



<b>Subject:</b>	Linen Quarter and Western Quarter Public Realm Analysis and Vision
<b>Date:</b>	11 <sup>th</sup> November 2015
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Phil Williams, Director of Planning and Place
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Keith Sutherland, Development Planning and Policy Manager

<b>Is this report restricted?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</b>	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update Members on work commenced to create additional focus on, and a more integrated planning approach to, the Transport Hub and South Centre and Inner West Special Action Areas (SAA) identified in the City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy approved by Council on 1 <sup>st</sup> September.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	Members are asked to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Note the initial findings of the public realm analysis and visioning exercise undertaken for the Linen (<b>Appendix 1</b>) and Western (<b>Appendix 2</b>) Quarters within the Transport Hub and South Centre and Inner West SAA ;</li><li>2. Agree to recommend to Council that a public consultation exercise on the draft Linen Quarter document be undertaken;</li><li>3. Agree to recommend to Council that a more detailed economic intervention is developed for Western Quarter prior to public consultation being undertaken for that</li></ol>

	<p>area;</p> <p>4. Note that any potential public realm/environmental improvement projects which may emerge and which have potential implications for the City Centre Investment Fund will be reported to a future Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.</p>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	<p><b>Background</b></p> <p>On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2015, the Council approved the Belfast City Centre Regeneration &amp; Investment Strategy (BCCRIS). Whilst not a formal planning document, it is a clear direction of travel – setting out the Council’s intention to ensure that Belfast’s City Centre drives growth and social, economic, and environmental well-being for the people of the city and the region.</p>
3.2	<p>The Strategy is based on the following core principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the employment population</li> <li>• Increase the residential population</li> <li>• Manage the retail offer</li> <li>• Maximise the tourism opportunity</li> <li>• Create a regional learning and innovation centre</li> <li>• Create a green, walkable, cyclable centre</li> <li>• Connect to the city around</li> <li>• A shared space and social impact</li> </ul>
3.3	<p>The Strategy identified five Special Action Areas (SAAs) as being in need of a detailed and integrated planning approach (<b>Appendix 3</b>). It was recognised that in these parts of the centre, a phased approach could be taken to preparing more intensive local plans to forward their regeneration in line with the larger ambitions of the Strategy.</p>
3.4	<p>The draft Public Realm Analysis and Vision for Linen Quarter and Western Quarter was commissioned by the Council in June 2015. It concentrates on two of the SAAs, the Transport Hub/South Centre and Inner West. Each area has its own characteristics and opportunities as well as different challenges and demands and, although part of the same commission, two separate documents have been produced in recognition of this. The work has been undertaken by Planit Intelligent Environments, a design practice comprising Landscape Architects, Urban Designers, Visualisers, Animators and Graphic Designers</p>

based in Manchester and London.

3.5 **Linen Quarter**

The Linen Quarter is a grid of streets that lies immediately to the south of Belfast City Hall, occupying a strategic position within Belfast City Centre (**Appendix 4**). The boundary encompasses much of the Linen Conservation Area, though not its entirety. The strategic network of main roads as well as the architecture, street pattern and uses have been considered in denoting the boundary shown as a logical edge to the Quarter.

3.6

In recent years, it has become the destination for office development within the city centre and a significant number of local government departments, together with private businesses have chosen this part of the city as their Belfast address. The BBC also has its HQ in the southern part of Linen Quarter. Other complimentary uses have emerged alongside offices including hotels and residential flats and cafes, bars and restaurants which are helping to extend the hours of activity and life across the Quarter and provide a more attractive, convivial environment.

3.7

Change is set to continue with the proposals to introduce a new Transport Hub at Great Victoria Street Station, which will become the destination (and arrival point) for trains from Dublin as well as a projected increase in public transport use. The position of the Hub, at the edge of the Linen Quarter, represents a significant opportunity to reinforce the role of this area within the city centre.

**Western Quarter**

3.8

The Western Quarter sits immediately to the north west of Belfast City Hall with a significant portion being within the City Centre Conservation Area (**Appendix 5**). It is suggested that for the purposes of this analysis, its boundary should include Castle Court shopping centre. Millfield represents a logical boundary to the west, while Donegall Place and Royal Avenue create a natural boundary on the eastern edge.

3.9

The Quarter occupies an important position within the city centre and is dominated by retail uses. For the purposes of the study, it is described as a single entity but it contains a number of distinct sub areas: the area around Fountain Street and College Street to the south; the area around Castle Street and Bank Square; and Castle Court and the area to the north. The Linen Quarter lies immediately to the south and the new retail area around the Victoria Square shopping centre; the North East and Cathedral Quarters, are all to the east. The recent development of Victoria Square has shifted the focus for retail across to

	<p>the east with an impact on the retail offer in Western Quarter.</p> <p><b>Key Issues</b></p>
3.10	<p>The key objective of the analysis and visioning exercise is to make the Linen Quarter and Western Quarter better, more attractive places, stronger in their own right and recognising their respective characteristics. It is presented as two, draft documents which make proposals which can complement existing development activity to increase the commercial and financial viability of each area. This includes the means by which existing quality buildings can be re-used/re-furbished as well as well as providing a framework for how new development might be evaluated. The documents propose a blueprint that can bring about uplift in quality, in terms of public realm, streetscape and architecture which will realise the standards expected of a leading European city. This includes proposals which contribute to a greener, more walkable, cyclable centre which is a shared space, better connected to the city around.</p>
3.11	<p>The draft documents contain an analysis for each Quarter, examining their current form and operation, use and character. This analysis has led to the development of a series of objectives, intended to set out future potential. It provides a framework to improve the public realm, streetscape and built heritage and overall quality of environment which in turn will influence investment in new business. (A summary of draft proposals is attached as Appendix 4). The documents are defined within the parameters of existing policies and are intended to complement rather than replace them. Should any guidance conflict with statutory guidance then the latter will prevail. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) screening will be conducted in parallel with the proposed consultation process.</p>
3.12	<p>It is proposed that, when approved by the Council, these documents would compliment planning policy that applies to the city and together help to shape its future direction. These include the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP 2015) which is the statutory development plan for the city; Planning Policy Statement 6 Planning, Archaeology and Built Heritage which sets out planning policies for the protection and conservation of the built heritage and BCCRIS which builds upon some of the key objectives of existing policies and sets out a broad vision to regenerate and influence investment in the City Centre</p>
	<p><b><i>Issues specific to Western Quarter</i></b></p>
3.13	<p>In considering Inner West, the draft Public Realm Analysis and Vision document recognises the role of Castle Street as an important gateway from the west and a direct</p>

route into the retail core of the city centre. Although well-used by the community, the retail offer in Castle Street is disappointing and characterised by high levels of vacancy. The document focuses on suggested physical improvements in the area. However BCCRIS recognised that a more comprehensive retail management intervention will be required to rejuvenate the area around Castle Street. An initial approach to how the council might develop such an intervention is suggested in paragraphs 4.5 – 4.8.

- 3.14 Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM) is involved in a range of activities to make the city a safe, welcoming and vibrant space. The organisation enters into a funding agreement with Belfast City Council and DSD (and its private sector partners through Belfast Chamber) on an annual basis to carry out these activities. One of the key issues identified in the BCCM plan has been the growing challenge of dealing with vacant properties. BCCM currently undertakes a quarterly vacancy survey of the ground floor properties in the city centre area. The organisation recently applied to take part in a national campaign called “Healthy High Streets”. This campaign is coordinated by Business in the Community and is backed by a number of key corporate partners including M&S, Boots, Santander and EE. It aims to support 100 high streets to realise their potential over a three year period by increasing footfall, addressing vacancy issues and restoring pride in town and city centres.
- 3.15 One of the priority projects identified as part of the Belfast action plan is an initiative to address vacancy levels and to increase the volume of independent traders doing business in the city centre. An initial project concept is being developed, through which new craft and design businesses will undertake an intensive support programme that will include a 10 week workshop programme, one to one mentoring to help refine their product and a set time for test trading in a shared retail unit. This will build on a successful model that has already been operating for over a year and that has had some significant success.
- 3.16 While this initial support will help the businesses understand both their product and their customers, there will be a need for them to move on to their own business units and there could be an opportunity to encourage them to establish these businesses in the Castle Street area. Given the challenges in this part of the city, there would be a need for a range of incentives to encourage the businesses to move to those units, as well as investment in issues such as street animation and security issues. Wrap-around business support services could be provided through the council’s economic development services and this would enhance business sustainability. This approach would address the vacancy

	<p>issues in Castle Street, whilst also creating an affordable city centre location for new start up businesses whilst also creating diversity within the local retail offer.</p>
3.17	<p>The feasibility of this project will be dependent upon securing funding to purchase and refurbish retail units, as well as the provision of business development support to nurture new start ups and to support the businesses as they grow. In addition, interventions will be required to address anti-social behaviour, deliver public realm improvements and to animate the area. There may also be a need to make a contribution to the “incubation” activity (which may not necessarily take place in Castle Street) which could provide a significant “feeder” to the Castle Street/Western Quarter project. Details of this proposed intervention project will be the subject of a future report to CMT. Accordingly, it is proposed that public consultation on the Western Quarter document be initiated when the intervention project has been developed further.</p>
	<p><b><i>Consultation and Engagement</i></b></p>
3.18	<p>Subject to the Draft Public Realm Analysis and Vision for Linen Quarter being endorsed by Committee and ratified by Council, it is intended that we will undertake a public consultation exercise at the end 2015/early 2016 which will facilitate further opportunities to shape the document before it is finalised. We will also undertake additional Equality Impact and Strategic Environmental Assessment screenings in parallel with the consultation process. It is on this basis that Members are asked to endorse the draft proposals set out in the document and approve it for public consultation in parallel with any other impact assessments as necessary.</p>
3.19	<p>In addition to providing a framework to improve the public realm, streetscape and built heritage and overall quality of environment in Western Quarter, it is recognised that a more comprehensive economic/retail management intervention will be required to rejuvenate the area around Castle Street. It is therefore proposed that public consultation on the Western Quarter document be initiated when the intervention project has been developed further.</p>
	<p><b>Equality and Good Relations Implications</b></p>
3.20	<p>Equality and good relations screening will be conducted in parallel with the proposed consultation processes.</p>

3.21	<p><b>Resource Implications</b></p> <p>The cost of potential public realm/environmental improvement projects or economic intervention projects which may emerge, and which have potential implications for the City Centre Investment Fund, will be reported to a future Strategic Policy and Resources Committee</p>
4.0	<p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>
	<p><b>Appendix 1:</b> Linen Quarter - Analysis and Vision Draft for Consultation  <b>RESTRICTED Appendix 2:</b> Western Quarter - Analysis and Vision Draft for Consultation  <b>Appendix 3:</b> Regeneration &amp; Investment Strategy – Special Action Areas  <b>Appendix 4:</b> Map of Linen Quarter  <b>Appendix 5:</b> Map of Western Quarter  <b>Appendix 6:</b> Draft Public Realm Analysis and Vision for Linen Quarter and Western Quarter – Summary of draft proposals</p>