



Belfast City Council

Report to: Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Subject: **Framework for student housing in the city**

Date: 23rd August 2013

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1	Relevant Background Information
	<p>The Belfast Learning City context</p> <p>1.1 The draft Belfast City Masterplan Review highlights development of the Learning City as a key theme, aimed at harnessing the value of the higher education institutions across the city to maximise their impact on the economy, vibrancy and diversity of the city and the region.</p> <p>1.2 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are anchor institutions and contribute significantly to the economic, social and environmental prosperity of the city, as well as providing a knowledge hub in the city.</p> <p>1.3 Research has shown that students studying and living within cities make a significant contribution to local and regional economies. Belfast currently has 5 Higher Education Institutions across the city and by 2018 will have 2 major University campuses close to the city centre. There is also a growing international student market which presents a significant opportunity for Belfast in terms of international marketing, tourism and knowledge research.</p> <p>1.4 Attracting students to study and live in the city not only requires excellent education providers, high quality campuses and a wide choice of quality courses, but also the right city infrastructure including IT connections, transport and housing. Student housing of whatever nature needs to be attractive, high quality, safe, secure, accessible and affordable. It needs to be well planned and appropriately managed to ensure that there is positive integration with existing communities.</p> <p>1.5 The <i>'Belfast: A Learning City - Strategic Study of the Holyland and wider university area'</i> report was presented to the Council on 2nd April 2012 and outlined a number of recommendations in relation to student housing, to make Belfast a learning city and destination of choice for students. Two of the recommendations were: a) Development of a coherent city wide strategy for student housing promoting choice and fit-for purpose accommodation; and b) Identifying locations, innovative arrangements and measures to attract alternative funding for housing students in the city.</p>

2	Key Issues
2.1	<p>The Council has been leading a joint Inter agency team on the development of a student housing strategy involving DOE Planning, DSD, NIHE and SIB, DEL, DRD and the main HEIs. Specific areas of work have included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assessing the demand and market for student accommodation in the city; ▪ Investigating Financial Models for purpose built accommodation; Considering suitable locations and factors to support student housing; ▪ Defining the 'Learning City' concept so it can be effectively marketed.
2.2	<p>Belfast is different to most other large university cities in that the proportion of available managed purpose built student accommodation (PBSA) is considerably lower than elsewhere in the UK. Local students also tend to live with others from their home towns and stay in their student accommodation during weekdays only. Also, whilst there are lower numbers of international students, the HEIs are keen to attract new students and grow their existing base and there is a DEL target to increase the numbers over the next few years. This means Belfast needs a fairly unique solution.</p>
2.3	<p>A 'Discussion document' has now been produced (provided in Appendix 1) which presents proposals to address student housing requirements in the city, in the context of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developing Belfast as a Learning City; ▪ Current market and demand information for student accommodation; ▪ The current policy context ▪ Case studies of other large university cities. ▪ Proposed planning criteria for Purpose Built Student accommodation (PBSA).
2.4	<p>The planning criteria proposed in the document could form the basis for a future revised planning policy for PBSA (HMO Subject Plan, Policy HMO7) after 2015, following transfer of planning powers under Local Government Reform. The draft criteria are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>i. Proximity: the development is within 15 minutes walking distance of a university/college campus or on a high frequency public transport route.</i> <i>ii. Design: the nature and scale of the development is appropriate to its context, the design and layout of the development is of high quality and all units are self-contained (i.e. having a bathroom, w.c. and kitchen available for use by the occupants).</i> <i>iii. Management: an appropriate Management Plan is in place to minimise potential negative impacts from occupants and the development on surrounding properties and neighbourhoods and to create a positive and safe living environment for students.</i> <i>iv. Impact: the proposed development, when considered with existing and approved student accommodation development, would not result in an unacceptable impact upon surrounding residential amenity.</i> <i>v. Need: the development meets an identified need for the type of accommodation proposed.</i>
2.5	<p>The Planning Service has also confirmed that, once the Council has endorsed its support for these criteria, they will consider them as material in their planning considerations.</p>
2.6	<p>The document also advocates a number of other relevant policy, legislative and financial interventions including improved HMO regulation, and an accreditation scheme for student accommodation together with actions to facilitate a wider range of provision of managed purpose built student accommodation within Belfast. These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Working with DSD on their ongoing regeneration work, particularly in areas around the HEIs; ▪ Further work on developing a revised planning policy for PBSA and improved pre-application discussion guidance/processes for planning applications (DoE), and to progress with legislative proposals following the fundamental review of HMO regulation in Northern Ireland (DSD);

2.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Further work on understanding financial viability and exploring options for facilitating and if necessary supporting private sector or partnership delivery of PBSA schemes (BCC together with SIB, DSD, DFP). <p>The next steps are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Undertake a managed consultation / engagement process, including structured interviews with key stakeholders and groups representing residents, students and landlords during September 2013. The document will also be published on the Council website for anyone to make comment. On completion of the consultation exercise the responses will be considered in development of the student housing strategy going forward and a final report will be produced; ▪ Continue to work with key partners, including SIB, to explore the feasibility of options for facilitation of purpose built student accommodation; ▪ Develop a Business Case in conjunction with SIB to be submitted to DFP to assess whether there is scope for public sector financial support for delivering the strategy.
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3	Resource Implications
3.1	Costs associated with the document/strategy have been allowed for within the revenue estimates.

4	Equality and Good Relations Implications
4.1	The Good Relations and Diversity Officer has been consulted and has advised that equality screening of the Discussion Document is not required at this stage. Following the outcome of the stakeholder consultation, future strategy proposals will be equality screened in line with corporate equality policy as they progress in more detail.

5	Recommendations
5.1	<p>The Committee is requested to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Agree to issue the Student Housing Discussion document (appendix 1) as a consultative draft and commence an engagement exercise with key stakeholders; ▪ Support the proposed planning criteria for PBSA schemes in consideration of future PBSA proposals; and ▪ Agree that that work should continue with key partners, including SIB, to explore the feasibility of options for facilitation of purpose built student accommodation, including the development of a Business Case.

6	Key to Abbreviations
<p>PBSA – Purpose Built Student Accommodation SIB – Strategic Investment Board DSD – Department of Social Development HEI – Higher Education Institution DEL- Department for Employment and Learning DFP – department of Finance and Personnel</p>	

8	Documents Attached
Appendix I – Draft discussion document on student housing and purpose built student accommodation	