spaces may be relatively low parking spaces can be hard to find which can lead to significant volumes of traffic searching between car parks and increasing city centre traffic levels.

3.9 Rationalisation of parking into larger capacity multi-storey car parks accessed from the Inner Ring Road would open up development sites, create a much more coherent system and reduce congestion.

3.10 **The potential benefits of new technology and improved information systems**
In the short term, the coordinated advertisement of parking availability to visitors to the centre would greatly improve the city centre experience. There are opportunities to harness new technology by providing information in real time about what parking spaces are available where.

3.11 The potential to develop a unified city 'app' that markets and promotes the city centre has already been used in other cities. This would provide information on parking together with a range of other topics including public transport, events, sales, as well as coupons, booking opportunities, etc.

3.12 In addition there are other emerging technologies that can support similar smart information systems e.g. the pay and display machines used both on and off street have inbuilt computers connected to the internet with integrated ticket printers and can be easily fitted with touch screen displays. Some cities are using these machines to signpost visitor information or offer promotional coupons.

3.13 The development and implementation of a City Car Parking Strategy will require a time frame of at least five years given the potential requirement for capital investment. Therefore, in the interim it is proposed that the Council should develop an action plan to address the shorter and medium term issues including:
- engage key stakeholders including current parking providers and the DRD to develop a parking strategy for the city centre,
- develop and implement a costed improvement plan for city centre parking provision, management and enforcement,

	• Progress the use and improvement of parking information systems and contribute to the development of a "city app",
	• Deliver the off street car parking functions and review its effectiveness to identify improvements to deliver on the ambitions in the Belfast City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan.
3.14	Financial & Resource Implications The cost of developing a parking strategy and action plan is likely to be in the region of £50k and will be met from existing budgets.
3.15	Equality or Good Relations Implications Equality and good relations issues will be considered in the development of the strategy and improvement plan. It is noted that the Shadow Council had previously passed a motion in relation to child and family friendly car parking provision which will be considered in the development of the strategy.
4.0	**Appendices – Documents Attached**
	None.