

**Belfast City Council
Response to The Executive Office
High Street Task Force, Call for Evidence 2021**

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Theme 1: Partnerships

The HSTF will seek to encourage partnerships with public, private and third sector partners, locally, regionally and nationally. This could require the consideration of:

- Government, local authorities, the wider public sector, businesses and communities must put the health of village, town and city centres at the heart of decision making and deliver the best local outcomes, align policies and target available resources to prioritise town centre sites, encouraging vibrancy, equality and diversity.
- Champions are needed to lead the way forward and to involve those who live and work in our town centres in the decision making.
- More coordination and joined-up working, partnership and reorganisation of the key statutory functions is needed to bring about effective change more quickly.
- Correct powers, appropriately devolved, need to be in place to deliver interventions.
- A recognition that this a long-term approach.
- Our councils have a key role in the localism agenda and the Executive need to consider the devolution of regeneration and other powers to them so that they can play a fuller role in the recovery process.
- We need interim solutions.
- We need to determine what has worked well and has not worked.

Theme 1: Questions and Responses

1. What are the key issues for partnerships?

High Streets and city centres are complex places, with the multiplicity of ownership, the multifunctionality of activity, their connections to surrounding communities. Whilst many of the challenges and opportunities facing our high streets will be similar, we cannot forget the uniqueness of place and a one-size-fits-all approach would not be appropriate. There needs to be a focus on **placed-based leadership** which has the flexibility to develop specific solutions to their unique circumstances, but with **the necessary powers, authority and resources to bring about transformational and sustained change.**

It is important that we take caution against setting up additional mechanisms or structures but rather utilise existing ones that are deemed appropriate, and consider the effectiveness of existing structures. The Council would highlight that under community planning, we have brought together inclusive and delivery focused partnership(s) to drive forward collaborative work on specific city priorities and challenges including 'City Development'. The future vitality, vibrancy and sustainability of the city centre and its connection to communities is a key priority area of focus (e.g. Belfast Future City Centre Programme), and on a wider city basis there is a focus on neighbourhood centres / arterial routes via targeted programmes such as supporting vibrant business destination programme.

A big problem is still the **fragmented nature of ownership of the high street**. Private and public partnerships are key and local authorities have a leadership and convening role around place. In this context, we would highlight the impact and agility of the partnership approach adopted to co-designing and implementing the Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme within Belfast. We worked collaboratively across the public, private and community sectors, bringing together existing city centre groups and stakeholders (e.g. Belfast Chamber, Belfast Centre Management, BIDs and other business interests) with a shared focus and strategic intent. It is a network rather than a hierarchy whereby place leaders act together and have the ability to evolve and adapt as circumstances change.

Going forward we may draw upon the **Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) High Street Craft Kit** to ensure existing or future partnerships remain focused, co-produces its approach to revitalising the High Street and delivering place based specific interventions. However, we feel that this Craft Kit has more applicability for neighbourhood centres / arterial routes rather than the city centre. It will also be **imperative** that the High Street Craft Kit approach is **aligned to funding streams and a commitment by all partners to agile partnership working to deliver on the action plan and outcomes**.

We work closely alongside global and local experts, through the Belfast Innovation and Inclusive Growth Commission chaired by Michael Lyons former chairman of the BCC, to co-design pragmatic proposals to press the reset button on how prosperity

and growth can be delivered within Belfast across wider region. The Commission has called for bold leadership and energetic efforts by the various agencies and governments who share an interest in the future prosperity of Northern Ireland. The Commission in its recently published report “**Reset for Growth**” has called for a focus on a renewed city centre, with a resurgent connected and animated city core.

Notwithstanding, key issues which need to be considered:

- **Better coordination between central and local government** is needed, together with a recognition that local government can be best placed to deliver and support local interventions.
- Need for **place-based leadership** which brings together key partners, interests and stakeholders with a focus on high street and how it connects to surrounding communities.
- **Alignment of policies/strategies and target available resources to prioritise the high street.**
- Whilst immediate and interim solutions is needed, important to recognise that a **long-term and sustained approach is required.**
- Ensuring the **necessary powers, appropriately devolved**, are in place to bring about effective change in a timely way.
- Consideration of **good practice and assessing how this may relate to Northern Ireland** and, in particular, Belfast city centre and the arterial routes / neighbourhood centres.

2. What powers should local partnerships have to make them more effective?

The Council asserts that this question is more about partnerships having the authority, adequate and sustained funding as well as access to the portfolio of place-making powers and functions necessary to enable immediate and sustained action to be taken and encourage a collaborative and co-designed approach to planning. The scope of the place-shaping powers which need to be available to council, and local partnerships, is covered in the next section.

3. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures could transform partnerships on the high street?

There is no doubt that councils, and local partnerships, need legislative and policy changes to enhance their ability to address the immediate challenges and opportunities facing our high streets as well as to prepare long-term strategies to revitalise and transform city and town centres. The following sets out a number of key areas which need to be considered:

i. Funding

The Council would highlight the scale of commitment demonstrated through the £820 million 'Future High Streets Fund' and the £1.6 billion 'Stronger Towns Fund' put in place to support the high streets of over 200 towns within England, via councils. Similar investment programmes of scale, centrally funded, have been brought forward in the last 18 months in Wales and Scotland.

A similar level of investment or commitment is currently absent in Northern Ireland. Consideration needs to be urgently given to create a dedicated fund of scale which brings together multi departmental, council and other sources of funding into an aggregate multi-annual fund. Such a fund could be allocated and administered through councils and subject to all partners (including government departments) working to deliver an agreed solutions / action plans. This would enable emerging investment plans to be developed in accordance with local community planning, development planning and growth planning priorities for Belfast. Each place will require different solutions to their unique circumstances.

ii. Green financing

The Council would highlight the opportunities presented through adopting a green route to recovery and the transition to create a zero-carbon, smart city (and high street). There is a positive economic case for investing rapidly in the decarbonisation of the city centre as well as within our neighbourhoods, which will contribute to levelling up through significant investment in place-making. Unlocking this potential will require new models of co-ordinated delivery and combined financing from multiple sources. A range of new 'green finance' opportunities are

now becoming available to support green growth; with many cities seeking to innovate and support growth of our indigenous green tech sector as well as seeking to maximise foreign direct investment.

As part of the integrated solution / investment package government needs to accelerate our thinking around green finances and the integration of potential private finance into supporting Net Zero ambitions; creating local jobs, deliver clean and inclusive places to live, shop and visit (including our high streets). Adopting a place-based approach and encouraging a strong public and private sector partnering approach will require policy change and consideration given to new delivery models (e.g. special purpose vehicles, joint ventures etc).

iii. Increased financial powers for local government

Local political and business leadership will need to be at the heart of any transformation and revitalisation of the high street. It will be important that cities have the right fiscal powers to enable them to better align local, regional and national efforts to get better results. The Council believes that the work of the High Street Taskforce provides an opportunity for central government to work alongside local government, community and business partners, to bring forward a package of proposals including, for example, new borrowing powers; simplified loan and borrowing regimes; government incentives for business start-up and a common delivery framework for emerging funding programmes (e.g. Shared Prosperity Fund).

The Council would commend that consideration be given to **alternative taxation options** to complement the current funding model and provide new revenue raising powers for councils, such as: Tourism tax; vacant site levy; derelict land levy; internet transaction levy; and green policy related levies and taxes.

iv. Rates Reform

Councils want to see a rates system that is modernised, responsive to local needs, fair for all and promotes growth through incentives. We are calling for councils to have greater flexibility in the support they can offer local business and the local rate setting. This would give councils a more secure revenue stream which will keep up with demands and the financial pressures local government is facing.

It is important that taxation should be fair for both high street and online businesses. We therefore welcome the proposed digital services tax as a first step to taking measures on retailers who may not pay business rates on retail premises. The funds raised could then be used to fund local services.

v. Important place-shaping powers

The Council would contend that the 2015 reform programme did not go far enough and would call for a second tranche of reform to be brought forward including consideration given to accelerating the following.

- **Community planning:** Enhancing powers to require community-planning partners, across both tiers of government and other city partners to collaborate to deliver the outcomes and priorities articulated in community plans, will further promote well-being across the city. There should also be a duty on central government partners to support community planning and encouraging and enabling sharing resources. We would refer the High Street Task Force to build upon and accelerate best practice and learn from recent reports (e.g. Carnegie Trust's Embedding Well-being in Northern Ireland report) which has identified areas to further enhance the effectiveness of community planning. We would call upon departmental colleagues to work together to examine how important recommendations contained within the Embedding Well-being can be brought forward at pace.
- **Regeneration:** including the transfer of regeneration powers to local government. This would enable alignment with other council functions to encourage positive and sustainable development of the high street and communities across Belfast. **Compulsory purchase powers** are an essential tool for local authorities acquiring and assembling land as part of high street regeneration.
- **Planning:** Extended planning powers, particularly around spatial planning, would unlock more effective place shaping and sustained delivery of the physical aspects of any high street revitalisation programme. This would also support more effective approaches to statutory masterplanning and development partnerships with the potential to harness the full benefits of regeneration for local communities often blighted by inequalities. Broader responsibility in relation to built heritage should also be considered to provide for more efficient

consideration of both heritage and conservation as part of the planning processes.

- **Transportation** - Increased functions in relation to roads and transport in order to support place-making and regeneration would greatly enhance the role of the councils as custodian of place and local communities. While recognising that there is a strategic regional role in these areas for central government departments, we believe that there is scope for local government and departments to work together to ensure that these top level strategic plans can be tailored and varied to suit local issues within each council area.

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Theme 2: Follow Best Practice

The HSTF approach to developing best practice is to assess good practice from other places and adapt this so that 'best practice' becomes a unique 'right practice' for our local high streets. This could require the consideration of:

- Looking at best practice locally, nationally and internationally.
- The importance of community planning, in which public sector organisations work in partnership with the private sector, local communities and the community and voluntary sector to identify and solve local problems, improve services and implement a shared vision for promoting the well-being of an area.

Theme 2: Questions and Responses

4. What is best practice for the management of the high street?

- **A definition of High Streets needs to be applied to an NI context.** While there are commonly accepted definitions of the components of a high street, city or town centre, no two high streets are the same. They are characterised on their diversity and complexity, in terms of scale, size, geography and catchment, function and form. **There is not a one size fits all approach for the management of the High Streets across villages to capital cities.** A **hierarchy of town centres** from cities to district towns to small villages should be considered. City centres have a significant regional role as investment attractors and hubs for employment. In particular the role of the **city centre in terms of an investment and employment hub, the benefits realised from city centre can be felt across the region in terms of contributing to growth ambitious, and within local neighbourhoods in relation to employment opportunities.**
- Whilst the global issues are largely similar, promoting localism, green spaces and adopted approaches as being developed through the joint BCC / DfI / DfC 'Bolder Vision', connectivity study can help to supplement a new sense of placemaking within Belfast City Centre and connecting to surrounding neighbourhoods. This approach is not exclusive to the city centre but its rather how the approach is to start whit the city centre and ripple out, addressing severance to communities etc.

- 21st Century will require places and cities to change, to move from a car borne culture to places where people live closer to their main centres of work, supported by effective and efficient active and sustainable transportation links and a mobile technology culture. Communities must be engaged in a different way, including young and old people to create an inclusive, safe and welcoming environment. Young people will inherit the city and will make decisions for the older people living in it – especially with the projected demographics of an aging city.
- According to the UK High St's Taskforce, high streets and town centres have to be both vital (full of reasons for people to visit) and viable (attractive to both visitors and investors in the longer term as well as surrounding communities). **The Institute of Place Management identified the Top 25 Priorities that local place leaders should focus to enhance the vitality, viability and sustainability of the high streets and ensure it meets the needs of their catchment communities.** These factors include:

Priority	Component Factors
1. ACTIVITY	Opening hours; footfall; shopping hours; evening economy
2. RETAIL OFFER	Retailer offer; retailer representation
3. VISION & STRATEGY	Leadership; collaboration; area development strategies
4. EXPERIENCE	Centre image; service quality; visitor satisfaction; familiarity; atmosphere
5. APPEARANCE	Visual appearance; cleanliness; ground floor frontages
6. PLACE MANAGEMENT	Centre management; shopping centre management; Town Centre Management (TCM); place management; Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)
7. NECESSITIES	Car-parking; amenities; general facilities
8. ANCHORS	Presence of anchors - which give locations their basic character and signify importance
9. NON-RETAIL OFFER	Attractions; entertainment; non-retail offer; leisure offer
10. MERCHANDISE	Range/Quality of goods; assortments; merchandising
11. WALKING	Walkability; pedestrianisation/flow; cross-shopping; linked trips; connectivity
12. PLACE MARKETING	Centre marketing; marketing; orientation/flow

13. NETWORKS & PARTNERSHIPS WITH COUNCIL	Networking; partnerships; community leadership; retail/tenant trust; tenant/manager relations; strategic alliances; centre empowerment; stakeholder power; engagement
14. ACCESSIBLE	Convenience; accessibility
15. DIVERSITY	Range/quality of shops; tenant mix; tenant variety; availability of alternative formats; store characteristics; comparison/convenience; chain vs independent; supermarket impact; retail diversity; retail choice
16. ATTRACTIVENESS	Sales/turnover; place attractiveness; vacancy rates; attractiveness; retail spend; customer/catchment views; Construction of out-of-town centre
17. MARKETS	Traditional markets; street trading
18. RECREATIONAL SPACE	Recreational areas; public space; open space
19. BARRIERS TO ENTRY	Barriers to entry; landlords
20. SAFETY/CRIME	A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting
21. ADAPTABILITY	Retail flexibility; retail fragmentation; flexibility; store/centre design; retail unit size; store development; rents turnover
22. LIVEABLE	Multi/mono-functional; liveability; personal services; mixed use
23. REDEVELOPMENT PLANS*	Planning blight; regeneration
24. FUNCTIONALITY	The degree to which a centre fulfils a role – e.g. service centre, employment centre, residential centre, tourist centre
25. INNOVATION	Opportunities to experiment; retail Innovation

Source: IPM

- The scale of the challenge the economy and society faces is unparalleled in recent times, and requires a wholly different approach and ambition. Large urban areas have been hit hardest by Covid-19 pandemic but are also the key catalyst to support recovery and renewal of place. There is no doubt of the impact of the pandemic on people's day-to-day lives, demonstrating that those living in cities and large towns had been hit hardest. The introduction of lockdowns saw a dramatic fall in mobility and public transport use, with office workers quickly shifted to working from home and a substantial move to online shopping. This adversely impacted upon the vitality and sustainability of the city centre; a legacy which will take significant collaborative focus and planning to overcome.
- Local leadership must be supported to play its full role in bringing centres back into activity and adapting to these longer term trends (NB. we would refer to the [‘The Future of Urban Centres’ report available @ corecities.com](#)). The public

sector maintains a key role in this in terms of the work based population of the larger urban centres, providing flexibility for workforce but also in providing centres for collaborative work space supported by the promotion of active and sustainable transportation to remove the trend of returning via private vehicles.

- As city and town centres reopen, it is clear that COVID-19 has accelerated change in the high street by almost 10 years. Trends in retail that were already present (i.e. transition to online, convenience based shopping) had intensified with multiple retailers no longer being the dominant attraction in most city centres and so we have to redefine the high street. **For the city centre and local neighbourhood centres, in Belfast to survive post COVID, local leaders working in partnership with key stakeholders / businesses will collectively and collaboratively need to consider and redefine/diversify their purpose and its uniqueness. Council have identified the need to accelerate this through our Belfast Future City Centre Programme, and emerging Vibrant Business Destinations programme.** There is a need to make the arterial routes / neighbourhood centres, and the city centre be destinations of choice through promoting and enhancing their USPs for people and will require behavioural change. Consideration should be given to supporting local independents and first to market brands to fill the voids within the city centre and to provide unique visitor and experiential destinations in the city centre and arterial routes / local neighbourhood centres. Whilst we have a concerted drive to diversify our high streets, we must also ensure that existing retail is supported, and diversified uses complement the retail offer, to ensure its sustainability.
- COVID has aggravated the question of working from home. While there has been some return to the office as restrictions have eased, it is likely it will not return to pre-COVID levels with many businesses assessing the options now available to them with a range of jobs demonstrating they can be done as effectively from home (e.g. ICT sector) *NB. source UUEPC research on future remote working.* Most companies understand now that fixed costs can be reduced in a dramatic including, for example, potential reduction in required office space required, reduction in utility costs etc. Creating a wholly exclusive environment and eco systems including liveability and workability will support the success of our high streets and city centre.

- The recovery and renewal of the high street needs strong place-led leadership and collaborative action. There is a need to bring city stakeholders, business interests, communities and government together to transform the high street. Cities, High Street's and towns should have a clear definition of roles and responsibilities and shared vision to create a strong city centre and high street which is at the heart of their communities, with a unique sense of place and a strong identity. **This should be supported with targeted financial support to address the short / medium- and long-term interventions to address the issues that are prevalent within the city centres.** Council would propose that its Future City centre Programme forms a strong basis for a joint action plan that could be taken forward by key partners and the Community Planning Partnership (City development Board) could act as a key oversight mechanism for this partnership approach.

Regeneration & Connectivity	Business & Investment	City Centre Vibrancy	Position the City to Compete	Digital Innovation	Clean, Green & Safe (Multi-Agency)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating the physical built environment to create vibrancy; sustain our economic recovery and support an inclusive, accessible and connected city centre. Examples: Major Regeneration Developments City Centre Living Connected Spaces & Places Lighting & Tactical Regeneration Connectivity & Active Travel Culture & Built Heritage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support and sustain existing and new businesses, and attract new businesses. Examples: Business Support Programmes City Investment Service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage vitality, vibrancy and increased footfall; maximising our cultural and tourism offering. Examples: Animation & events, pop up activities. Enhanced use of public realm & environmental improvements to encourage footfall and increased dwell time Meanwhile use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build on our reputation as a unique destination for investment, tourism and development. Examples: Renewed Ambition – public private partnership Vacancy interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximising and deploying digital technology and innovation solutions to position the city as a key location for innovation and support indigenous and new businesses to thrive and grow. Examples: Smart District 5G and Wireless opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enhance the city centre experience through a clean, accessible, safe and pleasant environment. Examples: Providing enhanced city cleansing regimes Imaginative use of open & civic spaces particularly to support retail / hospitality sectors Support the provision of parklets and greening the city initiatives

(Belfast Future City Centre Programme, Key Pillars)

- Belfast City Council's Future City Centre Programme aims to create a dynamic, vibrant and shared city centre where people will want to live, work and invest. It seeks to develop a 'City Centre Proposition' that provides "something different" to stand the best opportunity of future-proofing the city centre based on six pillars of work and underpinned by a sound evidence base to prioritise and track progress:
 - Regeneration & Connectivity:** Using the physical built environment to create vibrancy; sustain our economic recovery and support an inclusive, accessible and connected city centre.

2. **Business & Development:** To support and sustain existing and new businesses and attract new businesses.
 3. **City Centre Vibrancy:** To encourage vitality, vibrancy and increased footfall; maximising our cultural and tourism offering.
 4. **Position the City to Compete:** To build on our reputation as a unique destination for investment, tourism and development.
 5. **Digital Innovation:** Maximising and deploying digital technology and innovation solutions to position the city as a key location for innovation and support indigenous and new businesses to thrive and grow.
 6. **Clean, Green & Safer City:** To enhance the city centre experience through a clean, accessible, safe and pleasant environment.
- The FCC programme provides a holistic approach to addressing the challenges facing the HSTF, including Clean, Green and Safe, Connectivity, targeted acquisition and addressing vacancy, vibrancy, positioning the city to compete and digital innovation. While no one aspect of the FCC will provide a long lasting and sustainable impact on its own, it will be the collective benefit of each of the strands, delivered under a combined programme that will see effective change in the City Centre. Within the FCC programme there is a targeted addressing vacant premises initiative which will seek to address challenges facing High Street regarding vacancies and well as city resilience issues when full impact of Covid19 is realised.
 - Council commissioned a “*Strategic Stakeholder Engagement Study and Action Plan for Belfast City Centre Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe Initiative*’.” The resulting Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe (CGIS) City Centre strategy and action plan will be embedded within an overall approach to the re-opening of the City Centre and the longer-term priorities within the Council’s Future City Centre Programme. It will also contribute to ‘A Bolder Vision for Belfast: Reimagining the Centre’, with an emphasis on ensuring there is a clean and safe lens applied to green and shared space projects and infrastructure.
 - Public/private investors and stakeholders must become more engaged and have ownership of the vision. There are key roles within this for city partners spanning across local government, with anchor institutions and engaging the private sector.

Belfast City Council has sought to harness this engagement via Community Planning, particularly through the City Development Board which has representation from across government departments, VCSE, anchor institutions and local development community. This structure provides a key vehicle for the delivery of a joined up action plan to deliver on outcomes.

- Tailored promotion and marketing addressing local needs as well as wider promotion for investment and development for example aligned to the Council's Future City Centre programme, Supporting Vibrant Business Destinations Programme (focused on arterial routes), Retail and Leisure proposition, Renewed Ambition Programme etc including attracting institutional investment.
- Council recently approved an approach to supporting arterial routes / local neighbourhood centres "Supporting Vibrant Business Destinations" an approach which has been developed to assist and support the delivery of area-based support for neighbourhood centres / arterial routes for local business associations to increase vibrancy and drive footfall.
- The city centre offer must be relevant, and a significant part must be community-led (a new localism), experiential and addressing local needs.
- Key to securing the long-term prosperity of the city's retail core is to ensure the right mix and retail offer is available and recruiting absent retailers within the retail segments which are underrepresented in Northern Ireland and indeed Ireland. In addition Belfast City Council has promoted and assisted in a number of meanwhile uses, in order to ensure this is sustainable we would encourage additional funding to support further interventions.

5. What expert help is needed to develop best practice?

Belfast City Council has been involved in developing a number of strategic interventions alongside key stakeholders for example as referenced in earlier response the Future City Centre Programme, and A Bolder Vision which seek to build and earn from best practice. A number of expert advisory groups we have been formed, which play a key role in advisory for example Innovation and Inclusive Growth Commission, Climate Commission, Digital Commissioner etc.

The Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University was commissioned to undertake a series of workshops to support the development of a high street and town centre policy. Their report, 'The High Street 2030 Achieving Change' took a people and place-based approach to understand why some town centres/high streets thrive and others struggle.

The conclusion of the report was there was not a 'one fits all approach'. However, the report highlighted commonality in some fundamental principles that applied to all of their study areas and are as relevant now as we move forwards from Covid 19:

1. **Places need leadership and partnerships:** Place leadership needs to evolve and adapt as circumstances change. It is a network rather than a hierarchy - place leaders, acting together, achieve change.
2. **Places need to blend local and expert knowledge:** knowledge of local data and performance and working with experts is critical to making informed decisions. In too many cases towns make wrong choices, adapting something that has worked elsewhere when it may not be appropriate for their location. No one size fits all approach.
3. **Places need communication to flow:** Communication underlies and recreates the city brand and the perceptions of visitors, investors and residents. Good place leadership facilitates communication.
4. **Places need the input of their young people:** Our City Centre will soon be theirs. They have an abundance of enthusiasm we need to constructively and actively engage with them, involving them formally and informally.
5. **Places need to be served by place professionals:** place professionals from different backgrounds can provide the vision, leadership and knowledge required to create change.
6. **Collaborative place making** - creating a single voice: provide cross sector support to encourage collaborative place-making. Bring together all stakeholders.

In conclusion it is felt that the Assembly should retain leading specialist in the field to lead an overall project of High Street. This should be structured around a series of "task and finish" groups drawn from the community, business and academia. The

project should be professionally planned with a focus on outcomes within a strict timeline.

6. What changes are needed to legislation, procedures and processes to improve best practice and transform community planning on the high street?

Council understand there are a number of considerations required to legislation, procedures and processes to improve best practice and transform community planning on the high street:

Business rates is the primary source of income for the Council where 78% of our income comes from rates – 65% domestic, 35% non-domestic. In 2019, the Department of Finance via Land & Property Services (LPS) announced plans to undertake a full and comprehensive review of business rates in Northern Ireland. The onslaught on Covid 19 has held up further progress on this review.

The council recognises the importance of minimising the burden on the ratepayer and has set the district rate over the past number of years at below the rate of inflation. The council would welcome progressing further with the review and in particular the key issues highlighted for consideration in their response to the consultation to LPS in 2019:

Notably:

1. Consideration of local authorities being given the power to introduce reliefs to reflect the specific circumstances of their locality and local economy.
2. How the rating system can be aligned to support growing the economy.
3. How the rating system can be used to support city centre living such as relief for build-to-rent properties and purpose-built managed student accommodation.
4. Eliminating any form of tax avoidance or evasion.
5. Improving the collection and administration of rates.
6. The use of technology to maximise the collectable rates.
7. How the rating system can integrate the ability to pay and individual business circumstances as part of rates assessments.

8. Possibility of introducing new revenue raising powers such as:
 - vacant site levy
 - derelict land levy
 - internet transaction levy
 - green policy related levies
 - tourism tax
9. Conducting a fundamental review of reliefs, exemptions, and exclusions.
10. Introducing a business growth accelerator.
11. Reviewing the effectiveness of the rates hardship scheme.
12. How the rating system aligned to support specific sectors such as innovation, retail, and hospitality.

In relation to Community Planning, in Belfast, Council have led the community planning process. We worked with partners, including representatives from the statutory, business, higher education, and community and voluntary sectors, to develop a long-term plan to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of the city. As highlighted previously, we believe that community planning provides a good platform to bring partners and stakeholders together with a clear focus on place including the High Street. We would recommend, however, that urgent consideration is given to refreshing the legislative basis of community planning in Northern Ireland to bring it more in line with other jurisdictions such as Scotland and Wales. There is a need to strengthen the role of central government in the process and encourage and enable community planning partners to commit shared resources to implement agreed programmes of activity to truly add value and unlock growth potential and ambitions to transform the high street.

Theme 3: Investment

The high street needs ways of dealing with investment that will support innovation, help renewal and create thriving high streets. Investment is not only needed for buildings and digital infrastructure, but also for developing people and communities. This could require the consideration of:

- More specific funding streams and schemes are required to promote and encourage residential living
- Funding streams and workforces should be aligned.
- Specific funding schemes to promote and encourage wider provision of community services.
- A better understanding and clarity on the availability of funding streams.
- Place-based budgeting.
- The residential Urban Development Grant scheme should be revived.
- More focused funding for village, town and city centre promotions.
- Incentives to deal with long-term vacancies.
- Clarity on priority investment area(s) is needed.

Theme 3: Questions and Responses

7. What are the key issues for investment?

The challenges facing city centres and high streets are complex, interacting with consumer demand and behaviours, therefore investment needs to focus on delivering outcomes and the vision for the place that stakeholders buy-in to.

Out of town retail investment has not been significantly adversely impacted by Covid and has continued to be popular with investors and occupiers. The below comments relate to intown retail, high street and shopping centres:

- The **reduction in rates** during Covid has assisted many businesses through a difficult time, however there continues to be long term issues with the costs of rates compared to rents and overall occupancy costs for retailers. The revaluation date of Oct 2021 may go some way to assist a rebalancing of rateable values.

- Occupier demand for many locations remains low, although some sectors of the market are showing good levels of interest, there remain some locations and unit sizes which experience low demand or an oversupply of space.
- **Diversification of the high street** looks to provide a wider offer to attract customers and increase footfall however restrictions on licensing and planning uses can sometimes mean that occupier demand cannot be satisfied and a more flexible system, while ensuring effective regulation, is required for High Streets to trial and embed the diversification of uses.
- **Footfall** numbers have not recovered to precovid levels. Belfast Bid One Footfall figures for 25th-31st Oct 2021 are 16% down on 2019 year on year figures.
- CVA and retail administrations have affected the returns for retail investors and fund managers, causing many to disinvest in the sector.
- Some parts of the Investment Market have lost confidence in the retail sector as assets have depreciated. This effects the owner's ability to raise capital or direct funds towards capital improvements. Valuations for retail have moved out with yields weakening.
- Changing trends in tenant leasing poses difficulties for retail investment and financing, i.e. increased demand for turnover rent and shorter leases. Flexibility in lease terms is welcome and can work well within a shopping centre or in large retail blocks under single ownership, however it is unaffordable and unfinanceable for individual asset owners who require a guaranteed, secure income stream to meet liabilities.
- Areas with high numbers of **long term vacancies** require significant infrastructure investment and structural change in order to reposition them. Investors who own in these areas may struggle with viability, financing, and funding. On this point Council would advocate for the accelerating of the introduction of the Dilapidation Bill to consolidate and enhance existing legislation to better allow Council to safely deal with dilapidated buildings and neglected sites in their areas.
- Delayed **Infrastructure improvements** can affect property owner's ability to let units and the confidence in the regeneration of these areas. Further intervention from the public sector may be required to address long-term vacancy and dereliction.

8. Is information on funding easy to find?

This depends on whether you are looking for private or public sector funding. The NI Grant Funding Hub provides an overview of grants available through Belfast City Council <https://www.belfastcity-grants.com/> and DFC publish updates on various grants through their website. Information is available to businesses across the region at: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/>. It should be noted however, that these are not specifically targeted or developed for “High Streets” they offer a wide range of support, and there is merit in looking at a holistic and integrated funding mechanism. Belfast City Council Economic Development Unit provide a range of support tailored to the start up and growth side. Invest NI provide tailored support to assist private sector companies with advice, mentoring and finance, but **overall there is a lack of funding.**

9. Which of the following funds would support the development of the high street?

Pick as many or as few as you wish.

- a. High Street Transformation
- b. Residential Living
- c. Urban Development Grant
- d. Other (Please comment below)

The Council would recommend that given the scale and complexity of challenges facing the high street, that a package of funding streams, and supported by the necessary enabling powers – as referred to previously - should be brought forward.

- A. **High Street Transformation** – High Street Renewal Funding – targeted larger scale funding to make significant infrastructure and structural change and help assist viability for stalled city centre development schemes, with merit given in UK High Street Fund. City centre regeneration schemes, provide the basis and catalyst for mixed use development including city centre living for example Tribeca Belfast.
- B. **Residential Living** - Assistance to cover development viability and funding requirements and de-risk investment. The refocus of existing funds such as the Northern Ireland Investment Fund on residential could assist with gaps in affordable finance products in the market and viability. An increase in total funds

available could also assist large scale stalled development projects which will act as catalyst for other city centre regeneration. Dedicated Housing Investment Funds will be funds that provide financing through a range of innovative vehicles aimed specifically at bringing forward housing development at pace and addressing market challenges. The reintroduction of grants or tax incentives for LOTS and Heritage in Housing could assist with retail investment stabilisation through providing options to counter retail rental decline whilst increasing the city centre population and potential consumer numbers. Lessons learnt from the previous scheme should be considered.

- C. **Urban Development Grant** – Consideration to reopening this Grant scheme which can act as an enabler for private sector development with viability issues. This has the potential to enhance existing Belfast City Council programmes of work for example Vacant Premises Programme within the city centre, and sustaining the Vibrant Business Destinations programme directed at arterial routes / local neighbourhood centres.
- D. **Other-** the following section outlines additional areas for consideration.
- **Cultural & Events support fund** – important that we have the capability to make our High Streets more attractive and diversified in terms of the people's experience. Need to consider that funding or legislative changes may be required to help enhance the cultural mix and diversity of our High Streets (e.g. rates incentives, funding to deliver at scale),
 - **Business incentive schemes** - such as rates incentives as per earlier questions and themes. Specifically that these are tapered off as the business is established, and done so in a manageable and measurable approach for example ring-fence to small businesses – means of supporting additional start-ups.
 - **Enterprise Zones** - being designated with rates reductions and other financial incentives in order to assist with viability of development and attract inward investment. Reopening and providing additional financing to existing programmes may assist with moving this investment forward more quickly and productively.
 - **High Street Fund** - Northern Ireland was expected a Barnett Consequential relating to the Chancellor's announcement of £675M for High Streets. This could be in the region of £25m over 5 years. As this was unhypothecated funding and

other priorities may have taken precedence. Clarification on how this money was distributed and what projects benefited from it would be welcome.

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Theme 4: Planning

In addressing planning for the high street, our challenge will be to contribute to the delivery of a fair and inclusive planning system for people, communities and businesses. This could require a review of the planning system, its impact on the high street and the consideration of:

- Village, town and city centre masterplans.
- Promoting a “Town Centre First” principle to encourage the public sector to continue to invest in town centres and help communities thrive.
- More flexible planning policies are required to enable repurposing.
- Strong diversification of town centres is needed to include, but not limited to: housing, community uses, leisure, offices and outdoor spaces.
- Actions are needed to address vacancy and dereliction on the High Street.
- A five-year moratorium on major out-of-town retail applications should be considered.
- A stricter “town centre first” approach, more Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and a joined-up approach to regeneration.
- An approach to increase population living and working in our high street.

Theme 4: Questions and Responses

10. Are you aware of village, town and city centre masterplans?

Yes, Belfast City Council have developed a number of Masterplans aligned to the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (Regeneration Policy for Belfast City Centre), to shape the development of our city centre eco system to create a more dynamic place to live, work, visit and invest which includes:

- Inner North West Masterplan – adopted by Department for Communities
- Belfast East Bank Development Strategy
- Linen Quarter Vision and Guidance

In addition to this the Department for Communities has developed the Greater Clarendon and Sailortown Masterplan and the Shaftesbury Square Masterplan. In addition to the city centre, and its masterplans with areas for targeted intervention there is a need to consider the arterial routes in cities to connect community

hubs/centres to the city centre to take a placemaking approach to creating vibrant and sustainable areas. These combined with significant masterplans from large scale development Masterplans including, City Quays, Waterside, Tribeca and Weavers Cross lay out a transformational package of regeneration and investment, however the appetite and support must remain to transform these masterplans into action plans with allocated funding/investment and realistic timeframes. The said schemes have the potential to create a catalytic impact on the city as a whole, creating conditions for the region's growth ambition to succeed.

11. What are the key planning issues?

- Planning issues are largely focused around the **vitality and viability** of our centres and ensuring that their evolving role is appropriately managed and supported within a clear hierarchy that addresses local needs.
- The biggest challenge for our city / large town centres is the **changing nature of retailing** (and, indeed, office / commercial space) alongside the need to find alternative complementary uses in centres, both as a focus / destination and to support ongoing demand / footfall.
- Planning can provide a **long-term approach to enable change through the Local Development Plan (LDP)** which incorporates local policies plans and masterplans that can help to rebalance the role of centres and the mix of uses appropriate to the role and function of the centre.
- Planning has an important role in **placemaking** including the shaping of public spaces and buildings through appropriate design.
- The LDP can help identify safe communal spaces that create healthier, safer and more cohesive communities.
- Long term planning through the application of sustainable principles can help address congestion and promote enhanced connectivity /accessibility.
- It can help achieve more sustainable development patterns including by promoting a broader residential offer within and adjacent to our centres with a mix of tenures and forms of accommodation.

- Planning can help to protect, support and enhance the economic role of centres by ensuring the critical mass of appropriate uses at accessible locations.
- Planning can help to **increase the role of the evening and night-time economy** which will contribute to the vibrancy of centres.
- **Out of town shopping / retailing i.e. outside the existing urban area should not be confused with out of centre i.e. outside of existing centres.** In a general sense retailing outside of the urban area including the open countryside is unsustainable and should be discouraged.

12. Would you support a temporary ban on out-of-town retail developments?

a. Yes

b. No

If yes, for how long?

This is **not a binary issue** and it is not as simple as introducing all out bans that do not take account of the different forms of retail provision. Such an approach or proposition is overly simplistic. Large cities like **Belfast have a variety of centres. Belfast has a retail hierarchy which includes the city centre, district centres and local centres which all contribute to the wider retail and service offer.** The city centre itself has subcentres including the primary retail core and frontage areas. Each centre needs to be afforded an appropriate level of recognition and protection.

The emerging Local Development Plan will help to ensure that proposals for main town centres uses, including retail, are directed to the appropriate level of centre based on size, function and catchment.

There is a general issue around the ability of centres to compete equitably. Many out of centre and out of town shopping centres can offer free car parking at or near motorways or highly accessible location for cars. Charging for car parking at out of town locations either directly or through the taxation (rating) of parking spaces would help to redress this imbalance.

13. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures could transform high street planning for the better?

The Belfast LDP is the primary policy mechanism available to Councils to protect and enhance the role and function of our centres. The Belfast draft Plan Strategy is at an advanced stage. The PAC completed the hearing sessions and a report from the Commission on that was sent to the Department on 29 September 2021. The expeditious adoption of this plan will have significant benefits in helping to protect our centres.

The draft Plan policies seek to:-

- Provide a range of uses appropriate to the role and function of a city centre which can realise ambitions for growth.
- Acknowledge the distinctive role of Belfast City Centre as the primary location for retailing in the region.
- Adopt a sequential approach to the identification of a hierarchy for retail and other town centre uses in decision making.
- Maintain and improve accessibility to and within the city centre by supporting connectivity and the consideration of accessibility to these and other services.
- Provide for an appropriate scale of retail and town centres uses in accordance with their scale, role and function.
- Support local economies by ensuring continued vibrancy and vitality alongside the scope to expand within defined areas.
- Develop a compact urban form that maximises opportunities in the city centre and wider urban area; and
- Provide a focus for economic development.

Theme 5: Public Realm

The Public Realm is defined as the space around, between and within buildings that are publicly accessible, including streets, squares, parks and open spaces. These are the everyday spaces that we move through and socialise within and the places where we live, work and play. This could require the consideration of:

- Creating better ways of delivering Public Realm that are cleaner and greener.
- Public Realm “smart” towns with green spaces that are decluttered, eco-friendly, sustainable and better connected.
- Promoting high-quality design to ensure that our town centres provide sustainable, attractive, accessible and safe environments.
- Town centres should be clean, vibrant and attractive if visitors are to be encouraged to visit and stay.

Theme 5: Questions and Responses

14. What are your views on the high street environment?

A quality urban environment is a critical component of a successful high street, that can make a tangible contribution to the ‘health’ of a place, by enabling safe and easy access and providing an environment that tangibly supports a range of activities and uses, while contributing to character and intangible qualities that simply make a place attractive and pleasant for people to live and visit.

While interventions in the public realm should adhere to common principles and objectives, a high street environment should reflect local character, and a bespoke approach to the design of public realm should be taken that creates a genuine sense of place, avoiding a ‘design by numbers’ approach.

The relationship between the high street environment and the range of uses in a city centre is more important the ever, with growing understanding of the value of quality streets and spaces that create a point of difference and reflect both form and function of a place. There are opportunities to reimagine the relationship between internal and external space, including through business spill-out activating and animating streets

and spaces. While the pandemic has forced this agenda, there is potential long term benefit for businesses and other city stakeholders, but a considered placemaking approach will be required across local government and central government departments. That responsibility for the high street environment is shared across multiple agencies has a significant impact on both design/delivery and maintenance/stewardship of public realm in Belfast.

15. What could be done to change the perception of the Public Realm?

The public realm in Belfast is perceived by many as generally tired, very poor in some parts of the city, and in need of investment. While improvements have been delivered via the BSA programme and other individual schemes, many streets are in poor condition, reflecting a lack of investment in Belfast, particularly given the extent of public realm schemes delivered across large and small towns throughout Northern Ireland during the last 10-15 years. However, there is perhaps an **opportunity to deliver more transformational change across the city centre than may have been possible even 5 years ago, given the appetite for change among city stakeholders regarding issues such as pedestrianisation, active travel, greening, and the value of external space from both a civic and commercial perspective.**

In terms of changing perceptions, there is a need to ensure high standards of maintenance and stewardship of existing public realm, alongside the development of new schemes. Recent surveys and engagement with stakeholders indicate a need to review resource allocation to maintenance, which also suffers due to fragmented responsibility across local and central government bodies. In addition, with a number of major public realm schemes currently in development (BSA 3 & 5), there is a need for agreement between Belfast City Council, DfI and DfC regarding future maintenance requirements, which represent significant costs to the public purse. **With a major issue in Belfast being a shortage of quality open space, and an ambition to 'green' the city through the introduction of landscaping to soften otherwise hard urban spaces and streets, long term maintenance is a critical city issue to be resolved.**

There remains a need for the high streets environment to be designed with the changing user of the city centre to be incorporated. High streets should no longer be designed and serviced as large retail destinations but rather places that incorporate city centre living, tourism, education, workers and retail. The Bolder Vision for Belfast is currently out to consultation and the responses received to date are providing significant support for people based public realm design supporting the FCC. Responses are also showing that there is a need to have the correct legislation, control measures and maintenance in place to deliver the ambitions of the emerging designs.

In terms of perceptions of public realm schemes themselves, with an approach to design and delivery that seeks to effect meaningful change in terms of how people experience and move within the city, there is an opportunity to reposition public realm scheme delivery as a critical element of placemaking that, while not a solution in and of itself, is a key component of an integrated approach to development and regeneration.

16. What improvements are needed in your high street?

There is an opportunity to harness the apparent appetite for change in terms of how people access and experience the city, to use public realm design and delivery to challenge existing allocation of space for vehicles and pedestrians, ensuring opportunities are taken to genuinely position pedestrians at the top of the user hierarchy.

There is a need to fully integrate greening and soft landscaping within schemes, to create attractive and useable spaces for all users (residents and visitors), and encourage innovative approaches to greening within existing streets, (e.g. vertical greening), while exploring solutions to specific issues such as high services and service diversions which often frustrate planting of street trees.

There is also potential to fully exploit the **value of lighting (street lighting and feature lighting) as a key placemaking tool within public realm schemes that can make a significant contribution to night time safety and vibrancy within the city, supporting the night time economy and city centre living.** Belfast City Council

published a lighting strategy, 'Luminous City', in 2020 that sets out principles that should inform the design and delivery of lighting interventions.

It will also be important that public realm schemes fully embed other themes such as child friendly/play, art and culture, and SMART technology as key elements throughout design development processes, as opposed to 'nice to haves' that have often been considered peripheral or secondary in public realm design.

As noted above, given responsibility is shared across multiple agencies, the issue of maintenance of green spaces and soft landscaping urgently requires a joined up 'city' approach to future ownership and maintenance.

Additionally, maintenance of hard surfaces has historically been an issue in Belfast, with works carried out by utility providers and others leaving prominent 'scars' in the form of temporary reinstatement- effective management and enforcement to ensure satisfactory reinstatement, including by supporting access to materials, is required.

17. What is a priority for Public Realm projects in the high street?

The priority outcomes for public realm projects are noted above in terms of taking a bespoke placemaking approach and prioritising greening and active travel infrastructure within emerging schemes. Also noted above, there is a critical issue for the city in terms of stewardship and maintenance of existing streets and spaces, and ensuring future maintenance requirements of planned public realm schemes can be met in a manner that reflects established city regeneration, sustainability and green infrastructure ambitions.

In terms of delivery, in addition to DfC led schemes such as BSA 3 and 5, Belfast City Council is also progressing design and delivery of public realm projects utilising developer contributions secured via S76 planning agreements. In addition, schemes will continue to be delivered directly by private sector developers in line with planning agreements. As the adopting authority, DfI have a critical role in all of these schemes. In this context, Belfast will see multiple public realm schemes ranging in value from £100k to c£30m delivered by a mix of central government, local government and the private sector during the next 5-10 years. A joined up 'city' approach will therefore be

required to ensure a coherent approach and a quality outcome. There is now an opportunity for DfC, DfI and Belfast City Council to deliver on **'A Bolder Vision for Belfast'** through both direct delivery, as well as regulation of privately delivered public realm schemes that can have transformational impacts, or can effect incremental change in line with an agreed city ambition.

While delivery of major capital works in busy urban centres requires a significant lead-in due to design, consultation, statutory approvals and procurement, we consider that efficiencies should be sought wherever possible across government to support timely delivery of public realm schemes.

Additionally, in-year spend requirements can prove prohibitive for projects involving physical works to improve public realm, that often require a mix of both statutory approvals and third party consents.

Alongside delivery of public realm projects, there is a need to consider supporting programmes to improve the 'vertical streetscape' (buildings/facades), to promote a holistic approach to regeneration that also addresses long term vacancy, dereliction and urban decay, alongside public realm improvements.

18. What would make town-centre living more attractive?

Development and maintenance of a network of safe, accessible and attractive streets linking quality open and green spaces, large and small, that cater to the needs of existing and new city centre communities.

The city centre needs to be a place of choice, with consistently high standards in design, delivery, maintenance and stewardship of the public realm. Therefore consideration needs to be directed to the necessary attractors e.g. local amenities, shops, community infrastructure.

The city centre needs to be 'clean, green and safe', with potential residents confident in terms of health, safety and wellbeing. This has been demonstrated recently in research undertaken by Belfast City Council around a Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe city centre

for example the disjoints in city Centre cleansing is somewhat due to public realm being in the ownership of different organisations. This creates disconnect in terms of timing and standard of cleansing. Strong partnership working will result in street cleansing reaching consistent and optimum standard, positively impacting public perception on the suitability of the City Centre as a place to live, work, visit. Managing public perception is important by demonstrating to the public that the Council and key partners have a proactive approach to cleansing to enhance attitudes and behaviours.

Incorporation of family friendly design, whether through dedicated or incidental play, as a component of public realm design that caters for a range of users, promoting active and passive use of spaces that will help to deter longstanding ASB issues.

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Theme 6: Fiscal - Including Rates

Fiscal policy is how government taxation and spending policies are used to influence economic conditions. This affects demands on employment, inflation, goods and services, and economic growth. This could require the consideration of:

- Reform the tax system to ensure that sufficient revenue to pay for public services whilst ensuring that the tax burden is fair.
- A fundamental reform and review of commercial and business rates in village, town and city centres. (NI Reval 2023)
- A targeted approach to rates for small businesses.
- Our high streets have the highest vacancy rates in the UK. We need to develop a policy response to address vacancies and rates.

Theme 6: Questions and Responses

19. What tax and rating reforms are needed to help stimulate the high street economy?

Business rate is the primary source of income for the Council. 78% of income comes from rates – 65% domestic, 35% non-domestic. Any reduction in the level of this important tax must be replaced with alternative revenue sources. Rather than making overall reduction in the levy targeted approaches should be adopted.

The overall level of taxation must be maintained to ensure service levels are sustained. Any of the proposals suggested in the following paragraphs must be subjected to detailed modelling to ensure a balance of funding is maintained.

20. What actions should be taken to reduce vacancy rates on the high street?

Anecdotally, it is understood that SME's and independents have been capitalising on the current rates concession as an opportune time to test space and trade their concepts in the city centre having a multiplier effect on positively impacting the local economy, reducing vacancies, increasing footfalls and providing new reasons to visit

the city centre. Perhaps there is some learning here in supporting SME's in setting up in prime pitches and locations.

21. Do you believe that legislation is required to change fiscal policy?

As referred to in an earlier response, in 2019, the Department of Finance via Land & Property Services (LPS) announced plans to undertake a full and comprehensive review of business rates in Northern Ireland. Covid 19 has held up further progress on this review. The review needs to be restarted.

The council recognises the importance of minimising the burden on the ratepayer and has set the district rate over the past number of years at below the rate of inflation. The council would welcome progressing further with the review and in particular the key issues highlighted for consideration in their response to the consultation to LPS in 2019.

The Rates Order lacks powers that permit local authorities to introduce reliefs to reflect the specific circumstances of their locality and local economy. This is a serious impediment in the development of local policies and strategies.

The rating system needs to be aligned to support growing the local economy and support city and town centre living. Examples of initiatives that could be considered to stimulate local environments are:

- Relief for build-to-rent properties and purpose-built managed student accommodation.
- Integrate the ability to pay and individual business circumstances.
- Introduce a vacant site and a derelict land levy to accelerate development.
- Incentivise city and town centre living with a series of green policy related exemptions and rewards.
- Review all reliefs, exemptions, and exclusions with a bias towards city and town centre living.
- Introducing a business growth accelerator.
- Reviewing the effectiveness of the rates hardship scheme.

- Align the rating system to support specific sectors such as innovation, retail, and hospitality.
- Create “Retail Action Zones” which would exempt individual properties or specific areas.

Assembly should review the current tax; funding and development systems to rebalancing taxation to better encompass and reflect the rapid rise of online activities and the growth of retail parks and out of town shopping precincts. Potential suggestions for actions could include amendments to VAT, the introduction of digital taxes or transaction levies and the introduction of an Out-of-Town Car Parking Space Levy.

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Theme 7: Capacity

Capacity refers to the built, social, spatial, and infrastructural strengths and opportunities to transform to produce significant and measurable change. This could require the consideration of:

- A capacity mapping and pilots exercise similar to that undertaken by the HSTF in England should be developed for our region, utilising Ministerial Advisory Group data and knowledge, and resourced and contemporised by HSTF funds. This should be council area coordinated and community led.
- Greater High Street inclusion for Community Wealth Building Pilots, community planning, with greater formal and allocated cross-departmental investment in each. Community Wealth Building Pilots are an investment model to enable local communities to increase co-operative asset ownership, anchor jobs and resources locally, and ensure local community economic stability and democratic control.
- Develop HSTF capacity by investment in hubs by location, and, if desired at community level.

Theme 7: Questions and Responses

22. What is the priority for capacity mapping and pilot exercises?

Capacity mapping should be considered as part of any investment – not as a separate or stand-alone exercise. The MAG living High Street Craft Kit template is a helpful starting point. The leadership should be reflective of the High Street/locality composition – so the definition of “community” may change from area to area (e.g. the business community may well lead in many cases, in those locations where they dominate the High Street).

23. What capacity skills need to be developed?

The key capacity skills that need to be developed include:

- Governance
- Financial management
- Evaluation and/or impact measurement
- Some technical skills (although these can be acquired or commissioned).
- Place-making

Groups also need to build an understanding of the local/regional government environment with clarity of areas of responsibility and shared knowledge on the required processes to progress priority interventions. NOTE – it would be helpful to create “how to”/process notes for these key work areas e.g. requests for parklets.

24. What should be created to support the development of high street capacity?

- a. Community funds
- b. Locality budgets
- c. Sector schemes
- d. Expert advice
- e. Workshops
- f. Collaborative approach
- g. Other (Please comment below)

We suggest that a combination of ring-fenced budgets accompanied by access to technical assistance and expert advice and support will be required. Facilitation and workshop design support would be beneficial (which don't necessarily just have to relate to one specific area) in ensuring an inclusive and co-design approach is adopted. We would advise against the creation of numerous parallel strands of activity.

Theme 8: Energy, Climate Change and Sustainability

Our environment is our most important asset and is crucial to each and every one of us. It is one of the main reasons that people from other countries and regions visit, bringing money into the local economy. It affects our economy, our health and well-being, and it facilitates social interaction. Building, through construction, renovation and repurposing, also plays a key role in emissions reduction. This could require the consideration of:

- The carbon impact of interventions during design, to reduce the carbon footprint and increase sustainable development.
- Carbon reduction measures in existing and future infrastructures in our high streets should be dynamically addressed.
- Blue-green infrastructures, which are strategically planned networks of natural and semi-natural areas to enhance the biodiversity designed and managed to support a wide range of ecosystem services, could assist with the greening of our urban environments, facilitate better water management and support safer, cleaner, sustainable spaces. This will allow interconnectivity, provide recreation spaces and help communities to connect and to thrive economically and socially.
- Examine incentives for repurposing existing buildings to address embodied energy, increase energy efficiency and use of renewable energy.

Theme 8: Questions and Responses

25. What actions should be adopted to provide greener urban environments?

[Belfast Resilience Strategy sets out the ambition to address both climate adaptation and mitigation. Adaptation measures include the creation of sustainable urban drainage, and integration of tree planting through the Belfast Million Trees programme. Such measures address multiple issues such as flooding, carbon sequestration, urban cooling and physical/mental health. Climate considerations should be undertaken on all investment, both public and private, and the correct levers and controls incorporated within the business case, viability, design approval and adoption processes. Effective decision making is critical to ensuring that policy and direction is provided to incorporate control measures to reduce the impact of](#)

climate change and to ensure delivery of the commitments made through the Climate Emergency Declarations.

26. What incentives should there be for repurposing buildings? (Tick as many or as few as you wish)

- a. Environmental grants
- b. Loans
- c. Reduced rates
- d. Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer)

we believe all incentives should be properly considered and resourced. The Belfast Net Zero Carbon Roadmap sets out recommendations for the retrofit of buildings to support our decarbonisation goals. Retrofitting, has an important role in repurposing existing buildings in major developments to reduce the carbon footprint.

27. Should existing buildings, including our heritage assets, play an enhanced role in transforming the High Street?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Yes, heritage assets play an essential role in the high street and the revitalisation of the high street should consider the sustainable reuse and retention of heritage buildings as key priority. we should examine opportunities to support and showcase actions to decarbonise, use of renewable energy, incorporating green infrastructure, and embedding principles such as play, which we have addressed through the Urban Childhood Report and our membership of the Real Play Coalition, all of which enhance the resilience of the city.

Theme 9: Housing and Other Infrastructure

Good quality, affordable and sustainable housing is central to reducing housing stress, homelessness and improving housing solutions for the most vulnerable. This could require the consideration of:

- Policies and strategies to address quality, quantity and availability of housing to encourage people to live in and around high streets.
- We should ensure that these are not just transient communities but that they are attractive to families.
- We should consider space standards, access to services and the living over the shops scheme.

Theme 9: Questions and Responses

28. What strategies are needed to encourage people to live in and around the High Street?

Although Belfast is seeing an increase in both investor interest and planning approvals for housing developments, and so an increase in the city centre population, this trend has been identified within the Belfast Agenda which set out an ambitious objective to grow the population of the city by 66,000 people. As its spatial articulation, the draft Local Development Plan (LDP) seeks to provide for 31,000 additional homes by 2035, with an estimated 8,000 units anticipated within the city centre thereby increasing the city centre population. Population density is now considered crucial to the success and sustainability of city centres.

Council understands that to **grow and sustain a strong and vibrant residential presence within the city centre requires a suite of strategic measures which will create a city which attracts more individuals and families as well as the services that communities need to thrive.** City centre living is central to the Council's long term vision and ambitions for growth; to create a city with a thriving economy and excellent job opportunities for all, where the right mix of homes is surrounded by great public spaces with easy access to nature, culture, high quality schools and learning opportunities.

To better understand the needs and aspirations of new and existing residents across the City, Council have commissioned a City Centre Living Vision 2035 (CCLV). This will help identify what Belfast can do to attract a variety of new tenures to reside within the heart of the city as well as identifying what the successes are that has retained residents within the city and which has helped establish important city centre communities. It is important that Council recognises the strategic ambitions for the growth of the city against the aspirations and concerns of these existing communities.

This CCLV is also looking at national best practices in which Belfast can learn from as we seek to revitalise and repopulate our city centre. We have seen how medium to higher density residential developments in mixed-use neighbourhoods can flourish, and how high-quality public realm, supported by efficient transport infrastructure not only lessons car dependency but supports the delivery of our low carbon ambitions. This CCLV will support the commitments of the Belfast City Centre Regeneration Investment Strategy by capitalising on the change in landscape, and help create a Vision for the city to help it deliver on its growth ambitions. This strategy set out a road map of policies to guide city centre decision making and a series of potential projects that translate the policies into action. Housing growth was a clear intervention considered essential to Belfast's success addressing the universal elements of a thriving city centre as well as challenges and conditions that are unique to Belfast.

There are a number of key ambitions to support a mixed-use city centre that can deliver investment opportunity and amenity provision to encourage and enable a significant increase in its residential population within the next 15 years. These include:

i. Enable and encourage higher density mixed tenure residential developments

A range of benefits can be achieved through development of compact, accessible urban forms, clean and efficient urban transportation options, efficient building energy use and local clean energy solutions, climate change adaptation interventions and efficient waste management etc.

ii. Social Infrastructure

This is crucial to the building of healthy communities and sustainable places. It responds to the basic needs of communities to enhance the quality of life, equity, stability and social well-being.

iii. Tackling the climate emergency

This vision for a low carbon city is critical with the need to look at new and ambitious ways to address the emerging climate crisis.

iv. Transport

Belfast is relatively car dominated, a high amount of its space is currently devoted to roads and parking. This should be rebalanced to allow for a more favourable pedestrian experience. The emerging Bolder Vision will be key to supporting the City's liveability ambitions which is needed to provide a quality city centre environment, responsive to climate change emergency., greener, safer, more sustainable and better connected.

v. Place good design at the heart of a liveable city

Architecture and places play a fundamental role in the creation of liveable, sustainable communities, enhancing health and well-being outcomes. Good design will help deliver aesthetic value by enhancing a setting, functional value by meeting and adapting to the long terms needs of its people, economic value by providing good value for money and social value by contributing to a positive sense of identity and community.

Given the challenges facing our city centre, the need to reimagine and inject new life into the city core is more critical now than ever. A thriving and Inclusive residential population will be integral to a reimagined city centre, brought forward from a place-making perspective, enhancing connectivity between the centre and surrounding communities and providing connected and welcoming spaces. However it is clear that subvention maybe required to underpin and kickstart housing at scale in the city centre. this was highlighted in the Reset for Growth Report (IIGC June 2021), which highlighted the need for significant housing investment funds.

29. What key services should be available for high street residents?

- a. Health ✓
- b. Housing ✓
- c. Education ✓
- d. Leisure ✓
- e. Other (if you pick “Other” please expand on your answer)

To address the needs of high street residents the high street needs to ensure that it provides a level of offer that matches the demands for all its residents. A successful high street will then retain those existing residents as well as attract new and emerging tenures across the city centre. A modern vibrant city centre community is typically mixed use, densely populated and incorporates layers of use that complement each other. **City centre living is indeed a major part of regenerating an area, but not on its own. People are looking at lifestyle choices; not just living, but working, playing, socialising, and learning, not to mentions staying healthy. Council recognised through the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy that city centre living was not a simple case of “build it and they will come”.**

A compelling, attractive, and secure environment, with shopping, open space and other amenities is essential. The overall strategy to improve the public realm, food and entertainment offerings, connectivity and general vibrancy of the city centre is all important in increasing and sustaining the residential population of the city.

Commitment to a broad range of housing tenure is encouraged by Council to create balanced local communities through appropriate mix of house types, sizes, and tenures. Mixed tenure developments that reflect a privately owned, privately let, affordable and social accommodation can help to avoid the creation or the negative perception of an area by increasing the diversity of people living there. Strong neighbourhoods are also encouraged through active street frontages, buildings that provide public services, including education, healthcare and recreational facilities, public pathways and cycleways, and passive spaces such as civic squares and public paths. The modern high street does need traffic free areas with space for seats, displays, street markets and events. People like to be able to get out of their areas and get to places in their towns and cities without having to

drive. Having walkable and bikeable streets that are safe and easy to manoeuvre are important. Combined with creating opportunities for communities to access local employment, shopping, leisure and social facilities ensuring that they can live full independent lives within inclusive, cohesive, and sustainable communities.

Commitment to sustainable transport is important and indeed the City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy outlines a bold vision for a green, walkable, cyclable city centre attractive to all ages. The future vision of the city centre should prioritise people and place-making to ensure the delivery of a vibrant and sustainable City. It should be based on the emerging diversification of land uses where we are seeing employment, tourism, leisure, retail, family living and learning becoming the pillars of growth for the city centre. This involves not only shaping our residential development but shaping our tourism offer; developing a city imagining through the cultural transformation strategy, serving the culturally curious, creating events and festivals which serve the city's shared cultural identity, and future proofing our retail sector with experiential offerings. Creating a people centric city means we have our citizens at the centre of our plans; to ensure that they have the best life chances and living experience with access to endless opportunities.

Council have a leading role in helping create well designed places that are prosperous and welcoming and benefit the residents and all who use the high street. Places to gather and recreate are important to staying healthy and connected to others. Healthy cities encourage better urban planning to prioritise increased access to safe transport systems, green and public spaces which together reduce road traffic deaths, improve air quality and promotes physical activity. Where we grow up, live and work impacts how healthy we are. Interaction with other people through leisure and cultural activities are some of the many reasons why people locate and remain residing within the city centre.

30. How do we engage communities more effectively?

The Council is committed to early engagement with local communities and stakeholders and has sought to encourage inclusive discussions on the Belfast Agenda, LDP and key planning policies that will guide future development to deliver the tangible social, economic and environmental benefits for the city.

The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (Planning Act), introduced a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), to be developed by Councils, setting out how they intend to involve the community in carrying out their respective functions. Belfast City Council published its SCI 1 in March 2018, which set out the method and timeframe for engagement on the draft Plan Strategy and POP which states when stakeholders and the community could contribute to preparation of the LDP, its Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and decisions around planning applications. It promotes a more meaningful and effective approach to enable interested parties and the local community to engage early in the plan process and throughout its preparation. Council recognises that encouraging people to live in the city centre will need a place making approach that is people focused and that planning and designing future developments and areas will require effective collaborative engagement between applicants and stakeholders in advance of a full planning submission. Pre-Application Discussions (PAD) provide an opportunity for early consideration and engagement on design considerations and will generally produce better outcomes, as it provides the opportunity to work through issues such as design and access, transport, parking including green travel measures, heritage and conservation issues, and environmental issues.

Council recognises the importance of providing a clear, transparent and accessible planning system so that different user groups have the opportunity to participate and are not disadvantaged by the planning process. Finding and maintaining effective means of communication is unquestionably central to the collaborative process of place making. Through providing the opportunity for active participation from early onset instils ownership and pride in the outcome, which will greatly encourage its ongoing success and contribute to vibrancy, adaptability, and diversity thus creating sustainable and safe places.

Council has also led on various non statutory Masterplans and regeneration plans with community engagement being integral to this process. The Council believes a

collaborative approach involving community, landowners and other stakeholders is essential to realise the potential of an area.

The preparation of the LDP and the process by which individual planning proposals are now determined are key to furthering sustainable development, implementing the SPPS, and realising the vision and aspirations of local communities.

Council believes comprehensive and inclusive community engagement is fundamental to shaping our city at all levels. This has been at the forefront in the development of all Council plans, strategies, and planning processes to date. Council have demonstrated this through the development of various channels to improve how we listen and engage with our residents and other stakeholders. The Council's consultation and engagement platform, [Your Say Belfast](#) gives people the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas through comments, surveys, online forums and much more.

The recently published City Centre Living Housing Survey, (September 2021), identified key components and services required for a city centre living population and attributes to the creation of a city centre living vision.

Council feels that we can continue to develop and improve our means of engagement through strategic partnerships we have forged across the city and utilising the structures that are there to support these for example the Community Planning Partnership and associated boards. These partnerships will go some way to enabling the delivery of new and regenerated inclusive, healthy, sustainable, resilient, and liveable city centre neighbourhoods.

31. How will housing developments improve areas of deprivation in high streets, rural villages, town and city centres?

- Encouraging sustainable residential use into and near centres will increase footfall and their ability to increase spend in shops and services located at those which can stimulate a multiplier effect.
- Policies or initiatives to support the use of vacant or underused spaces within centres could support the delivery of residential accommodation and

contribute to a more sustainable mix of uses that increases the utilisation of existing assets.

- Consider initiatives to support vitality, vibrancy and increase options for people through initiatives such as LOTs.
- Key to this will be ensuring effective sustainable and active travel provision from areas of high deprivation into areas of learning of learning and employment, and addressing and overcoming the long standing issues of severance created through historical infrastructure provision.

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Theme 10: Getting To and From the High Street

Getting to and within villages, towns and cities is at the heart of urban regeneration and positively impacts local and regional economies. It unlocks development potential and as a result, many places and communities have seen increased regeneration, investment and employment. This could require the consideration of:

- Ensure that our town centres are well served with public transport provision and supporting infrastructure.
- Promote policies to encourage walking, cycling and the accessibility and quality of environment. This could link to the 15-minute neighbourhood concept.
- Maintain and improve accessibility to, and within, village, town and city centres.
- Parking, including issues such as charging, free or time-limited parking, especially in the levelling-up context.
- Reduce the appeal of commuter and out-of-town parking.
- Incentivise employers to promote the use of public transport.

Theme 10: Questions and Responses

32. How do you get to your high street? (Tick all that apply)

- a. Walk ✓
- b. Car
- c. Bus ✓
- d. Train ✓
- e. Cycle ✓
- f. Taxi
- g. Other (if you pick "Other" please expand on your answer)

The vision as set out in the Belfast Agenda, the city's Community Plan, outlines the City's ambition to promote the development of sustainable transport, including promoting walking and cycling. The Belfast Agenda set a target for the City to achieve 15% increase in the use of sustainable transport. Council would therefore advocate and promote these modes to get to and from the local high streets and city centre.

In our ambition to attract 66,000 new residents to the city it is critical that connectivity considerations and alternative travel options can align with these growth ambitions. For example, the development of housing close to existing services may mean shorter, more localised journeys, allowing higher levels of cycling and walking or public transport, therefore reducing dependence upon the car and mitigating negative impacts such as traffic congestion and air pollution.

The Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) identifies creating a green, walkable, cyclable centre and connecting to the city around as two of its eight key policies, recognising that active travel and connectivity are closely aligned to regeneration and development.

Belfast City Council (BCC), the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and the Department for Communities (DfC) are developing A Bolder Vision for the future of Belfast City Centre. This will inform actions, interventions and a more joined-up approach across planning, transport and regeneration in developing Belfast City Centre as the attractive, accessible, safe and vibrant space central to the partners shared ambitions for Belfast.

A Bolder Vision for Belfast involves a fundamental rethink of how streets and places are used to make them attractive, inclusive, accessible, healthy, and vibrant places. The first Phase of the Vision was agreed by Council and endorsed by the DfC and DfI Ministers in 2020. It is underpinned by four Visioning Principles that will drive and shape the city centre, which includes; fundamentally changing the centre of Belfast to prioritise integrated walking, cycling and public transport and end the dominance of the car.

These Principles have shaped COVID recovery place-making and active travel interventions in Belfast and have supported modal change. However, this requires a collaborative and holistic approach across a number of stakeholders and partners to deliver strategic connections and improved access between, and into local communities and the city centre. Towards this aim, Belfast City Council and the Department for Infrastructure are working together to deliver a package of sustainable travel interventions that support improved connectivity to the city centre, including

cycle parking (covered and secured), active travel hubs that encourage cycling and walking, and have expanded the Belfast Bike Share scheme to link communities to the city centre.

Council recognises that people take different types of transport, depending on their circumstances and at times, these may be multi-modal journeys. The key is that A Bolder Vision is providing safe, sustainable choices for people.

A Bolder Vision Phase 2 is currently out for public consultation and is the overarching framework for this initial work and within it there are four Key Moves that groups short and long term interventions in critical parts of the city to create a green, people focused, connected city centre for current and future users.

Each of these Key Moves supports connectivity to the city centre and introduces a strategic direction of travel accompanied by short, medium- and longer-term interventions to encourage walking, cycling and wheeling.

It is critical that the correct strategy and policy framework, coupled with investment is put in place to deliver on the objectives of the Bolder Vision and other key place-making documents including the DfI Ministers 'Time for Change'. The public sector needs to be more flexible to change and have the correct frameworks and strategic direction in place to ensure effective decision making.

33. What would make your journey to and from your high street easier?

The Belfast Agenda seeks to develop a city that is vibrant, attractive, connected and environmentally sustainable. We have committed to develop a city that is well planned and with the right infrastructure to succeed; to develop the city's infrastructure and improve connectivity locally, nationally, and internationally; to be a city that will encourage walking, cycling and the use of public transport; where the natural and built beauty of Belfast, linked to its hills, parks, rivers, lough, fine buildings and public space is well protected and can be enjoyed by everyone. Key to making the journey to and from our local high streets and city centre easier is the quality of connectivity in terms of public realm, the interface between junctions, adequate and accessible public transport and the vibrancy of the environs and low

air pollution. Council have worked with IMTAC on a range of strategies and would advocate that they are engaged around accessibility to and from the high street.

The Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) identifies creating a green, walkable, cyclable centre and connecting to the city around as two of its eight key policies. It specifically references the lack of green space and tree-lined streets, identifies the need for rebalancing the scales between tarmac and soft landscaping and recognises that there is no provision for children in the city centre. these factors are also critical to making journeys to local high streets and in particular the city centre easier. the need to rebalance perceived severance between the city centre and its bounding communities in terms of harsh infrastructure and car dominated carriageways is key to making journeys to and from the neighbourhoods into city centre and vice versa.

As set out in the response to question 32 A Bolder Vision (ABV) and the aligned short, medium- and longer-term interventions including its key moves will be key to making journeys to and from the city centre easier. The four underpinning principles of A Bolder Vision support making journeys to and from the city centre easier:

- Creating a healthy, shared, vibrant and sustainable environment that promotes well-being for all, inclusive growth and innovation;
- Fundamentally changing the centre of Belfast to prioritise integrated walking, cycling and public transport and end the dominance of the car;
- Providing lively, safe, and green streets linking inclusive shared spaces to promote resilience and enhance our built heritage;
- Removing severance and barriers to movement between the centre of Belfast and the surrounding communities to improve access for all.

The key moves as set out in ABV supports connectivity to the city centre and introduces a strategic direction of travel accompanied by short, medium- and longer-term interventions.

The key moves are:

1. Create a Civic Spine with a focus on people

Establish a clearly defined and recognisable strategic north-south Civic Spine, connecting the Ulster University and York street Interchange through the heart of the city to Queen's University via Botanic Avenue. The Civic Spine would be reconfigured to prioritise space for people and support effective access by public transport while enabling the introduction of green spaces for a diverse, inclusive, future-proofed and vibrant city centre.

2. Reimagine the Inner Ring Road and end Car Dominance

Transform the Inner Ring Road to reduce physical severance for surrounding communities and become a sustainable mobility corridor. To do this, the Inner Ring should be reconfigured to accommodate high priority public transport services (such as BRT2) as well as fully segregated and green infrastructure for walking, wheeling, and cycling.

3. Promote City Centre Living

Encourage city centre living by providing greater quality, choice, and affordability of accommodation, to create a shared and inclusive environment. Establish a city-wide network of people friendly routes, community focus streets, incorporating city parks and connections to opportunities for play, interaction, rest, and leisure.

4. Embrace the River Lagan and Waterfront

Capitalise on one of the city's most defining, but underused assets, the River Lagan, by strengthening connections from the city centre to the east and its surrounding communities – enhancing connectivity across and around the River Lagan.

34. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures would encourage walking and cycling?

The implementation of legislation, policies, processes or procedures which encourage and make walking and cycling more attractive should be welcomed. It is key to take these aspects forward in an integrated and holistic approach, providing a broader understanding of what is required to support walking and cycling.

However, it is recognised that the implementation of the three pillar approach as set in the Northern Ireland Changing Gear Strategy will encourage walking and cycling:

- Build – a comprehensive network for the bicycle
- Support – people who choose to travel by bicycle
- Promote – the bicycle as a mode of transport for every day journeys

There is an opportunity to encourage walking and cycling through improved strategic project planning and implementation. For example, a number of interrelated projects have been strategically identified as “Active Travel Enablers” and collectively they could form a compelling programme of small-scale catalytic interventions to support citizens to have the freedom and confidence to travel by bicycle for every day journeys. This could directly contribute to the “Build” pillar of the Northern Ireland Changing Gear Strategy in that it will provide appropriate infrastructure, design, cycle parking and safety. Initiatives such as the following could enhance the Active Travel Network within the city through:

- Expansion of the first phase of cycle stands delivered through the Revitalisation Programme with a further city-wide roll out of covered cycle stands.
- Seeking collaborative opportunities to partner with multi-storey car park operators and other city partners to provide secured cycle parking units within their facilities providing multi-modal change centres and encouraging active travel through secure cycling provision. Cycle theft is a deterrent to cycling and the 2019 Bike Life reported that only 16% of residents reported that the security of public cycle parking was good, with concern in relation to bike storage at the workplace and home.
- In addition further value can be added to the existing Active Travel Network through the introduction and installation of bicycle repair stations.

Making effective changes to policy, legislation, processes and procedures to maximise funding available for Blue and Green Infrastructure projects and the extension of the Belfast Bike Network will encourage walking and cycling.

The implementation of the Belfast Cycling Network and incorporation of effective cycling infrastructure within the planned capital works programme including BRT2, SA3 & 5 and the BRCD will also encourage walking and cycling.

The outworking's of A Bolder Vision, and any required changes to legislation, policy, processes and procedures aligned to the identified and consulted on key moves and any additional interventions will be intrinsic to encouraging walking and cycling.

Funding for the delivery of all such interventions remains key. Importantly agile partnership working with agreed outcomes across all partners including DfI, DfC, Council and others will be critical. It is felt that the Community Planning partnership could provide a good mechanism for bringing forward an agreed action plan to deliver on increased active travel. The City Development Board of Belfast Community Planning Partnership has identified active travel and connectivity as a key priority and partners are being asked to commit to actions to deliver on an action plan.

35. What are your views on high street parking?

The Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) identified the need for a parking strategy and action plan to ensure appropriate provision and location of parking to support the vitality of the city centre. A Car Park Strategy (CPS) and Action Plan was published by Council in May 2018. Public consultation took place between August and November 2016. The CPS included a comprehensive baseline review of parking, focused largely within the city centre and surrounding neighbourhoods, which identified parking issues, challenges and opportunities, and outlined a number of objectives and actions to support the Strategy's vision; *'Belfast is a city offering sufficient, high quality and appropriately located parking which supports economic development and regeneration within the city by balancing the requirements of residents, businesses, commuters and visitors'*.

The baseline review generally concluded that there is sufficient overall public parking supply within the city centre; a significant proportion of all day commuter parking takes place in the city centre; the quality of car parking facilities and payment technology varies greatly; and better management of parking demand and supply is

needed to provide an integrated parking information system. The report also noted the impact of commuters who park in mainly residential areas, which prevents local residents from parking, adding to the cluttered feel of individual streets, decreasing perceived safety levels and reducing access for emergency service vehicles. In conclusion the CPS 2018 and associated engagement found that the focus should be directed at demand management and effective management of the oversupply of car parking space aligned to active and sustainable transport priorities. However it should be noted that a review of the 2018 CPS is to take place in 2022.

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Theme 11: Tourism

Tourism is a major contributor to the economic well-being of our villages, towns and cities. Its development could include:

- A review of policy and regulations including support for hotels.
- Recognising the importance of sustainable town centres to meet the expectations of the tourist of the future. This will mean being able to provide a critical mass of services for accommodation, hospitality outlets and a thriving night-time economy.
- Develop the unique and visitor attractiveness of our high streets and remodel their marketing to reflect that.

Theme 11: Questions and Responses

36. How do we engage with communities to promote tourism?

There is a strong symbiotic relationship between the health and success of our City and that of the tourism sector. To attract tourists in what is an increasingly competitive marketplace it is critical that our city is clean, attractive, vibrant and can offer the experiences and services expected by today's tourist. This includes good quality accommodation, great restaurants offering local food and drink, a local and distinct retail offering, vibrant cultural facilities, events and festivals. The flip side of this coin is that tourists can add to that vitality and the money they spend helps sustain those businesses and services that meet the needs of not just the tourist but those of local communities as well.

The Regenerative Impact of Tourism - In the decade prior to the COVID pandemic the growth of our tourism industry had a huge regenerative impact on Belfast which is the gateway to Northern Ireland, and in turn NI's other cities, towns and rural communities. Tourism led regeneration has revitalised redundant industrial areas of our city and region. Public/private investment in the Odyssey Pavilion and Titanic Belfast spearheaded the regeneration of the former shipyard into a new city quarter which has become a centre for tourism, recreation, learning, an innovation hub, home to the creative industries and an attractive place to live.

Tourism and hospitality have also driven the regeneration of the Cathedral Quarter, revitalising its built heritage and has made it a vibrant destination for both the tourist

and the creative industries sector. This was a significant factor in the relocation of Ulster University into the city. Tourism has had a similar impact in Derry-Londonderry becoming an attractive place not just to visit but also to live, study, work and invest.

The work being undertaken under A City Exploring Theme in Belfast's Cultural Strategy: A City Imagining and Council's draft ten year Tourism Plan: Make yourself at Home, currently out for consultation, are effectively focused on engaging with communities to develop and promote tourism. Regenerative tourism is driven by the relationship between people and place and the strategic themes of our Tourism Plan, uplift the importance of community in the context of tourism and in particular the relationship between visitor and the host.

Our Tourism Plan seeks to build on the success of tourism to date acknowledging both the investment of the public sector and the significant contribution of business, local enterprise and communities in taking risks and establishing, in a relatively short period of time, a city offer of culture, heritage and hospitality to be celebrated. The next phase of development is committed to an inclusive approach that recognises the importance of tourism and global connectivity to our economic and social wellbeing, but to do so under the principles of being people-centred, responsible and sustainable. Our plan places community at its heart with respect for the local context, to ensure tourism-derived benefits are shared and inclusive, which is evident in all four of the strategic themes - Grow, Position, Experience and Sustain. We are working with our communities to co-create and package authentic visitor experiences through opportunities for local people to tell their stories.

37. What changes to legislation, policies, processes or procedures should be made to develop tourism on the high street?

- The issues that the tourism sector had with the legislation pertaining to alcohol licensing and closing times has recently been amended so this is a positive move.
- Legislation relating to for example café culture and dining on street spaces needs to be examined and revised to become fit for purpose and to deliver for the recovery of our city and provide visitors with the experience that they expect to find in cities when visiting

- An effective Sunday offering to provide vibrancy and footfall within the city centre during times of limited animation
- Coach parking is an issue right now with poor provision and policies in place to accommodate coach parking for those coaches that bring groups of tourists to Belfast for day trips and overnight – in recent times Belfast has been losing out on this valuable tourism sector due to lack of parking and coach operators choosing to go elsewhere.
- Active and sustainable and integrated transport is important including cycling opportunities
- Simplification of certification of accommodation is needed
- The recently approved Belfast City Council Vacant Premises Programme aims to tackle vacancy within the city centre bringing vacant spaces back into use – some of these uses could be directed at tourism and visitor experiences.

38. Are you aware of an innovative tourism project that could help your high street?

The tourism-led regeneration projects within the City and Growth Deal programmes are central to the survival of the high street in Belfast. In making Belfast attractive to the tourist it will also help make it a place which is attractive as a place to work, learn and visit, and help retain and attract the talent needed to drive the innovation led economy of the future.

Of equal importance, tourism will also provide employment opportunities for those for whom employment in the knowledge economy is beyond their reach and contribute to a more balanced, inclusive and productive regional economy which contributes to a greater quality of life for all our citizens.

The plans for the new Belfast visitor destination, Belfast Stories will provide the platform for communities to tell their story which in turn provides an authentic visitor experience, and will result in tourism providing spend in communities thereby economic benefits and employment opportunities. It is essential that the investment in this visitor attraction is made available without delay as it will take time for it to be delivered. It will be important that the investment in Belfast Stories is made alongside the smaller City and Growth Deal programmes that are being planned and NOT left until the end.

Infrastructure is needed to support tourism and enables year round tourism rather than just at peak periods, which is essential to ensure that high streets remain viable.

In the meantime whilst the work on the new visitor destination is underway, there are opportunities for temporary use of buildings in Belfast City Centre to pilot and deliver cultural tourism visitor experiences. Investment in these cultural tourism visitor experiences will help to ensure that the reputation of Belfast as a cultural tourism destination will be secured and visitors will still choose Belfast as their city of choice.

Other innovative tourism projects that could help Belfast's high street include – Festival 2022; Urban Forest 2023; Year of Culture 2024; and UNESCO City of Music programme.

Theme 12: Digital High Streets Online shopping has impacted our high streets.

Online shopping has impacted our high streets. As well as the opportunities, consideration of the concerns and issues could include:

- Complementing existing business models to allow additional flexibility and resilience to react and survive during what are still uncertain times. Going online will also open up opportunities to reach new markets and new consumer demand.
- In addition to online innovation and diversification, the high street needs to be offering something different that cannot be delivered or experienced online.
- We need data-driven insights into the social media conversations that matter with ways to understand the audience and how to make better connections to reach them, such as their preferences.
- Promoting local products, services and trades.
- Considering the potential for strategies such as data and IT training

Theme 12: Questions and Responses

39. What aspects of a digital high street are important?

The impact of digital innovation on the high street is not just the trend towards more online retail at the expense of bricks and mortar. The impact has been much broader and more profound and need to be recognised and co-opted. Our experiences of the high street (and city in general) are now almost entirely mediated through a digital experience. Mobile and cloud technologies offer shoppers, residents and visitors discovery and decision-making support, recommendations, way-finding, shared social experiences, leading increasingly to an inter-connected, curated experience. Any action plan needs to recognise this holistic experience and not focus narrowly on online retail opportunities for individual companies for example click and collect, also using technology to “view” products out of hours e.g. enhancing sizing guides; ensuring all stock is posted online; online stock management/control.

- **Good wireless connectivity** is assumed. However, as the sophistication of the mobile offering grows (eg AR or rea-time AI) the need for next generation

advanced wireless will grow – not just for individual consumers, but for companies particularly business to business. Belfast needs to be offering a range of wireless options from comprehensive free WiFi through to 5G small cell.

- **Policy makers and businesses need access to data.** The city and its residents generate large quantities of rich data. But this is usually collected by third party digital companies – and can be difficult and expensive to access and harder to utilise. The city can create opportunities to work with businesses, citizens and policy makers to generate, collect, manage and utilise locally generated data for local data. This needs investment in shared data infrastructure, investment in data science, and data informed decision-making.

40. What digital innovations would help your high street?

As part of its Smart Belfast programme, Belfast City Council is collaborating with innovative companies, university researchers and public bodies to develop a Belfast Smart District commencing in 2022.

Co-terminous with the city centre, one of the aims of this smart district is to foster an environment in which partners are encouraged to exploit digital innovation to address major urban challenges such as the transformation of the high street. Belfast City Council would welcome engagement with the HSTF to co-design digital innovation opportunities.

What is the Smart District offering Belfast city centre?

- A £30m investment in state-of-the-art wireless networks – specifically designed to support innovation by SMEs, MNOs, end-user companies, innovators, researchers.
- A £20 million Innovation for Societal Impact challenge fund – specifically designed to encourage SMEs, researchers, and public bodies to innovate together on urban challenges such as the changing nature of the high street. This fund is planned to open for the first time in 2022/23.
- A £5 million urban data platform designed to provide a safe, trusted environment for the collection, management and utilisation of city-generated

data to allow SMEs, universities, public bodies to innovate on the city's key challenges.

- A curated urban innovation environment – A council-based team who will work to support innovation the city centre – by supporting access to locations, technologies, data, funding, partnership delivery, etc.

What are the kind of digital innovations need to be considered?

- The development of digital twins to support modelling of behaviours, urban mobility, logistics, impact of public policy interventions, etc. Digital twins have the potential to allow businesses and public policy makers to better understand the impact of fine-grain decisions and to model alternatives.
- Support for companies to innovate – creating a real-world environment (such as that on offer through the smart district) for companies to innovate, experiment, take risks, and learn.
- Local shared data – building local data pools about the high street and making them work for Belfast. This needs tech, expertise, and a trusted relationship between consumers, businesses, researchers and public policy makers. (Loyalty cards have explored this in a disconnected fashion – but there is no over-arching strategy for retaining local data with a trusted environment.)
- Related – creating a nuanced shared economic model of the high street that allows for scenario planning, data-informed decision making, A/B testing, trend analysis, etc. (Smart Belfast is currently working on a pilot of such a model with Land and Property Services).
- The role of digital in support last mile logistics, supply, active travel, multi-modal travel. The success of this is dependent on a rich data environment, digital twins, IoT infrastructure, and the expertise to exploit the data. (Smart Belfast is currently developing a pilot with Amazon Web Services on modelling multi-modal travel)
- The role of digital innovation to enhance alternative use of the high street – eg, supporting healthy urban residential living. Supporting city centre advanced manufacturing. (Both of which are being explored by the universities and/or Smart Belfast).

- It is still in an early phase – but the use of immersive technologies (AR, VR) to enhance the high street experience. Opportunities here to work with Smart Belfast and the two local universities.
- Support for new forms of transport – e-bikes, scooters, cargo-bikes, electric delivery vans. Drone delivery.

41. What more needs to be done to improve digital skills?

- Building skills to allow companies to adopt new ways of working that support innovation – eg, user-led co-design, living labs methodologies, agile as an iterative approach to innovative solutions, etc.
- Capacity building to support policy makers and companies to better utilise data to inform decision making. Our experience is that there are numerous data tools available on the market but that the ability of local partners to understand and exploit these tools remains limited. There is little evidence that new data opportunities (eg big data or real-time IoT data) is actually having an impact on plans and strategies.
- Capacity building for the citizen. Data as a tool for policy is only going to grow– however, there are concerns about trust, privacy, security and transparency. Engagement directly with the citizen on the exploitation of data and/or the use of AI technologies in the public realm is needed – or there will be growing distrust in the role of such tech in the city.
- Better awareness and adoption of the latest innovative practice from other places. Many cities are already experimenting with digital innovation in the high street. Opportunity here to link in with the many Smart City programmes across the world.
- There needs to be more specific digital marketing training provided to independent businesses who cannot afford to employ advertising and marketing agencies to provide these services. Although existing training courses are available, they are usually not specific enough and cover more general digital marketing topics.
- More targeted training is needed in areas such as search engine optimisation for their website and products, Google maps (listing your business, managing

reviews and feedback), Facebook and Google paid advertising (how to set up an advert, advertising budgeting, how to optimise adverts etc), proactive engagement with potential customers on social media, using tools to monitor their brand (reputation management), ecommerce (click and collect) etc.

- Businesses need to better understand the customer journey and how people find out about their business and products so they can optimise their marketing activity.

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Theme 13: Rural Settlements

Rural development is vital not just for individuals in rural areas but also for economic growth. Rural development will help improve productivity and stability in social and economic development. It enhances the quality of life and financial well-being of individuals, specifically those living in rural areas, but it also has major impacts on those in urban environments. This could require the consideration of:

- Providing support for rural settlements, including consideration of the social, environmental and economic role of settlements in a new era of connected working.
- Maximising the opportunities of the Department for the Economy-led Project Stratum that will bring high-speed broadband and connectivity to rural settlements.
- Invest in and provide a tailored and seamless approach.
- Village high street development

Theme 13: Questions and Responses

42. What changes to legislation, process and procedures are needed for village developments?

The planning approach focuses on stimulating economic and residential growth primarily within the city although an appropriate level of protection and growth will be directed towards our small settlements.

43. How could funding for rural settlements be made easier?

The introduction of Rural Needs Act 2016 aimed to demonstrate that sufficient evidence is considered to make effective policies which provide for equitable treatment of both rural and urban areas. As a result, any plan or programme being developed by Council is screened for Rural Proofing to determine whether they have a differential impact on rural areas and, where appropriate, adjustments are made to take account of particular rural circumstances.

In terms of funding rural settlements within Belfast, a small number have developed bids for funding through residents and community based organisations such as residents committees, sports clubs etc. Settlements have benefitted from the Rural

Development Programme and Belfast City Council Local Investment Fund. The Council has also worked with these groups to build capacity and consult on various policies, plans and strategies.

44. What innovative initiatives would improve village economies?

Innovative initiatives to address loss of banking presence in rural communities – e.g. cash back schemes. Also in terms of circular flow of the economy, improve village economies with better public transport links be developed in order to enable residents to avail of job opportunities and improve access to the City Centre and in return spend in local vilages.

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Theme 14: People, Localism and Well-being

Places need to be compelling, to encourage communities to support economies, products and services that promote and improve the health and well-being of residents and the wider community. People need to feel connected, and community networks can support these links. This could include:

- The High Streets Task Force in England describes this regeneration framework as four Rs: repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring. These 'four Rs' require a new vision, a changed offer to consumers, better stakeholder communication and changing the governance of our high streets.
- Part of the solution to this challenge lies in fully developing and implementing the concept of 'localism' to repurpose our village, town and city centres as unique hubs at the heart of our community.
- Localism is not just about supporting independent retailers; it is also about empowering people and communities to reshape and repurpose their local villages, towns and city centres and reinvigorate the leadership model.
- Considering the impact of the Living Wage on equality and on people wanting to work on the high street.

Theme 14: Questions and Responses

45. Are you aware of any initiatives that would improve localism in your community?

Local government reforms that came into effect in April 2015 significantly shifted the role of local government towards one of active place-shaping. These arrangements provided councils with greater responsibility for important powers such as spatial and land-use planning, off-street car parks, local economic development and tourism. However, a residual sense exists across local government that the powers which transferred to councils did not go far enough. Effective place making starts within the community, engaging on the ground and bringing forward to delivery.

Community Planning is the most effective mechanism to support the integration of public services for the benefit of local communities. Particularly important though is work in Belfast City Council to develop a smaller "area" based planning and delivery

approach to integrating public services. This recognises that community planning at a local authority level still needs to connect more meaningfully to local places.

“Area” based planning and delivery in Belfast brings together people (communities/public service staff), services and place (physical environment/assets) in a holistic way and a current demonstrator is well underway in the form of the “Holylands Intervention” and the Multi-Agency Support Hub in the Botanic District Electoral Area.

The planned Review of People and Place (DfC) seeks to examine place based deprivation in a similar way to area based planning and that important relationship between NI Executive policy and local Council planning/service delivery needs continued investment

Further devolution of core place-shaping functions will allow for a more responsive approach to communities’ needs, aspirations and true feeling of localism. Councils have a greater understanding of, and engagement with, their local communities enabling the tailoring of services, improved decision-making and the delivery of local outcomes.

However, given the previous experience of the 2015 reform programme, we must emphasise the importance that if there is to be any further devolution of powers to local government this must be supported by greater resource, clarity of purpose and occur in a planned and phased manner to ensure continuity and certainty for all stakeholders.

In summary the main issues relating to the future role of local government that the Council wish to highlight include:

- Central government commitment to work in partnership with local councils, by providing the necessary funding and policy backdrop, from which councils can play a leading role in the sustainable recovery of their local areas;
- enhanced devolution to local government including regeneration, planning, skills investment and planning, and local transport planning;

- greater powers regarding local taxation measures and enhanced local investment powers, to ensure that that councils have the fiscal levers to tackle issues at community and city level; and
- the introduction of legislation/measures that strengthen the relationship between central and local government, including a duty to collaborate to provide for responsive and integrated service delivery at regional, city and community level.

46. What is the most important aspect for creating well-being in the community?

Core to effective community planning and area planning is empowered communities who feel confident in lobbying for and participating in public policy and implementation. It is recognised that capacity in most communities in Belfast is excellent, but that there are parts of the city where capacity needs further investment. Often these areas do not fall into existing government place based programmes (Neighbourhood Renewal, Urban Villages, Building Successful Communities etc). A strategic exercise is needed to ensure capacity is developed in all communities.

The participation of communities in planning and implementation is core to their well-being and the Belfast Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise Panel (advisors to the Community Planning Partnership) are an excellent example of the role of this sector in shaping effective public sector service delivery. However, that principle of genuine and equal partnership between the public sector and the third sector is core to all public sector service delivery and should be embraced across government.

Currently, the Council works in partnership with each of the 9 government departments and their respective Ministers (who make up the NI Executive) in the delivery of policy and services to the citizens of Belfast. Such co-operation takes place across many policy areas including local planning, waste, environmental health, public safety, building control, community planning, and economic and cultural development.

The Council recognises the need to further strengthen the relationship between central and local government on a clear legislative and policy basis, in order to effectively

deliver for the citizen. This strengthened relationship should be underpinned by a shared commitment to delivering outcomes for our citizens and improve quality of life in a measurable way, such as health and well being. This approach can be tailored to local area interventions.

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