Belfast

Belfast City Centre

Regeneration and Investment Strategy

September 2015

Belfast City Council

www.belfastcity.gov.uk

Foreword

Foreword from the Party Group Leaders and Chief Executive of Belfast City Council

We are pleased to commend to you Belfast's City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy.

We believe that the city centre will play a pivotal role in the growth of Belfast and the entire region and we are very excited about the potential opportunities for investment that exist.

This document sets out our collective ambition for the continued growth and regeneration of the city core and its surrounding areas to 2030. It has been shaped by extensive engagement with stakeholders and contains a road map of policies to guide city centre decision-making and key projects that translate those policies into action.

Action only happens with resources and in order to make this strategy real and underline our commitment to Belfast, the council has created an £18.7million City Centre Investment Fund to support implementation. We hope that this fund will stimulate and facilitate projects that have the potential to make a significant impact in terms of "gross value added" and job creation.

We are determined that the regeneration of our city centre will drive not just economic growth but social benefits. A key theme throughout the strategy is neighbourhood connectivity; this includes both physical connectivity and ensuring that local people feel connected to the centre in a way that allows their full participation in its economic and social life. The strategy therefore includes a commitment to ongoing engagement with local people and to taking forward work on specific programmes that will ensure that the social impact of regeneration is maximised.

Our commitment to ensuring maximum economic and social impact through our strategy is captured in the principles which underpin it:

- Increase the employment population;
- Increase the residential population;
- Manage the retail offer;
- Maximise the tourism opportunity;
- Create a regional learning and innovation centre;
- Create a green, walkable, cyclable centre;
- Connect to the city around, and
- Shared space and social impact.

Our city will continue to adapt to changing circumstances and this strategy positions us to make the most of the exciting opportunities that exist; opportunities such as the North East Quarter, the proposed Transport Hub and the Ulster University development.

We want to maximise the collective potential of these and other large scale development and infrastructure projects as catalysts for city regeneration and improved economic and social well-being.

This document sets out our overall direction of travel; further more detailed policies and action plans will be produced, along with our own Local Development Plan and these will set out more specific development and area based guidance. Implementation will also include spatial planning guidance for the city centre, individual programmes for special action areas and approaches to issues such as car parking, retail, offices, hotels and public realm.

The quality of our city environment has a huge impact on our experience and lives. Our unique city centre is key to the continued growth of our economy. It is our job to ensure that the benefits of this growth are felt by local businesses, people and communities.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their engagement and comments over the course of the preparation of this document and for creating this distinctively Belfast strategy.

Councillor Michael Long, APNI
Alderman Brian Kingston, DUP
Councillor Billy Hutchinson, PUP
Alderman Patrick Convery, SDLP
Councillor Jim McVeigh, SF
Alderman David Browne, UUP
Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive

Cover Photo: Belfast City Hall (Tourism NI)

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Executive Summary

The Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy has been developed to provide a framework for change at a critical time for Belfast. Foreign direct investment is bringing new jobs, tourism is on the rise and major public and private developments are transforming the city centre. Perhaps most importantly, Belfast City Council has received a suite of new place-shaping powers to shape the city as part of the ongoing reform of Local Government. In this time of significant change it is essential that the Council is equipped with a strong vision to prepare for its new role and greater responsibility. With these new responsibilities comes a sense of the urgency that many of the city centre issues discussed in this report must be addressed.

One overarching imperative drives this Regeneration Strategy. The city centre is one of the most important places in Northern Ireland. City centres are where investment impact can be maximised, where rates are generated and where momentum can be built to support growth in the surrounding neighbourhoods. All communities in Belfast therefore have a direct interest in an economically thriving centre.

The centre is to a large extent the face of the region to the world, the place on the basis of which people make decisions about where to invest, where to live and where to start a business. The implication of that importance is that Northern Ireland policy and investment must at times be differentially directed to the centre, as this is where it has the greatest likelihood of the greatest return.

The regional centre deserves special treatment because it is special. The centre is the place that represents Northern Ireland's future, a place that can be shared by all. It is a place in common, where everyone from every community, of every age and origin can enjoy life together.

This Strategy has been developed in the context of our new responsibility to produce a community plan for the city. The community plan, known as the Belfast Agenda, will provide the vision for Belfast created in partnership with key city partners, residents and community organisations. The outcome based framework of the Belfast Agenda will set the overriding priorities for the whole city and its communities and this city centre Strategy will be one key strand. The research, engagement and learning from the Belfast Conversation events have referenced the key role for the city centre in the future success of Belfast. The Regeneration and Investment Strategy will play an important part in achieving the social, environmental and economic goals of the Belfast Agenda. However, the Council will, through its wider plans, programmes and investment, ensure that people living in and around the city centre feel part of this regeneration and benefit from it and that commercial growth is balanced with social impact.

The City Centre Strategy sets out the context for developing the city centre and outlines our aspirations for the continued growth and regeneration of the city core and its surrounding areas. The Strategy is based on the following core principles:

- Increase the employment population
- Increase the residential population
- Manage the retail offer
- Maximise the tourism opportunity
- Create a regional learning and innovation centre
- Create a green, walkable, cyclable centre
- Connect to the city around
- Shared Space and social impact

A key theme throughout the Strategy is neighbourhood connectivity and how we will address connectivity issues, both physical and perceived, between the city core and its surrounding neighbourhoods. One element of achieving a better connected city centre is to ensure that the social benefits of major city developments are fully realised and captured. Underpinning this entire approach will be the concept of shared space and how it becomes inherent in the development of any policy or project. Other connected programmes of work and investment will support this wider approach.

In this Strategy we 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. Work is ongoing to develop and implement the most effective delivery structure within the Council to bring the projects to fruition. Extensive meetings and consultations with city stakeholders have contributed to the strategy, including the Future City Conference in June 2014 and months of meetings and conversations with all sectors which tested many of the policies, projects and approaches.

The Strategy is grounded in an understanding of Belfast City Centre today – the Policy Context, Physical Context, Market Context and Transport Context. This context constitutes the starting point for the policies and projects developed.

Eight policies for the city centre provide a vision for the eight areas of intervention considered most essential to Belfast's success. The policies address the universal elements of a thriving city centre as well as challenges and conditions that are unique to Belfast.

The centre is to a large extent the face of the region to the world, the place on the basis of which people make decisions about where to invest, where to live and where to start a business. The implication of that importance is that Northern Ireland policy and investment must at times be differentially directed to the centre, as this is where it has the greatest likelihood of the greatest return.

Executive Summary

Policies

Increase the Employment Population
Capitalise on Belfast's advantage of competitive costs of space and labour and a well-educated work force. Support the development of new Grade A office space and better connect the existing office provision within the centre so that appropriate space is available for firms looking to locate jobs in the city.

Increase the Residential Population
Add liveliness and bustle to the city centre at all hours and create a market for retail, restaurants and entertainment by supporting residential development of various types and tenures at key locations.

Manage the Retail Offer
Address the retail decline of the centre through a targeted and proactive approach to regeneration of retail areas and management of the city centre retail offer.

Maximise the Tourism Opportunity
Take tourism in Belfast up a level by complementing the existing offer with another big attraction or festival and fostering the general buzz and activity of the centre.

Create the Region's Learning and Innovation Centre
Address Belfast's low level of innovation and by building on the strength of existing institutions in the centre and providing cheap and flexible space for new businesses.

Create a Green, Walkable, Cyclable Centre
Reduce the area of tarmac and increase green space in the city centre through provision of new open spaces, a comprehensive streetscaping programme and development of the Lagan corridor as a recreational spine.

Connect to the City Around
Reduce barriers between the city centre and the communities that surround it by connecting to activity in adjacent neighbourhoods, developing two new access points such as walkways, crossing routes over the River Lagan, potential reconfiguration of road infrastructure, improving pedestrian crossings where feasible, streetscaping key corridors and improving the built form relationship at the edges of the city centre.

A Shared Space and Social Impact
Ensure that the city centre is a welcoming and attractive place for everyone in Belfast through the design and programming of space.

To facilitate the implementation of the eight policies for the city centre the strategy identifies a series of projects for each district. The projects are intended to focus Belfast City Council's efforts on discreet initiatives which will help to achieve the policies and create a liveable and economically thriving city.

The projects should not be undertaken in isolation, however. A coordinated and integrated planning approach is required. Five Special Action Areas are identified as parts of the centre where more intensive local plans should be prepared, either to maximise the beneficial effects of major new institutional and transport developments or to initiate the comprehensive regeneration of declining retail areas.

Special Action Areas

Inner North
The relocation of the Ulster University will be transformative to the northern part of the city centre and a comprehensive planning process is already underway to maximise benefits to the surrounding area.

Inner West
A coordinated programme of improvement is required to revitalise the Castle Street / CastleCourt / Smithfield Market area as a vibrant shopping district.

North East Quarter
A plan for the regeneration of the largely vacant area through the introduction of anchor developments and smaller supporting uses is essential for the reconnection of the retail axis of the city centre.

Transport Hub and South Centre
The development of a new transport hub around Great Victoria Street Station is a major city-building opportunity and a strategic approach is required to ensure it supports wider city ambitions and its impact is fully realised.

Oxford Street and the Eastern Bank
Reuniting the centre with the River Lagan requires a major reimagining of Oxford Street as a waterfront boulevard rather than a busy arterial route. To ensure a comparable level of quality in the public realm on the eastern bank of the river, the design of the river frontage in Queen's Quay also requires careful attention.

Further Work on the Local Development Plan (LDP)

The Council is also starting the process of developing a Local Development Plan. This will take some time to bring forward. Therefore this Strategy sets the context for the statutory plan in relation to the city centre. It also points to some early and ongoing work on issues like student housing and public realm interventions which will be taken forward by the Council.

In addition, it is clear that specific implementation plans will follow from this strategy such as a social impact plan; a transport/parking strategy; a digital and creative economy plan; a festivals strategy; a cultural plan and such other strategy development encompassing our other responsibilities on economic development, tourism and developing skills.

Belfast City Hall (Belfast City Council)

01
Introduction

01 Introduction

The success of Belfast's city centre is vital to the future of the city and of Northern Ireland. It is the location of new economic growth, at the core of Northern Ireland's image to the rest of the world, a place that has something to offer everyone. It is the factory, the advertisement and the meeting place of the region's future.

Belfast has done well in recent decades to improve an economically dynamic and attractive city centre. It has, however, some way to go in comparison to other European cities of comparable size. It needs more; more people working and living in the centre, more visitors, more attractions, more commerce, more jobs, more street life and nightlife, more trees, more in-migrants and more development. More serenity, more bustle, more buzz. It is the combination of all those elements that makes a great city centre, that provides the self-fuelling chemistry for regeneration. Belfast has particular challenges; an economy that has been growing slowly, perceived geographical isolation and a legacy of conflict. But it also has a distinctive culture, a special sense of place and a talented population that can help it achieve its own unique brand of city centre success.

One overarching imperative drives this Regeneration Strategy. The city centre is the most important place in Northern Ireland. Experience from across the world shows the importance of thriving, productive, attractive and prosperous cities for their wider regions. City centres are where investment impact can be maximised, where rates are generated and where momentum can be built to support growth in the surrounding neighbourhoods. A city centre which is attractive, safe, with high levels of employment and investment can provide the basis for a prosperous and successful city and surrounding region. All communities in Belfast therefore have a direct interest in an economically thriving centre. Higher-level decision makers across Europe and the UK are increasingly recognising this, and it is time that Northern Ireland decision makers considered how this approach can be replicated on these shores.

The centre is to a large extent the international face of the region, the place on the basis of which people make decisions about where to invest, where to live and where to start a business. It is the place that conveys confidence and competence to the world. The implication of that importance is that Northern Ireland policy and investment must, at times, be differentially directed to the centre, as this is where it has the greatest likelihood of the greatest return.

Many other UK cities have come, often after contentious debate, to this understanding. Manchester's centre is now called the 'regional centre' in the planning and regeneration strategies of that conurbation. The centres of Birmingham and Leeds receive similar recognition.

The regional centre deserves special treatment because it is special. Planning and investment policies at the NI Government level should recognise this status and continue to assist Belfast City Council in discharging its responsibility to create a thriving and prosperous city centre that will benefit everyone in Northern Ireland. The centre is the place that represents Northern Ireland's future, a place that can be shared by all. It is a place in common, where everyone from every community, of every age and origin can enjoy life together.

From the mid 1990s to 2007 Northern Ireland, including Belfast, experienced one of its most economically prosperous and politically stable periods in recent memory. The following period of wider global economic downturn saw a fall in employment, a huge reduction in private sector investment, a collapse in the housing market and continued high levels of deprivation across many of the city's neighbourhoods.

However, Belfast is now emerging from the recession and things are improving. Recent years have seen indications of an upturn in the economy, jobs are being created across the city and investor confidence is growing. Belfast has emerged with enhanced economic, political and cultural functions and there is a growing concentration of intellectual resources in universities and research institutions that will help reinforce Belfast's role as the economic driver of the region. With the appropriate support and investment aligned to the right policies Belfast can be even more competitive. One demonstration of the Council's intentions to enhance the impact of our city centre is the £29.5 million extension to the Waterfront Hall to provide an internationally competitive conference centre with potential to grow Belfast as a business and tourist destination, provide employment opportunities, and stimulate economic and social benefits across the city.

Belfast City Council's role as civic leader and driving force for the city has been enhanced with the transfer of Planning powers and this key place-shaping power will be consolidated further with the planned extension of Regeneration powers, as well as our new powers of Well Being and Community Planning which have been developed as part of the ongoing reform of Local Government. In this time of significant change it is essential that the City Council is equipped with a vision and a framework to prepare for these new powers and greater responsibility. This is the moment to set in motion the transformation of Belfast City Centre, and there is a sense of urgency about getting it underway.

This Strategy has been developed in the context of our new responsibility to produce a community plan for the city. The community plan, known as the Belfast Agenda, will provide a vision for Belfast created in partnership with key city partners, residents and community organisations. The outcome based framework of the Belfast Agenda.

The Strategy sets out the context for developing the city centre and outlines our aspirations for the continued growth and regeneration of the city core and its surrounding areas.
The Strategy is based on the core principles of:

- Increase the employment population.
- Increase the residential population.
- Manage the retail offer.
- Maximise the tourism opportunity.
- Create a regional learning and innovation centre.
- Create a green, walkable, cyclable centre.
- Connect to the city around.
- A Shared Space and Social Impact.

01 Introduction

A key theme throughout the Strategy is neighbourhood connectivity and how we will address connectivity issues, both physical and perceived, between the city core and its surrounding neighbourhoods. One element of achieving a better connected city centre is to ensure that the social benefits of major city developments are fully realised and captured. Underpinning this entire approach will be the concept of shared space and how it becomes inherent in the development of any policy or project.

This Regeneration and Investment Strategy for Belfast City Centre sets out a road map of policies to guide city centre decision-making and projects that translate the policies into action. Extensive meetings and consultations with city stakeholders have contributed to the strategy, including the Future City Conference in June 2014 and months of meetings and conversations with all sectors which tested many of the policies, projects and approaches. Drawings and maps are utilised throughout the document to demonstrate some of the aspirations of the Strategy. However, these are for illustrative purposes only and are not to scale.

The Strategy was prepared before statutory plan-making powers were transferred to Belfast City Council from the Department of the Environment (NI) on the 1st April 2015. It was prepared in the absence of statutory regeneration powers currently possessed by the Department for Social Development, which will not be transferred to the Council until 2016. In this regard, the Strategy was not bound by statutory provisions at the time of its preparation, namely the procedures and requirements of the 1991 Planning Order as amended. Accordingly, it is a non-statutory document and will be material insofar as it supplements statutory guidance in BMAP (The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015) and regional planning policy. For the most part, it complements and builds upon policies and proposals outlined in the statutory development plan, namely BMAP.

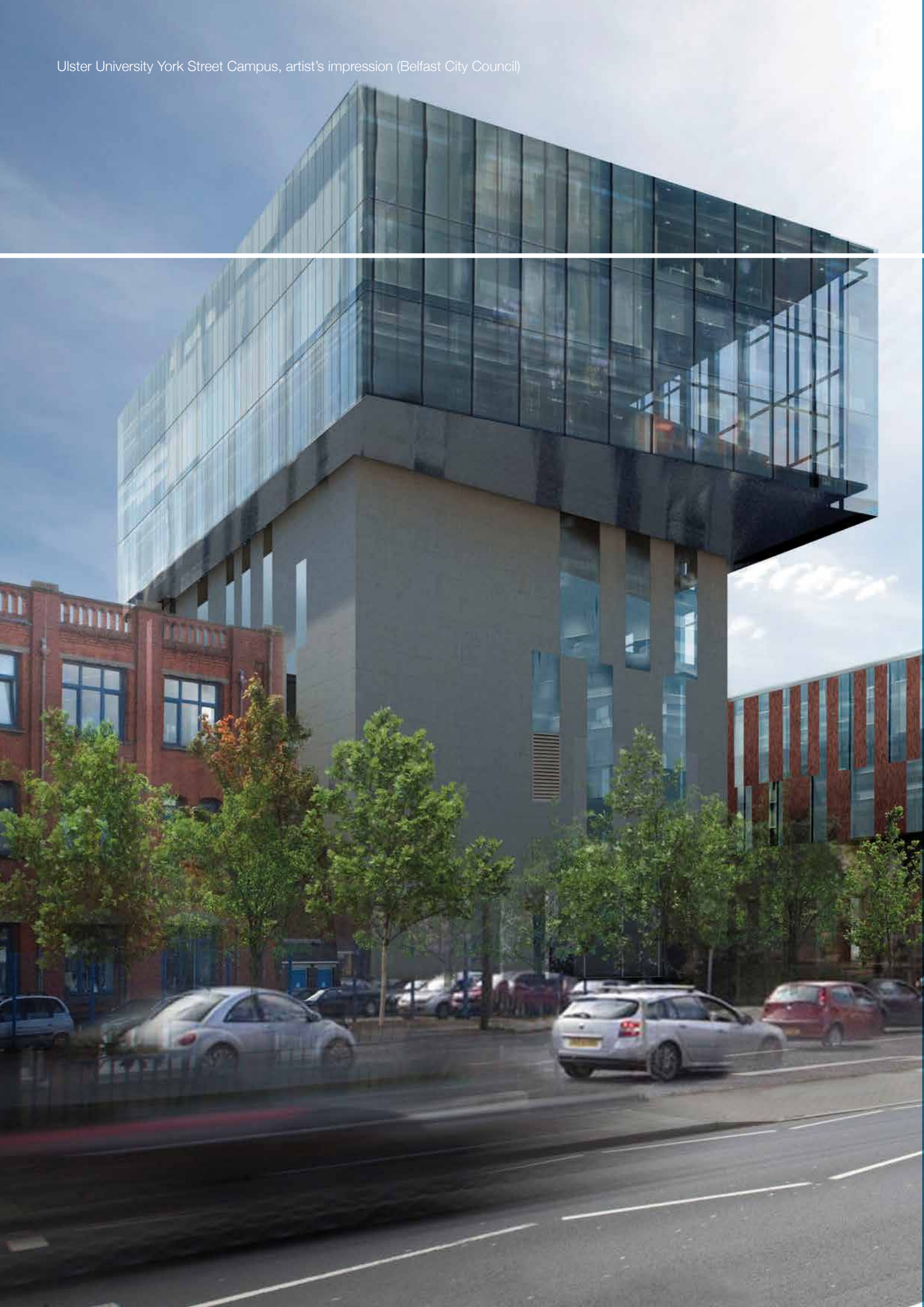
The time horizon for delivery of the Regeneration and Investment Strategy is roughly 10-15 years and work is underway to develop and implement the most effective delivery structure within the Council to realise the projects in the strategy.

In the coming years the new Council will be responsible for developing plans for the entire city area, some of which will be entirely new, such as the Community Plan and some that will succeed the variety of plans which exist today. As the city centre is a key location for investment and employment, this Strategy has been undertaken as an initial step in planning for the entire city. In the months ahead, as the new Council is established with its extended remit for shaping Belfast through its regeneration and planning functions, attention will turn to creating strategic plans for both the city as a whole and areas within it. These will focus on improving quality of life for people across the city and ensuring that the growth agenda, at the heart of the city centre Strategy, is one that can be shared by people across the new council area. Like the city centre Strategy, they will require a collaborative partnership approach, and they will be driven by a strong focus on outcomes for local people.

At a city-wide level, it is also the Council's intention to produce a number of supporting strategic documents, aimed at addressing some of the broader economic and social outcomes that require attention, for example, an Integrated Economic Framework, Tourism Strategy, Employability and Skills Framework and an Active Travel Strategy. These are being developed with the city's communities and other stakeholders to identify their priorities for Belfast and their local areas.

Belfast City Hall (Tourism NI)

This Regeneration and Investment Strategy for Belfast City Centre sets out a road map of policies to guide city centre decision-making and projects that translate the policies into action. Extensive meetings and consultations with city stakeholders have contributed to the strategy, including the Future City Conference in June 2014 and months of meetings and conversations with all sectors which tested many of the policies, projects and approaches.



Ulster University York Street Campus, artist's impression (Belfast City Council)

02
Context

02 Context

2.1. Policy Context

The Regeneration and Investment Strategy fits within a suite of existing policy documents that apply to Belfast and its city centre. It aligns with the key aims of these documents and provides an interpretation of how Belfast City Centre should develop in the coming years to help achieve those aims. In some instances there are variations in detail with existing area-based plans, reflecting a refreshed approach that takes account of the improving economic context and housing market and increasing investor confidence in Belfast City Centre, as well as significant new initiatives that have emerged since the policies and plans were created.

The Programme for Government 2011-2015, the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and "A New Approach to Regional Transportation" provide the entire region with a vision, with realistic goals and ambitious targets in relation to investment, development and transportation. The Programme for Government has five priorities for the Government to focus on up to the year 2015. They include Growing a Sustainable Economy and Investing in the Future; Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Well-Being; Protecting Our People, the Environment and Creating Safer Communities; Building a Strong and Shared Community; and Delivering High Quality and Efficient Public Services.

In addition to the aim of strengthening Belfast as the regional economic driver, the Spatial Framework Guidance in the RDS includes "Growing the population of the city of Belfast" and "Enhance the role of Belfast City Centre as the regional capital and focus of administration, commerce, specialised services and cultural amenities". The RDS identifies the need to support and strengthen the distinctive role of Belfast City Centre as the primary retail location in Northern Ireland; enhance the employment potential of the city centre; close the gap in quality of life for those living in deprived areas; and develop Belfast as Northern Ireland's cultural and arts centre.

At a local level there are already a number of plans and policies for the city, many of which encompass parts of the city centre, developed by Central Government departments including the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development. However, none of the plans provide a holistic and focused approach to the city centre. The regeneration strategy is intended to fill that void by providing an up to date vision that bridges the gaps in existing policies and plans and supports their delivery.

The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 provides the land use context to planning for the wider city region and its recent adoption helps provide greater certainty. Whilst many of the policies remain valid, some parts of BMAP have naturally become outdated due to the length of time passed since inception. For the most part, this Strategy complements and builds upon policies and proposals outlined in BMAP, the statutory development plan.

At a local level there are already a number of plans and policies for the city, many of which encompass parts of the city centre, developed by Central Government departments including the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development.

Mindful of the need to place environmental protection at the centre of policies and proposals in this Strategy, all relevant environmental considerations outlined in regional policy and environmental legislation will be taken into account. This particularly relates to the contents of the urban and natural environment sections of BMAP and the Strategic Environmental Appraisal prepared for the Strategy, which includes the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

The DSD publications, People and Place and Belfast City Centre Regeneration Policy Statement establish regeneration objectives for the city centre which are very much aligned with the regeneration strategy. The objectives for the city centre include: enhancing its role; promoting its physical renewal; creating a high quality and safe urban environment which is attractive to investors, employees, residents and tourists; and creating a sustainable and vibrant city centre which supports a quality lifestyle attractive to inward investors and potential future residents, amongst other objectives.

2.2. Physical Context

This strategy takes a larger view of what constitutes Belfast City Centre than has typically been used. A city centre is partly defined by its functions, and in Belfast today city centre functions take place not only in the traditional core inside the bounds of the River Lagan, Westlink and M3, but also in City Quays and Titanic Quarter. In the future Queen's Quay and Sirocco must also be drawn into the centre through better physical connectivity. These areas should not be seen as competing with the traditional city centre but as having their own unique and complementary role in an expanded city centre context.

A number of signature areas within this larger definition of the city centre have been defined for the purposes of this strategy only – the South Centre, the Core, the North Centre and the Lagan Corridor. Roughly, the South Centre includes everything south of City Hall, the Core includes City Hall and the retail core, the North Centre includes the Ulster University's York Street campus, the Cathedral Quarter and everything north of Frederick Street and the Lagan Corridor encompasses everything along the river, including the new and future development areas.

No geography perfectly captures the diversity and function of a city like Belfast and five "Special Action Areas" have also been defined, that overlap these structuring areas to give more detailed guidance on proposed short term implementation priorities.

The South Centre

Belfast City Hall acts as a natural focal point in the city centre, the point from which everything else is measured. To its south lies the traditional office core, heavily occupied by the public sector but with a large private sector presence as well. Whilst the traditional office core is reasonably healthy, the number of premises to let is concerning and the quality of the office stock is deteriorating. The lack of the type of Grade A office space desired by incoming firms is a major weakness. There are some restaurants and cafes on the ground level to serve local office workers, but little in the way of open spaces for their use and enjoyment.

The built form in the area is a mixture of solid heritage buildings and infill development of varying architectural and physical quality, suggesting an opportunity for selected demolitions to reduce redundant stock. There are a number of sites currently occupied by surface car parks or low value buildings that are excellent candidates for new Grade A office development. The office core comes to an abrupt end at Ormeau Avenue, as the surface car parks along the unfinished South Link of the Inner Ring Road create an undefined edge.

Great Victoria Street Station, set to be transformed by Translink into an integrated Transport Hub, is hidden behind the Europa Hotel and Great Northern Mall, with minimal presence on Great Victoria Street. Exploring options to bring the entrance to the street will be crucial as the Transport Hub essentially becomes the gateway to the city centre and its immediate vicinity becomes a key area for investment and development and connections to the key city institution of Queen's University Belfast and its wider campus.

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Opposite Page:

1 Vacant heritage building (Flickr / William Murphy)

This Page:

1 Great Northern Mall / Street entrance to Great Victoria Street Station (Urban Strategies Inc.)

2 View looking north on Great Victoria Street (Flickr / William Murphy)

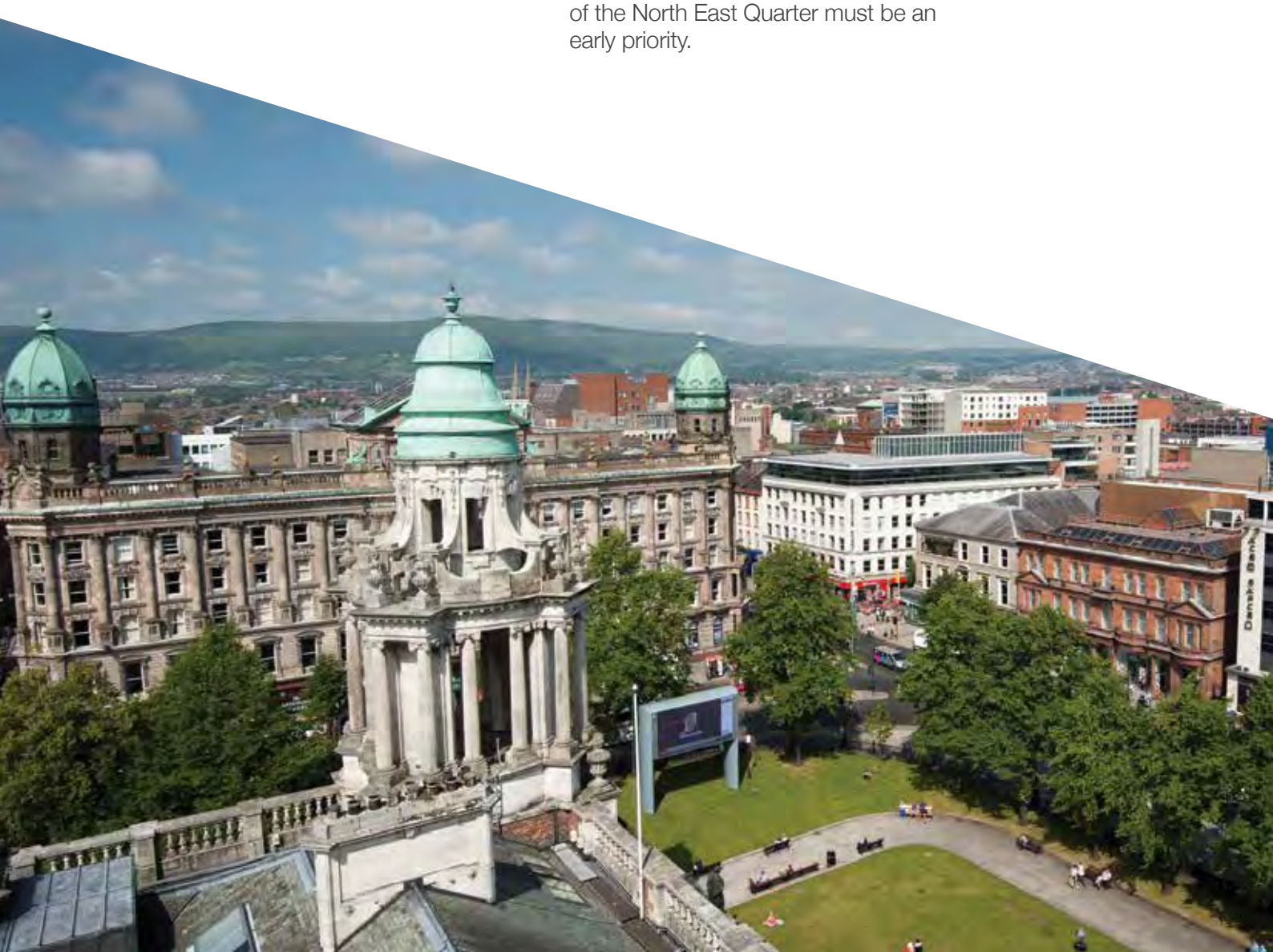
3 Linenhall Street (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Picture Below:
Belfast's South Centre (Belfast City Council)

The Core

In the city's retail core north of City Hall and the high-quality streetscape improvements implemented as part of the Streets Ahead initiative create a general impression of a well cared-for district. However, Donegall Place and Royal Avenue have suffered from a decline in footfall and retail quality in recent years. The development of Victoria Square has been successful in adding a modern retail environment in the city centre; its public realm and built-form quality are evident. On the west side, however, the CastleCourt Shopping Centre needs refreshing and is cut off from Victoria Square and what should be a strong retail axis by the uncertainty over the delivery of the North East Quarter redevelopment. The high level of vacancy along Castle Street and neighbouring retail areas suggests the need for a coordinated set of retail enhancement, destination activity and public space improvements.

Belfast's rich legacy of heritage architecture is most evident in the Core, though impressive heritage buildings can be found throughout the city centre. The iconic City Hall is the most recognisable landmark, an asset that is somewhat underutilised at this point. Many significant heritage buildings lie completely vacant, while other heritage stock has vacancies on upper levels. Belfast's heritage fabric is an essential ingredient of its unique character and charm, therefore a strategy for adaptive re-use is required to ensure its preservation. In this regard, the regeneration of the North East Quarter must be an early priority.



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Opposite Page:

Belfast City Hall view (Belfast City Council)

This Page:

1 Victoria Square (Belfast City Council)

2 Belfast City Hall green space (Urban Strategies Inc.)

3 Belfast Christmas Market (Belfast City Council)

4 Bank Square undergoing improvements (Urban Strategies Inc.)

5 Donegall Place (Belfast City Council)

The North Centre

The northern part of the city centre is the most poorly defined in terms of both land use and built form. Numerous vacant sites, surface car parks and cheap one-to-two storey commercial and industrial buildings contribute to a lack of character and direction for the area. However, the Ulster University's new York Street campus will anchor the north end, with the thousands of students, faculty and staff bringing energy and vitality that will transform the area. The emerging Northside development opportunity area has the potential to create leverage from the investment by the Ulster University by accommodating and encouraging innovative new start-ups in close proximity and redeveloping vacant and underutilised sites. Though the north centre is blessed with two of the few public open spaces in the city centre - Writer's Square and Buoys Park - they are disappointing in their landscape treatment and activity. Proposals for "Library Square" and "Cathedral Gardens" as part of Streets Ahead phase 3 will add greatly to the open space provision in the north centre.

The historic Cathedral Quarter has developed into a vibrant area characterised by arts and culture organisations, bars, restaurants, and with upscale residential at St. Anne's Square. This area is now firmly established but will continue to require encouragement and support to continue along its current trajectory. The potential creation of Business Improvement Districts in the city core can provide an added element of opportunities and city centre management.

The northern edge of the city centre is the least permeable, defined by the major road infrastructure of the Westlink and M3. There is a danger that, with the construction of the York Street Interchange, the barrier between the city centre and the communities to the north will become even more pronounced. Innovative and interesting ways must be found to penetrate this barrier and foster connections through the concrete of the interchange.

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Opposite Page:

1 St. Anne's Square (Belfast City Centre Management)

2 Commercial Court, Cathedral Quarter (Flickr /Woody Hanson)

This Page:

1 Buoys Park (Urban Strategies Inc.)

2 Hill Street, Cathedral Quarter (Urban Strategies Inc.)

3 Under the M3 by Donegall Quay (Urban Strategies Inc.)

4 The MAC (Flickr / Joseph Magowan)

Pic Below: Ulster University York Street campus, artist's impression (Belfast City Council)

The Lagan Corridor

The River Lagan is underplayed in the city centre. It is a largely negative space at the edge of the traditional core, lacking in the drama and celebration that other cities bestow on their waterfronts. The bridges are utilitarian rather than iconic, and there are not enough of them. Recent investment in quality public spaces such as Donegall Quay is a step in the right direction, but the river remains too hard and too serious, with not enough green or playfulness. There is nowhere for patrons of St. George's Market to sit and eat their breakfast and watch their children play on a Sunday morning, and nowhere for office workers at Lanyon Place or delegates at Waterfront Hall to chat over lunch. Whilst there are sections of a riverfront promenade, they are not fully connected into a continuous network. The recreational possibilities of the water itself are ignored; in this lower section of the river there is a complete absence of water activity. Overall, the river's enormous potential as a recreational and public space asset for the centre remains unrealised.

It is all the more important that the River Lagan receives proper treatment because it is no longer the edge of the city centre. Significant development has taken place in Titanic Quarter over the past 10 years, including the introduction of Belfast's biggest tourist attraction, Titanic Belfast, as well as hotels, apartments, Titanic Studios, Belfast Metropolitan College's Titanic Quarter Campus and the Northern Ireland Science Park. This has resulted in Titanic Quarter playing a significant employment (in terms of providing choice to occupiers), tourism and accommodation role in the City. Titanic Quarter is also a key site for Grade A office space. The Harbour has increasingly become a popular docking point for cruise liners bringing tourists into the city and there are plans in place to expand the capacity of this gateway into Belfast and the region. As Titanic Quarter continues to evolve and diversify its offer, and as Queen's Quay, Odyssey Quay and Sirocco begin to develop, bringing these tourists into the city centre through improved connections will be essential.

Opposite Page:
River Lagan (Belfast City Council)

This Page:
1 Donegall Quay - Obel Tower (Belfast City Council)

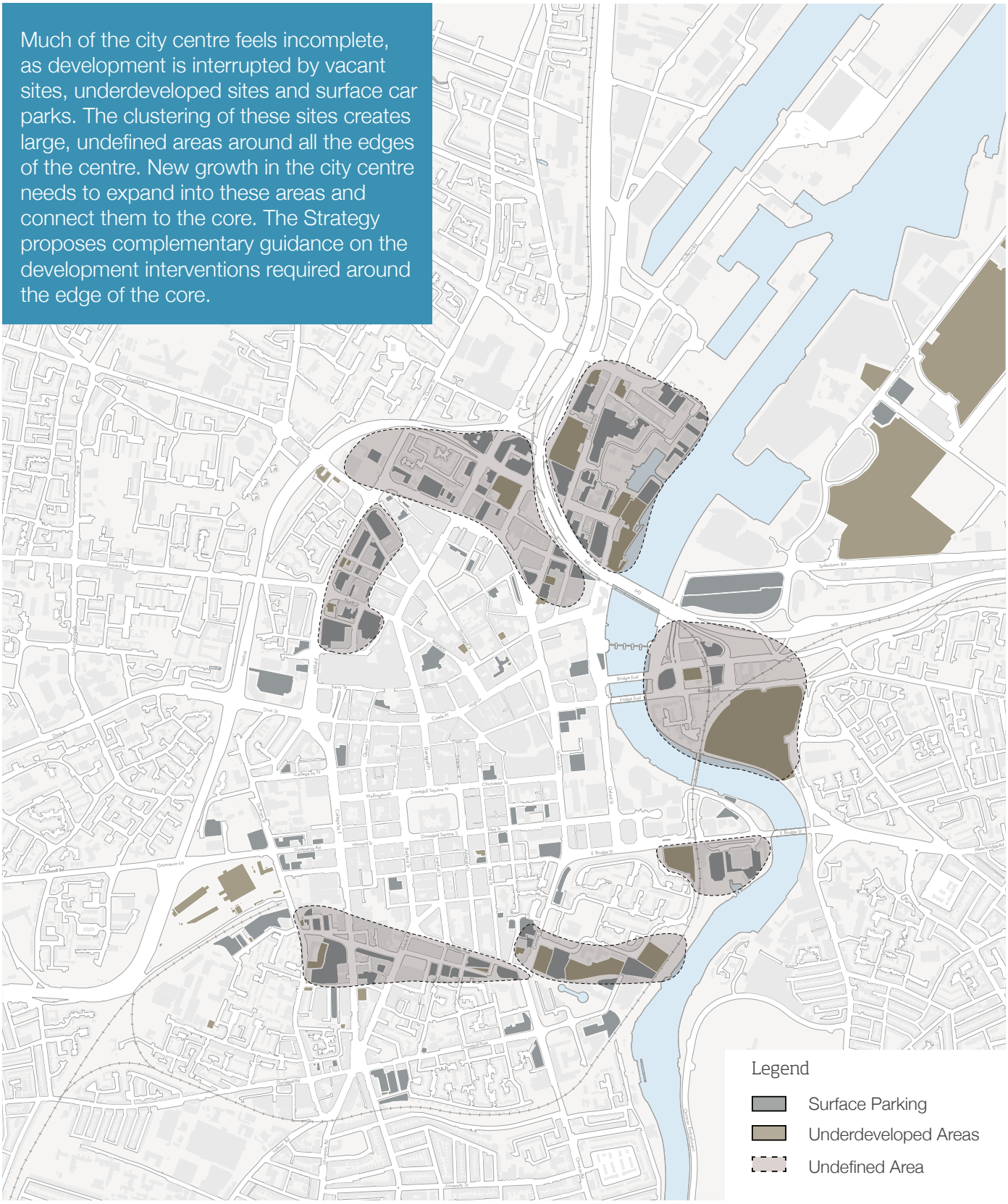
2 Lanyon Place (Belfast City Council)

3 St. George's Market (Belfast City Council)

Pic Below: Titanic Quarter (Flickr / Miss Copenhagen)

Underdeveloped Areas

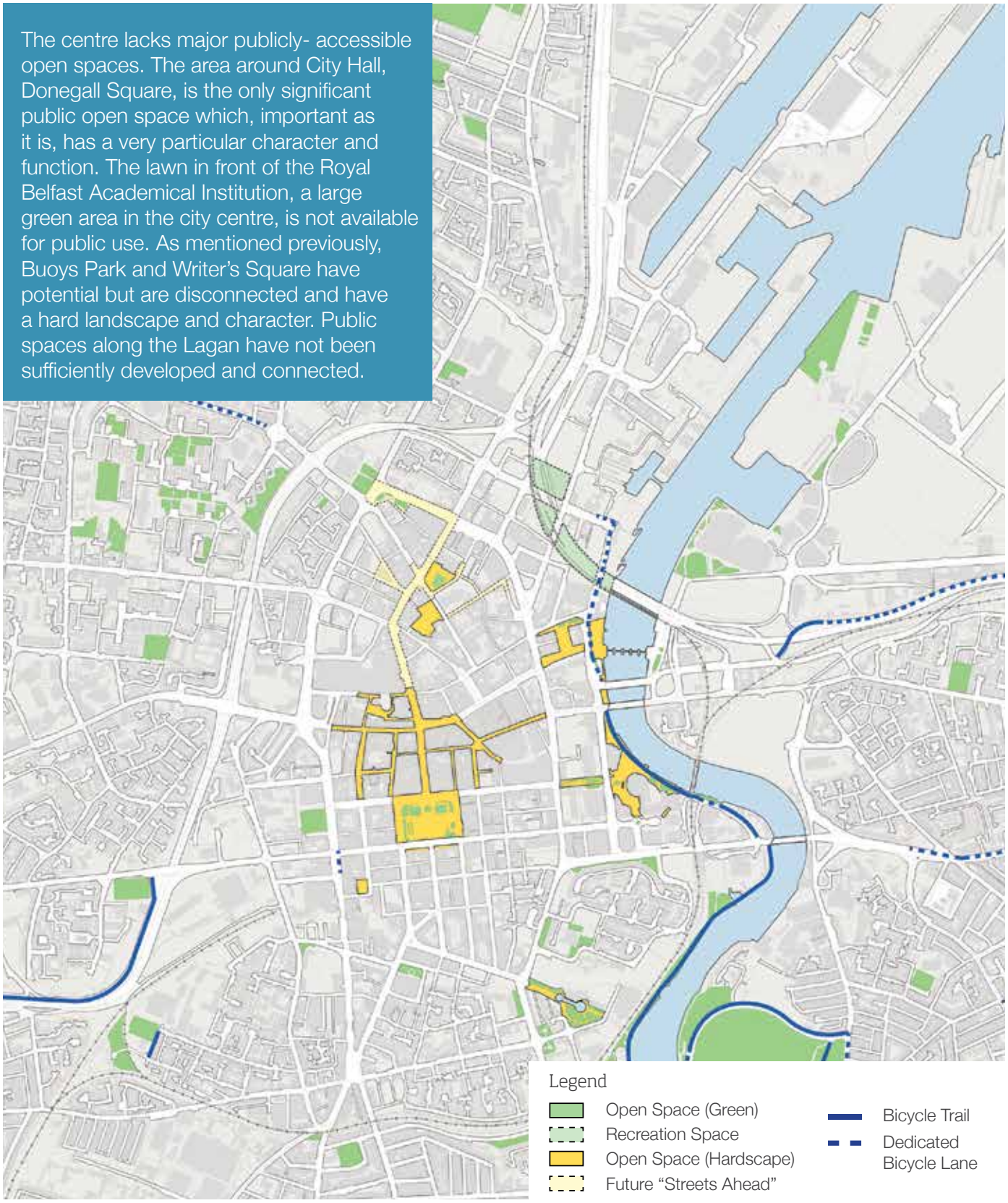
Much of the city centre feels incomplete, as development is interrupted by vacant sites, underdeveloped sites and surface car parks. The clustering of these sites creates large, undefined areas around all the edges of the centre. New growth in the city centre needs to expand into these areas and connect them to the core. The Strategy proposes complementary guidance on the development interventions required around the edge of the core.



Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Lack of Open Space

The centre lacks major publicly- accessible open spaces. The area around City Hall, Donegall Square, is the only significant public open space which, important as it is, has a very particular character and function. The lawn in front of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, a large green area in the city centre, is not available for public use. As mentioned previously, Buoys Park and Writer's Square have potential but are disconnected and have a hard landscape and character. Public spaces along the Lagan have not been sufficiently developed and connected.



Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Poor Connections

None of the city centre's component parts are geographically very distant from each other, but they often feel separated due to poor physical connections. Likewise the neighbourhoods surrounding the city centre – Carrick Hill, Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, The Markets, Shankill, Divis and others – are cut off from the centre by hard physical barriers, creating perceptual as well as physical boundaries. City Quays, a key location for much needed Grade A office development in the short term, is separated from the core by the M3. The M2, M3, Westlink, rail lines and River Lagan despite their respective purposes for transporting people and goods, all play a defining and dividing role.

Major arterial routes within the city centre also create barriers. The scale and width of roads is too great, the quantum of tarmac is too high, as is the ratio of tarmac to green. Whilst the Streets Ahead programme has transformed the quality of the public realm in Belfast's retail core, there is too little urban greenery. The Inner Ring Road's unfriendly pedestrian character divides the centre into inner and outer zones. The north end, in reality only a few minutes from City Hall, feels very disconnected. Oxford Street, with its five lanes of traffic, cuts the core off from the River Lagan. A primary objective of the Regeneration and Investment Strategy must be to reconnect the city centre both within and without.

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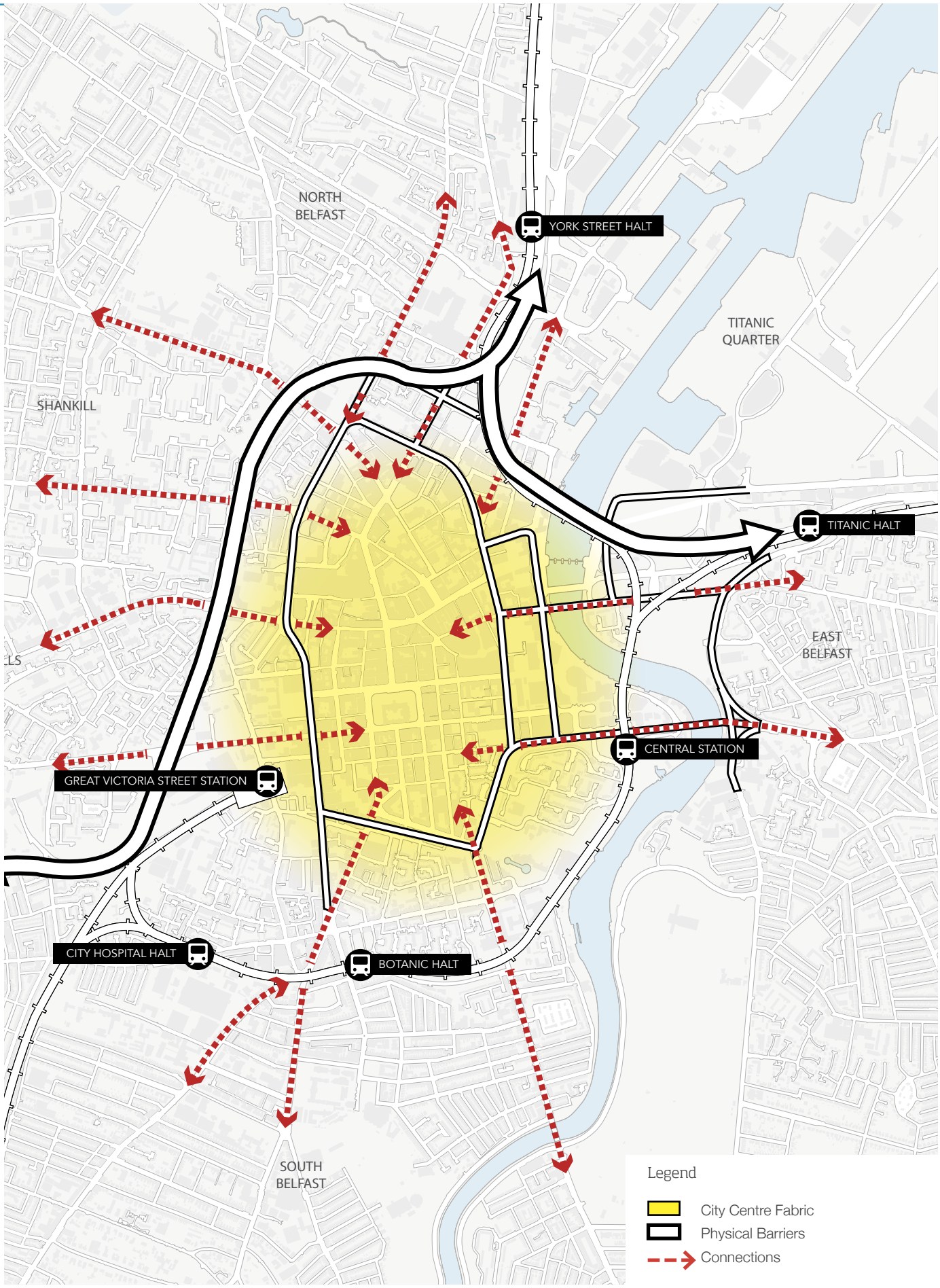
This Page:

1 M3 underpass (Urban Strategies Inc.)

2 York Street, approaching the junction with the Westlink (Urban Strategies Inc.)

3 Donegall Quay view south under the M3 (Urban Strategies Inc.

4 The M3 (Belfast City Council)



Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

2.3. Market Context

Belfast, and indeed the rest of Northern Ireland, have a very clear focus on economic development. This is in part a response to a damaging recession and to a longer term goal of re-balancing a regional economy that had become heavily reliant on the public sector, not least during years of conflict. This strategic context mirrors that enacted by the Programme for Government 2011-2015 which has the creation of a vibrant economy as its number one priority.

Notably, given public spending austerity, the private sector has largely driven the recovery in Great Britain. It is unsurprising then that Northern Ireland is not recovering as quickly as other regions. This imbalance needs to be addressed and it is with an understanding of the underlying property market conditions illustrated within this section that the policies and projects for the city centre have been conceived and developed.

This Page:
River Lagan (Tourism NI)

Employment Sectors

Almost 200,000 employee jobs in Belfast comprise 29% of the total jobs across Northern Ireland, a figure which highlights the economic importance of the city centre to the wider region. However, economic inactivity in 2013 in Belfast (30.9%), was higher than the Northern Ireland average (27.6%) and the UK average (21.9%).

Typically for a regional capital, there is a significant association with public administration. Other notable sectors which are concentrated in Belfast City Centre include: administrative and support services; education, financial and insurance activities; health, information and communication; and professional, scientific and technical activities. The creative industries is one of Belfast's fastest growing sectors with over 1,000 creative businesses based in the city, employing over 17,000 people.

When considering the combined productivity across these sectors, it is apparent Belfast has experienced growth in Gross Value Added (GVA) per head in the last decade.

In terms of sector specific GVA growth, Belfast has been most pronounced in financial and insurance services and information and communications, both of which have seen GVA growth of over 100% since 2000.

Workplace based GVA per head at current basic prices

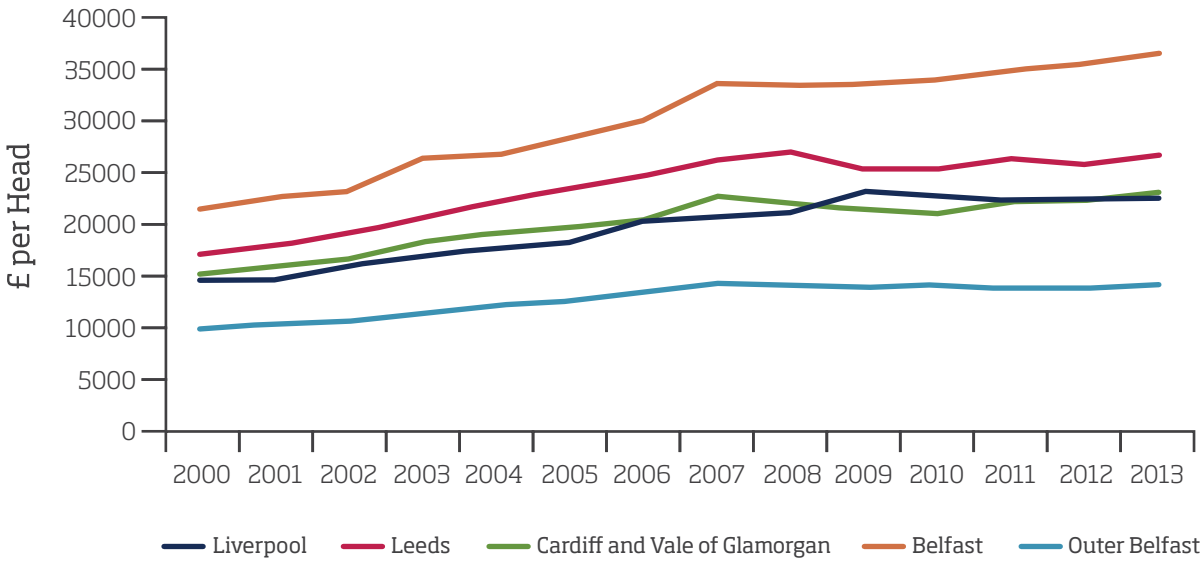


Figure 1: Workplace based GVA per head at current basic prices. (Source: ONS, 2014)

Part of the growth in these sectors is linked to Belfast's success in attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Belfast sits 4th out of 28 UK cities based on number of projects and 3rd out of 28 based on number of jobs created between 2009 and 2011. Notably the list of investors in the city includes international brands such as CitiBank, HBO (Game of Thrones), Fujitsu, Liberty IT, Bombardier and New York Stock Exchange all of whom have established substantial bases in Belfast.

In contrast, Belfast benchmarks poorly in terms of entrepreneurship, using the indicator of business start-up rate. In order to promote the health of a city's economy the dynamism of businesses and entrepreneurs is vital. In this regard Belfast appears to be bottom of the pile; based on business start-ups per 10,000 population, Belfast was ranked 64 out of 64 cities in the UK.

Belfast Workplace based GVA growth between 2002 and 2012 by industry at current basic prices

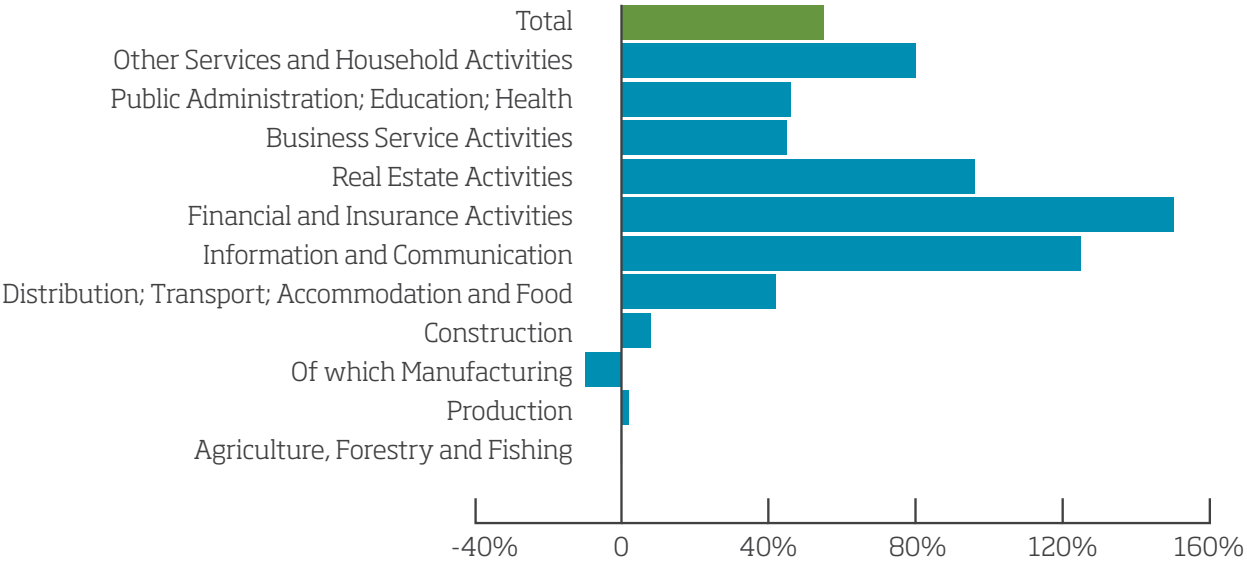


Figure 2: Belfast workplace based GVA growth between 2002 and 2012 by industry at current basic prices. (Source: ONS, 2014)

Opposite Page:
Belfast Allstate office (Flickr / William Murphy)

Office Market Characteristics

Geographically, the core office district within Belfast is dispersed around City Hall. To the south and south east of City Hall there is a focus on Alfred Street, Adelaide Street, Linenhall Street and Bedford Street and to the east of City Hall around Chichester Street and May Street. There has also traditionally been a strong office presence on Great Victoria Street. Over the last decade office development has extended towards the waterfront with significant development taking place around Waterfront Hall. There are three significant areas of office development on the edges of the city centre, at the Gasworks, City Quays and most recently in the Titanic Quarter. These edge-of-centre schemes have secured some significant tenants, particularly from the financial services and technology sectors, but despite the promising commercial sector growth, the majority of the anchor tenants remain public sector occupiers.

The Titanic Quarter, which is master-planned to ultimately deliver 180,000 sq m of business/ office/ R&D floor space, has extended the focus across the Lagan. The Titanic Quarter provides a deliverable and affordable option for occupiers and has been successful in attracting private sector companies such as Citi Group, Kana, Fidessa, Consilium Technologies and Ciena.

The Belfast office market has become increasingly polarised. There is significant over-supply of secondary office accommodation, with agents estimating the quantum of vacant office space at approximately 1.2 million sq ft (Q2, 2013). However, Grade A office space is undersupplied and there is virtually no Grade A space available, or indeed, in the immediate pipeline. This is a major issue, despite some recent developments, that must be a primary focus of this Strategy.

One of the challenges for this sector relates to low prime rental levels and lack of funding which make new schemes unviable. Despite this, there is over 2.5 million sq ft of office with planning permission and local market sentiment is improving in regard to the potential for any further speculative office development. A number of occupier lettings moving through the market in 2015 have shifted rental levels up to around £15.50 per sq ft up from £12.50 per sq ft, where they have been throughout 2013 and 2014. However, this figure does not support speculative development and therefore there will continue to be viability issues that will need to be addressed if supply is to improve.

The public sector is, as mentioned, a very significant employer in Northern Ireland and Belfast. The continuing changes in administration coupled with a need to drive efficiencies in the public sector and reduced space demands will likely create opportunities in the office market. These will however lead to some consolidation and an overall reduction in the occupied footprint of the public sector.

Target: At least 1.5m sq ft of net new office floorspace should be aspired for over the next 15 years, with up to four times as much space moving through the refurbishment market. This is based on analysis suggesting that Belfast has the potential to deliver an average of 100,000 sq ft per annum of net new office floorspace and average take-up rates of 500,000 sq ft per annum.

Retail

Belfast City Centre has supported a significant amount of new retail development over the last decade. There has been considerable success, for example in Victoria Square and the Cathedral Quarter. That success has, when coupled with the economic downturn, increased the vulnerability of other parts of the city centre, notably Donegall Place and the CastleCourt Shopping Centre. The focus of city centre retailing has shifted from its historic location on Donegall Place, Royal Avenue and Castle Street / Castle Place to the covered shopping centres of CastleCourt and Victoria Square.

There are several market characteristics which can be assessed to analyse the health of the retail sector. Belfast's retail market faces a number of challenges which need to be understood and recognised in the strategy.

Catchment

Belfast has a catchment area of 602,000 people which places Belfast 13th out of 22 major cities with a comparable catchment to Nottingham and Edinburgh. The challenge remains in ensuring this catchment population chooses Belfast as its retail destination.

Vacancy Rates

These exceed the UK averages. Reasons that have been cited for this include retailers falling into administration and retailers being more selective and requiring less space. Business rates in prime locations can also be a concern to existing occupiers, a situation which will only serve to further increase vacancy rates in the future. Vacancy is however concentrated, rather than dispersed and could potentially be tackled on a coordinated basis.

Tenant Mix

The success of any retail destination is dependent on the cross-section of tenants within that location. It is important that Belfast's city centre retail offer is unique, in order to differentiate it from other destinations in the Belfast region and Northern Ireland.

Independent retail has an important role to play, as it contributes to this unique retail offer. A significant proportion (43%) of the retail in Belfast City Centre is made up of independent retail. However, in recent years, this type of retail has to some degree migrated away from the city centre to some of the arterial routes, most notably Lisburn Road.

Given Belfast's regional role, there is potential to attract a greater number of retailers - for example, large multi-national retailers and/or department stores. Such retailers are important because they anchor a retail district, drawing clientele who then also patronise other stores in the area. John Lewis has had a significant positive impact on other city centres such as Cardiff and Liverpool and an anchor such as this has been commonly cited as the missing piece in the jigsaw.

Target: Reduced vacancy rate, enhanced tenant mix and renewal of redundant space with new quality provision. There will not be significant net growth in retail floorspace over the strategy timeframe, with the exception of the North East Quarter.

Vacancy Rates	Belfast Count	Belfast %	UK %
Vacant Outlets	202	20.63	12.60
Vacant Floorspace (sq ft)	380,600	15.64	10.69

Leisure, Tourism and Culture

Belfast's unique history, improved hotel offering and proximity to attractions such as the Giant's Causeway have helped to distinguish it from other cities and enabled it to become a global tourist destination. Tourism to Belfast has more than quadrupled over the period 2000 to 2013, with 7.5 million visitor trips in 2013 and a £438 million spend. The city has now established itself as a leading short-break destination.

Whilst tourism indicators show a positive trajectory in terms of visitor numbers and spend, great untapped potential remains. The remarkably successful Titanic Belfast, which has seen visitor numbers of over 2.3 million since opening, presents a reason to visit Belfast, but the city centre lacks additional significant visitor attractions to secure weekend visitors and encourage them to spend more time in the city – nearly half of the visitors to Titanic Belfast do not do anything else in the city when they visit.

The hotel sector is performing very well, with occupancy rates across all sub- sectors currently over 75%.Effectively this means that hotels are fully booked at peak times. Demand is increasing with rising overnight visitor numbers. This is due to further increase when the Waterfront Hall expansion is completed. Numerous new hotels are likely to come on stream in the foreseeable future at Titanic Quarter, City Quays and the traditional city centre and office core. Even when these are taken into account, projected demand would suggest a requirement for a further 1,000 rooms between 2015 and 2020. The requirement will primarily be in the 4 and 5 star sector.

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Target: Double the value of tourism over the next five years. From a base of £438m in 2013, this would result in a tourism spend of £870m in 2020.

This Page:

1 Made in Belfast restaurant (Flickr / Robert Young)
2 Titanic Belfast (Belfast City Council)
3 Belfast 2011 MTV EMA (Belfast City Council)

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Residential

The conflict in Northern Ireland means that Belfast's centre has experienced a history distinct from other UK cities, which has had a fundamental bearing on how the city centre has developed and changed in the last 50 years. City centre living may be one of these divergences; however there is evidence that there is an increasing residential population in Belfast's city centre communities such as Carrick Hill or Donegall Pass.

In recent years, there have been a number of high profile schemes completed within the city centre which have helped reposition the centre as a desirable place to live and demonstrate the city's potential for high quality urban living. New developments around Laganside and within Titanic Quarter have helped bring activity to these declining areas. Further residential development at Titanic Quarter will continue to attract people to this area on the edge of the city centre and will help reinforce its important role for the city. There have also been a number of schemes within the city centre core, most notably at Victoria Square and St Anne's Square.

Despite this, city centre living has not quite achieved the same level of sustainability as in other comparable cities, and has experienced a greater downturn following the economic crisis. There is a perception that for a capital city, Belfast has not been able to attract the city centre residential community that a city of its stature should hold.

As a consequence of the under-developed residential market there are relatively few properties for sale in the city centre. In July 2015, there were only 41 properties available on the main estate agency website for Belfast City Centre. This compares with 231 available for Edinburgh city centre and 290 for Cardiff city centre.

Likewise, for the private rented sector there is also a lack of available housing stock. In terms of availability of property for rent in the city centre, in July 2015, there were only 70 properties available on the main estate agency website for Belfast City Centre. This compares with 926 available for Manchester city centre and 718 for Liverpool city centre.

Future development of residential living in the city centre will need to consider all housing sectors and tenures and will also have to engage with, and ensure connections to, surrounding inner city communities.

Target: At least 6,000 new homes should be aspired to over the next 15 year period. This assumes that the residential market in Belfast has the potential to deliver at least 400 units a year, and given the potential for changes to lifestyle, economic growth and culture there is no reason to think that this figure could not be exceeded.

This Page:
Riverfront residential development (Belfast City Council)

Opposite Page:
City Hall at night (Belfast City Council)

2.4 Transport Complex

Transport and connectivity will play a vital role in the economic growth and regeneration of Belfast by enhancing access for the life-blood of the city centre – its people. It is the movement, connectivity and transport of people that will serve as one of the key elements to catalyse growth and support Belfast as a successful modern city.

Belfast currently has a clearly defined concentric urban form, with few people living within the core area. Beyond the core area there are numerous higher density residential zones which typically connect to the city centre via radial routes shared by all forms of transport.

The city centre itself is compact and flat with an accessible and legible grid pattern of local streets meaning that many journeys could be made by walking or cycling. The main retail and employment areas lie within a five minute walk of City Hall but connectivity and routes for these journeys can be disjointed.

Belfast is a city that has historically been dependent on the private car and the streetscape has evolved to cater to these demands, resulting in road infrastructure that is oversized, over -complicated and a barrier to non-motorised accessibility.

The historic reliance on the car and consequent imbalance of space allocation in Belfast City Centre has recently been challenged by recent changes towards a more balanced approach to pedestrians, public transport and the private car. The project reduced general traffic capacity within the Inner Ring Road and reallocated that space to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport. The changes have created a city which is more welcoming on foot, bicycle and public transport and this is evidenced through decreases in the volumes of traffic entering the city and increases in public transport, walking and cycling levels.

However, there are still issues that need to be addressed on accessibility and car parking and our future plans will require a balanced approach to all forms of transport. The recently introduced Belfast Bike Share Scheme has attracted impressive numbers of users which has made a noticeable impact on the mix of transport modes using the streets and roads in the city centre.

Road Network

Belfast City Centre is served by a comprehensive road network, the basic structure of which is a series of radial routes converging on the Inner Ring Road which encircles the city centre, with the exception of the south where it is incomplete. Several major national motorways (M1, M2, M3) also pass in close proximity to the city centre providing access to it from a number of junctions.

On a number of key 'gateway' approaches to the city centre, the road infrastructure presents an impermeable and unnecessary barrier to non-motorised accessibility. This is especially true of the approaches from the north (York Street Interchange) and the east (Queen's Quay and the 'shatter-zone' further east) as well as the localised points where urban roads cross strategic roads such as the Westlink.

The city centre acts as a convergence point for the arterial routes leading from the Outer Ring Road (A55) in the suburban area of Belfast. Working in partnership with Transport NI and other partners, there is an opportunity to explore how to simplify and 'untangle' some of the city gateway areas through the removal of unnecessary flyovers and reassignment of some traffic links from one-way to two-way. This rationalisation of sections of road will be further assisted when the York Street Interchange is complete and strategic through traffic is re-routed away from the city centre environment.

This Page:

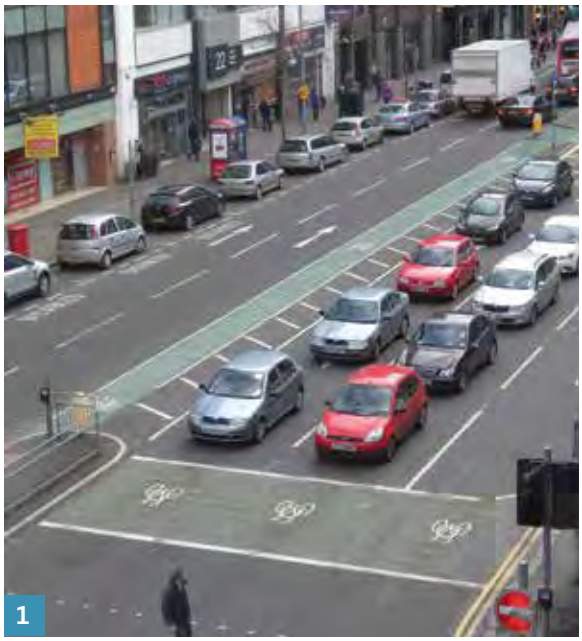
1 Approach from the east - the Queen's Quay 'knot' (Google Earth)

Pic Below: Oxford Street near Waterfront Hall (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Walking

The grid network of streets and the availability of crossings mean that the compact city centre is relatively easy to walk around. Recently installed pedestrian signage and mapping helps to create a legible area, nearly all of which lies within a 10 minute walk of City Hall. It is only as walking journeys extend to the margins of the city centre – the Inner Ring Road, the River Lagan, the Westlink and corresponding major road junctions – that this accessibility begins to deteriorate. Pedestrians are funnelled through pinch points and required to use limited, designated crossing points which affect the directness, ambiance and journey times of walking routes. Despite being relatively close to City Hall, emerging development areas such as Titanic Quarter and City Quays feel beyond walking distance due to these barriers.

The primary scope for improving walking lies in ensuring routes are direct and benefit from good quality public realm treatment. At key crossings and pinch points, the use of traffic calming and enhanced junctions can improve the pedestrian experience.



This Page:
1 Great Victoria Street (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Pic Below: Castle Lane pedestrianisation (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Cycling

Cycling around Belfast is currently more challenging than walking and the routes are less complete. Routes come to an end without warning, require frequent stopping and vary in style, colour and signage. There is the feeling of a network but one that has not been joined up. There are, however, a number of key routes such as the River Lagan and the Comber Greenway which provide good levels of route continuity and are popular for both utility and leisure cycling journeys.

The potential for cycling is significant and its popularity continues to grow with the introduction of the Belfast Bike Share scheme. The destinations that can be reached within 15 minutes of City Hall include not just the city centre but also many of the densely populated inner suburbs, employment centres, and the universities and colleges, making cycling the quickest option for a range of daily journeys.

There is the need to complete the network that connects to the city centre – tackling the current discontinuities to create a complete and legible network. Within the city centre there is the scope to reallocate space on key routes and provide a city centre environment where cyclists can move quickly and directly.

This Page:

1 Existing cycling conditions (Urban Strategies Inc.)

2 Nelson Street looking south under the M3 overpass (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Connectivity

An important characteristic of the city centre is that it is compact, which should lend favourably to a high level of connectivity. However, there are existing barriers to connectivity that inhibit movement. These barriers are a combination of adjacent roads, the River Lagan and railway lines that intersect the city area. The key to softening the severance created by these barriers is to seek ways to increase their permeability whilst allowing existing movement to be maintained. This can be achieved through the introduction of:

- Super-crossings at high demand locations.
- Improvements to a number of junctions along the Inner Ring Road.
- Additional cycle ways.
- Simplification of the existing road structure.
- Additional pedestrian bridges over the River Lagan.
- Improvements to existing links to communities across the Westlink and M2 motorway network, such as Peters Hill, Clifton Street, North Queen Street, Divis Street and Grosvenor Road.

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Public Transport

Public Transport in Belfast is provided by 'Metro' local bus services, Goldline regional coach services and the Northern Ireland Railway network. All public transport services are operated by Translink but ticketing and fare structures are not currently fully integrated between the different modes of transport, meaning that passengers are penalised for making multi-modal journeys in some instances.

Mirroring the road network, most 'Metro' bus services are radial, operating on twelve key routes and travelling to either City Hall or Upper Queen Street. The services provide a high frequency of 5-10 minutes on core parts of the network and operate seven days a week with extended operating hours. Recent road alignment changes have delivered significant road space reallocation for buses which has been reflected in an increase in patronage of 4% between 2010 and 2013, in contrast with many bus networks in UK cities.

Dedicated buses also serve a number of Park and Ride sites on the periphery of the city, providing onward travel to the city centre. These services are well used and enable journeys that are not on core routes to be made by public transport.

Northern Ireland Railways provides a network of stations of which seven lie within the central urban area of Belfast. The primary terminus station serving the city centre is Great Victoria Street. Located to the west of City Hall, this station is within ten minutes' walk of the majority of the city centre and plans for a significant upgrade as the Belfast Transport Hub are being developed.

There is also a new and exciting prospect for public transport – Belfast Rapid Transit (BRT). This public transport service will be a high frequency service, running along major corridors initially to east and west Belfast, as well as the Titanic Quarter. This new system will run high capacity, high quality vehicles, stopping at dedicated halts approximately every 500 metres. It is anticipated that the priority attributed to this new service will encourage significant modal shift, as well as increasing access for commuters and tourists outside the city area.

Belfast Rapid Transit (BRT) will be fully functional by 2017, with plans for a potential north-south route to follow, those services being functional by approximately 2021/2022. However, it is recommended that this timeline on the north-south services is accelerated if possible in order to minimise disruption, capitalise on the opportunity and realise the benefits BRT can bring to the city. A complete BRT network, integrated into a galvanised public transport system would not only provide alternatives to using the private car in the city centre but would also connect the surrounding communities to the city centre with an enhanced public transport experience.

Another important element of public transport in Belfast is the black taxi service. Black taxis provide key community connections to the city centre, that also operate on a share basis in some areas to allow the service to be maximised. It is envisaged that black taxis will also be integral as feeder services to the proposed BRT system. Black taxis have also become a popular tourist attraction, allowing tourists a guided tour of historically significant parts of Belfast.

This Page:

Public transport in Donegall Square (Belfast City Council)

Car Parking

Transport NI have been monitoring car parking levels in the city centre by conducting biannual surveys of the Belfast area, enabling changes in parking levels to be measured specific to each car park. There are currently in excess of 10,000 publicly available off-street parking spaces in and around Belfast City Centre in addition to extensive on-street parking and numerous private car parks. The provision of these spaces is fragmented into a number of typically low capacity surface car parks owned and operated by a range of stakeholders with inconsistent pricing and information.

The result of the current situation is often that parking is confusing, that occupancy of the total available spaces is relatively low but that parking spaces can be hard to find, leading to significant volumes of traffic searching between car parks and increasing city centre traffic levels.

To resolve these issues an integrated parking strategy and action plan will be developed, recognising the influence of parking supply on vehicle volumes in the city centre. It will seek to ensure appropriate provision and location of parking which will support the vitality of the city centre by managing the total number of spaces and, where possible, locating these in high capacity multi-storey facilities around the Inner Ring Road. Consideration will be given to how technology could be used to help guide drivers from approach routes to parking spaces by comprehensive, real-time parking information, eliminating the need to search for a parking space.

This Page:
Car park, Gresham St. (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Opposite Page:
Car parks on the unfinished South Link of the Inner Ring Road (Urban Strategies Inc.)

DAYS HOTEL

Titanic Belfast (Urban Strategies Inc.)

03
Policies for the City Centre

03
Policies for the City Centre

Eight policies have been identified for the city centre, covering the eight areas of intervention considered most essential to its success. The eight policies address the universal elements of a thriving city centre as well as challenges and conditions that are unique to Belfast.

The policies were identified based on discussions with stakeholders about the health of Belfast City Centre and what it is lacking in a city of its size and stature. Naturally, implementation of the eight policies will be subject to the satisfaction of overarching legislation, policies and guidance that exist to protect the environment. A series of opportunities listed at the end of each policy and elaborated in Section 4 suggest some practical interventions to implement the policies. Five Special Action Areas are later identified, where integrated application of these policies should take place in the short term.

This Page:
Regents Place, London (Dennis Gilbert)

3.1 Increase the Employment Population

Belfast is a major European city. Like many cities of its size, its economy is changing, reflecting the long-term structural changes in the global economy. The transformation from a manufacturing and industrial economy to what is increasingly a knowledge economy has important implications for a city centre because it changes its primary source of economic growth. For a centre to succeed it must attract high quality employment in an environment where cities increasingly compete against one another. The knowledge economy is looking for a sympathetic working environment, an advantageous cost base, good communications and access to a well-trained workforce. The primary private sector components of the knowledge economy are professional, management and financial services, IT and communications; on the public sector side are government, health and education services. This is a work force that operates in office buildings with increasingly high demands for technology, efficient layouts and attractive neighbourhood amenities. The primary areas of growth for Belfast's centre should be focused on the private sector, as public sector growth is restrained and pressure continues to decentralise public employment.

How does Belfast's office sector compare with those in other cities and what are the strategies for growth? Belfast benefits from very low rents compared to other UK cities, one of the reasons it has recently been successful in attracting new IT and professional service employment. The low rents are however an indication of relatively low demand, presenting difficulties in supporting new office construction. That lack of new city centre office growth is exacerbated by the fact that much of the office stock in the traditional office core south of City Hall is in older buildings not appropriate for modern working environments. Whilst increasing the office population will help to fill these spaces, the possibility of selective replacements to reduce redundant stock and create opportunities for new Grade A office development should be examined. Encouraging the upgrading of existing office space and other buildings to Grade A standards should also be considered.

The primary private sector components of the knowledge economy are professional, management and financial services, IT and communications; on the public sector side are government, health and education services.

Cost pressures on knowledge economy jobs are increasingly severe and the high concentration of such employment in expensive London and South-East England locations could represent a major opportunity for provincial cities offering an attractive alternative. Belfast must position itself in relation to centres like Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff and Liverpool and determine how to maximise the competitive advantage of its value offer of competitive rental and labour costs and high quality of life. Renewal of the city centre with improved transport access, an attractive public realm, a good retail offer and a sense of buzz and activity will complement these cost advantages.

Much recent office development has taken place in Titanic Quarter and City Quays and the surrounding harbour, areas that are adjacent to but outside the city's traditional core. Many UK cities have similar patterns of dispersed office development in and adjacent to their centres – Manchester City Centre and Salford Quays being a very comparable example – indicating that new office tenants were not able to find suitable space in the core and that office employers and workers did not have a strong preference to be located in the centre. This dispersed office development pattern can detract from the vitality and

attractiveness of the core. However, the example of Manchester and Salford, whose office districts are much more separated than in Belfast, suggests that what may initially be perceived as competing office clusters can evolve to become a complementary offer. Improved physical connectivity to the city centre will help bring important employment areas closer to the city centre including Titanic Quarter Studios, Northern Ireland Science Park, Titanic Belfast and the growing Belfast Harbour and City Quays area. Shrinking the perceived distance and barriers between Titanic Quarter, City Quays and the traditional office core with better river crossings, improved pedestrian connections and high quality streetscaping can help these disparate office districts present as one appropriately varied offer to the outside investor and tenant.

At the same time, the traditional office core must not be neglected. Appropriate locations to revitalise the traditional office core with new Grade A office space should be identified.

Furthermore, the public sector could also have a role to play in de-risking private sector investment in Grade A office construction in this part of the centre.

In the longer term there is an opportunity to create a prestige office district adjacent to the Belfast Transport Hub on Great Victoria Street. At the gateway to Belfast for a projected 13 million users by 2030, there are a number of potential office sites, including the current premises of the BBC, which would become vacant should the organisation decide to relocate. This location offers the best opportunity for a Grade A office cluster close to the traditional office core with excellent access, both within Belfast and to the rest of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Opportunities

- Develop a comprehensive knowledge economy marketing programme for the city centre with appropriate inducement packages directed at 'near-shoring' back office functions in the city centre and other potential office sectors.
- Identify key Grade A office sites in three locations and prepare them for development, including:
  - Traditional office core between Great Victoria Street and Bedford Street
  - City Quays
  - Titanic Quarter.
- Examine the opportunity for selective demolitions of redundant stock to facilitate Grade A office construction.
- Consider ways to encourage the upgrading of existing office space to Grade A standards.
- Undertake a feasibility study/pilot project to determine how Belfast City Council could de-risk private sector investment in Grade A office construction.
- Support the creation of a prestige office cluster adjacent to the Belfast Transport Hub by giving the station a presence on the street and identifying and preparing sites for Grade A office development.

3.2 Increase the Residential Population

Whilst there are a number of existing communities on the edge of the core area of Belfast City Centre such as Sailortown, Carrick Hill, Sandy Row, the Markets and Donegall Pass, Belfast has a low overall city centre residential population in comparison to other cities. A significant residential population is highly important for the successful functioning of a city centre, providing a home for the knowledge workers on whom the new office sector is dependent. That new population is also key to establishing a high value market for downtown retail, restaurants and entertainment and contributing to the general level of activity in the city centre.

No solid market for private sector housing has yet been established in the centre; the city largely missed the dramatic wave of higher density apartment development that occurred in most UK and Irish cities in the decade before the recession. However the fact that Belfast trails comparable cities in city centre residential population does suggest an unrealised opportunity. Belfast ought to have a city centre population of several thousand. The challenge is to establish strong market confidence in the centre, something which has been lacking to date. Experience in other cities has shown that city centre apartments are typically lived in by younger newcomers to the city and by existing city resident empty nesters. The focus on increasing knowledge economy employment and the reality of continuing demographic change suggest a potential market from both sectors.

Both groups will be demanding in terms of the nature of the housing provided, the quality of the immediate urban environment and the confidence that their investment is secure. The private rented sector may be a logical growth market and a good way to build confidence in the city housing market.

Particular parts of the centre, most promisingly along the river, should be prepared for new market-oriented housing development, either as stand-alone housing or as part of mixed-use developments. On the east side of the river the schemes for Titanic Quarter, Queen's Quay, Odyssey Quays and Sirocco all contain a significant residential component, and suitable sites for one-off apartment or

This Page:
Titanic Belfast (Tourism NI)

rental housing development also exist in the inner-west of the city core. Available publicly-owned sites should be marketed in this context where possible, and development of key privately-owned sites should also be supported. Market and Development Briefs should be prepared for key residential sites, and if necessary financial models should be prepared to underpin and support funding package applications (e.g. Build to Rent for private rented housing).

Conversion to residential may be the answer to the centre's vacant upper floor space, particularly in the fine heritage buildings of the retail core. These spaces tend to be inefficient for most office uses, but appeal to the young professional sector who are looking for an authentic urban experience. Hostels, hotels and most promisingly student housing should also be considered and incentivised to make use of and breathe new life into this under-utilised asset.

City centre living is 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 "buzz" of the city centre is as important to increasing the residential population as ensuring there are appropriate sites for development.

There is a need to ensure that future city centre residential developments are appropriately located and contribute to the creation of balanced communities. Such a strategy could initially focus on quality market housing to ensure that a market can be firmly established and address the imbalance that currently exists in the city centre's residential provision. Emerging DSD and DOE planning policy regarding developer contributions and the existing requirements for social and affordable housing will ensure that an appropriate mix of affordable units is provided as new market housing is developed. The aim is to stimulate the private sector in order to encourage the development of a self-sustaining quality residential market environment that provides a mixture of tenures and meets the range of needs of a growing city centre population. Care should be taken to bridge the divide between the centre and its adjoining communities.

The opportunity for appropriate student housing should be explored in suitable locations and there is certainly development interest in this sector. Student housing should be carefully directed, located and managed. In March 2014 the Council worked with city partners to develop a Framework for Student Housing and Purpose Built Student Accommodation. The Framework promotes consideration of student housing proposals with particular focus on proximity, design, management, impact and need. The Council will continue to work on developing a balanced approach to student housing in the city.

This Page:
Grand Canal Dock Apartments, Dublin (Flickr / Michael Foley)

Opportunities

- Identify key residential sites and prepare market and development briefs, in discussion with landowners. If necessary, prepare financial models to underpin and support funding package applications.
- The Council will continue to develop a balanced approach to student housing in the city including consideration of planning policy and other mechanisms to ensure this type of development is located in suitable locations and the many associated benefits can be maximised.
- Remedy any key deficiencies in the city centre living environment, through improvement of food shopping, day-care, open space and sense of security.
- Identify well-supported, social housing opportunities along the major roads leading into the centre.

3.3 Manage the Retail Offer

Retail activity in city centres across the UK is undergoing fundamental change. The competition from out-of-centre shopping, new format retail and e-retailing has the potential to provoke dramatic reductions in the requirement for conventional city centre retail space. These trends require that city centre retail management be highly directed and realistic.

Another factor identified by retailers as being at play in Belfast City Centre is comparatively high rates relative to rent. City centre retailers find this challenging and a balance must be struck as, at a certain point, prohibitively high rates could deter potential businesses. Opportunities for rates relief schemes, encouraging start-ups and attracting new businesses into the city centre will be encouraged.

The opening of Victoria Square has been instrumental in closing the retail gap between Belfast and comparable cities. However, the concurrent decline of Donegall Place into a street of discount retailers and mobile phone shops is a trend that must be reversed. It is Belfast's historic retail spine and primary retail showcase and should present as such. Many cities have had success with retail management strategies which provide a degree of oversight and guidance to direct the retail offering, and Belfast is currently lacking in managed retail floor space in comparison to similar cities.

Determining a viable future for the North East Quarter is critical to conveying a healthy retail message for the centre. The area also contains a wealth of heritage buildings which will need active users to ensure their preservation. Several options need to be explored. If at all possible, this area, or the nearby CastleCourt Shopping Centre should become the site for another anchor store for the city. Such stores are still of major significance in city centres and would provide a step change for the retail core. Without underestimating the planning and financial implications of directing a department store to the centre, the experience of Cardiff and Bristol is instructive; one proactively secured John Lewis in its centre, the other let it leave for an out-of-town location, with consequent beneficial and negative impacts on their respective centres.

The Urban Regeneration Potential Study by DSD suggests that there is capacity for such a retail-led development scheme in the centre

and that Belfast has fared better than many other towns in the region and the Republic of Ireland where the economy has been one of the hardest hit within the European context. However, it is unwise in the current climate to rely too heavily on retail-led regeneration. If the retail option is not possible, then a major non-retail user should be sought for the North East Quarter. Should the BBC decide to relocate it would be an obvious candidate for the North East Quarter, although several other good locations exist. A strategy that attempts to fill the block with smaller uses would be encouraged by the addition of an entertainment/leisure or institutional presence, by converting upper floors to housing and by the creation of an interesting public space in the centre of the block.

Perceived barriers to outer-Belfast and Northern Ireland residents accessing city centre shopping must also be addressed. Several retailers have raised the apparent problem of adequate parking to serve city centre retail. Quantitatively, there is more than enough parking. The problem is that it is fragmented into numerous, typically low-capacity car parks owned and operated by different bodies. Rationalisation of parking into larger capacity car parks accessed from the Inner Ring Road would open up development sites and create a much more coherent system. Even without this intervention, the coordinated advertisement of parking availability to visitors to the centre could be greatly improved. New technology can provide information in real time about what spaces are available in which locations.

The introduction of the new east/west BRT service offers a great opportunity to re-brand the centre as a retail and leisure destination for the wider community and an integrated marketing programme to build excitement should be developed. Care must however be taken to ensure that its street design is not perceived to restrict access to the centre. 'Loyalty' programmes, coordinated pricing and validation, again exploring new technologies like a unified city 'app' and other SMART city technology could set Belfast apart in the marketing of its central retail opportunities.

This Page:
Victoria Square Shopping Centre (Tourism NI)

The objective should be to establish a strong, healthy retail axis in the city's core, catering to all market levels and marketing the centre with its own distinctive retail experience. The concerning trends in retail behaviour most threaten conventional shopping, which can create an opportunity for the city centre to offer the kinds of specialty shopping that can be found nowhere else in the urban region. Local, 'artisanal', one-of-a-kind shops should become a cornerstone of the city centre retail offer. Such shopping, supported by a rich array of accommodation, food and entertainment opportunities, provides a compelling longer trip alternative to online or suburban shopping.

One area that could be home to such a distinctive shopping and entertainment experience is the area around Bank Square and Castle Street. Plagued by a high level of vacancy but increasingly home to distinctive restaurants, the area could, with coordinated management and incentives, become a complementary district to the Cathedral Quarter, with its own distinct sense of place and activity.

Opportunities

- Support regional planning strategy and reinforce urban policy favouring city centre retail activity that could direct large department store/anchor store uses to the city centre.
- Develop a refreshed Framework Plan for the North East Quarter that includes a mix of retail and non-retail uses.
- Develop a Donegall Place retail management strategy and potentially, a retail management body.
- Work with major owners and shopkeepers in and around CastleCourt Shopping Centre on strategies to renew the area's retail offer.
- Use the opening of the BRT system as an opportunity for a major re-branding of the city centre shopping and leisure experience that emphasises greater accessibility to communities.
- Develop a unified city 'app' that markets and promotes the city centre by providing information on a range of topics including public transport, parking, events, sales, etc as well as coupons, booking opportunities, etc.
- Develop community policies and grants that encourage the opening of local, artisanal, 'one-of-a-kind' shops, restaurants and entertainment with an initial focus in the Castle St. / Bank Square area.
- Ensure policy supports the retail offer with complementary uses such as accommodation, food and entertainment.
- Develop and implement a city centre parking strategy involving consolidation of car parks and real time advertisement of parking availability.

3.4 Maximise the Tourism Opportunity

Tourism is a critical industry for a contemporary city centre and one in which Belfast has displayed impressive growth, more than quadrupling visitor trips and tourism spend between 2000 and 2013. Meeting facilities, destination attractions, food, retail, hotels and nightlife are an essential part of a city's presentation to the wider world and a great source of employment at a range of different skill levels. The success of Titanic Belfast in marketing the city on an international stage and achieving admirable visitor numbers has clearly opened opportunities for additional and complementary tourism facilities. However, in comparison to other UK and European cities there are not enough reasons to visit Belfast, not enough things to do and the city does not have a distinctive enough brand.

Tourism is a complex, multi-layered business and the centre should cater to as broad a range of visitor/tourist markets as possible. Business tourism is the highest value of all tourist activity, and business-related meetings and events the most remunerative for a city, so the £29.5 million expansion of the Waterfront Hall into a dynamic business destination is an important contributor to such activity. Marketing Belfast as a unique, cost-competitive, multi-attraction, interesting and attractive place for business meetings has to be supported by ensuring the city's offer is as compelling as those of its principal competitors – Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Dublin, Cardiff and Glasgow. Belfast is however not yet a major player, its potential market held back by the lack of direct European and international connectivity from its airports. The proximity of George Best Belfast City Airport to the city centre is an unusual advantage and one that should be used in marketing Belfast for business tourism.

Belfast is in need of a projected 1,000 more hotel rooms between 2015 and 2020, primarily in the 4 and 5 star class, and locating some of these in a conference hotel in proximity to Waterfront Hall would be desirable. Targeting a luxury brand that business travellers and tourists would be accustomed to in other places would add credibility to the city as a major destination. Some tourists, however, prefer a hotel experience that is unique to the location, and this is another gap in Belfast's hotel sector. Converting vacant or underutilised historically significant buildings into hotels with a strong local identity would serve the dual purpose of revitalising existing heritage fabric and providing a uniquely Belfast hotel option.

This Page:
Edinburgh Fringe Festival (Wikimedia)

After the justly popular Titanic Belfast, the city centre does not contain any museum, gallery or similar destination of national or international stature when compared with the cultural offering of equivalently-sized European cities. Nor is there any other distinctive destination attraction unique to the city – like VeloCity in Manchester or the new Birmingham Library – that could enrich the visitor experience and lengthen tourists' stay in Belfast. Serious thought should be given to the opportunity to create a significant and complementary star attraction, preferably by making use of a piece of Belfast's built heritage, such as the Customs House, Crumlin Road Courthouse or the North East Quarter. One promising opportunity that should be explored is a contemporary visual art museum with both local and global programming. Modern art has proved a strong draw in other cities – local content could give it a special edge. That said, Belfast does have a multiplicity of very high quality attractions that are simply not on most tourists' radar. The MAC and Ulster Museum, for example, are fine institutions that do not disappoint those who seek them out. There needs to be a concerted marketing effort to make the most of the attractions that Belfast is already blessed with. Improvements to both physical connectivity, harbour cruise dock access, and promotional connectivity are needed to take full advantage of these assets. Some cities, for example, have developed clearly marked "tourist trails" connecting key attractions.

One promising opportunity that should be explored is a contemporary visual art museum with both local and global programming. Modern art has proved a strong draw in other cities – local content could give it a special edge.

There is room to ramp up or re-invent the festival offer in Belfast, placing the city on the emerging circuit of city annual or biennial festivals like those in Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow. Often cities will band together in the delivery of festivals by sharing acts, considerably reducing the cost of festival development. Major festivals can create energy comparable to what Belfast recently experienced with the Giro on a recurring basis.

Whilst the large stadia sports market is more limited and fragmented than in most comparable European cities, several sporting opportunities could be advanced. The stadia developments at Windsor Park, Ravenhill and Casement and sports unique to Belfast within the UK could be attractively marketed. The remarkable landscape immediately around Belfast makes 'adrenalin' sports – rock climbing, 'Tough Mudder' races, mountain biking, white water rafting, kayaking, etc – all very accessible. And the clear interest in the legacy of the Troubles, its artefacts and images, and the history of conflict and peace-making will remain something visitors to Belfast will want to know about. Black Cab tours are a distinctive and increasingly famous component of the tourist experience.

Contemporary tourism is much more than specific attractions or events. The whole city is the destination; its unique feel, character and level of activity become the reason to visit, stay longer and broaden the range and level of expenditure. Belfast has made great strides in this urban tourism opportunity; the Cathedral Quarter, with its rich mix of restaurants, entertainment and streetlife, the Gaeltacht Quarter, with its unique cultural offer, and the special places like St George's Market, symbolising the distinctive and increasingly recognised food culture of the city. The Bank Square/Castle St. area could be developed as a compelling and complementary district with a distinct food, entertainment and artisanal character. All these urban attractions could however still benefit from a significant

'ramping up', as complementary offerings to the well-recognised countryside attractions of Northern Ireland – the Giant's Causeway, the Bushmills Distillery, the scenery of the hills and coast, world class golf and other recreational opportunities. There is potential for some quick wins in this regard that will substantially improve Belfast's attractiveness as a weekend destination. Changing licensing laws so that bars can remain open later and ensuring attractions and facilities are open on Sunday mornings should also be explored.

The city's recent history depressed visitor numbers for decades and recovery only really began with the opening of Titanic Belfast. The market for in-city tourism is growing, especially among young people, but it is highly competitive. Belfast can catch-up, with a 'brand' that clearly differentiates it from its competitors – particularly Dublin. The essence of Belfast's distinctive character needs to be celebrated and clearly articulated to provide a compelling message for why the city centre, in the wider context of Belfast and Northern Ireland, is a place to visit.

Projects

- Work with George Best Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport to understand missing markets and new connections to make Belfast a more competitive option for business conference tourism.
- Identify a significant new tourism destination within the city centre underpinned by a feasibility study or business case.
- Increase the number and draw of large-scale events occurring in Belfast and explore developing a city festival as a member of a growing international circuit.
- Establish Belfast as a destination for 'adrenalin' recreational tourism.
- Work with local organisations to amplify the emerging Belfast brand related to food, music, literary and cultural events, festivals and recreation, with the Castle Street/Bank Square District becoming a distinctive complement to the Cathedral Quarter.
- Investigate the potential of a new event/exhibition/festival space as Belfast's significant new tourist destination using one of the many heritage buildings on offer.
- Develop a promotion strategy for Belfast's existing attractions including marketing and better wayfinding between attractions.
- Identify and implement some 'quick wins'; consider changes to licensing laws and encouraging businesses to open on Sunday mornings.

3.5 Create Regional Learning and Innovation Centres

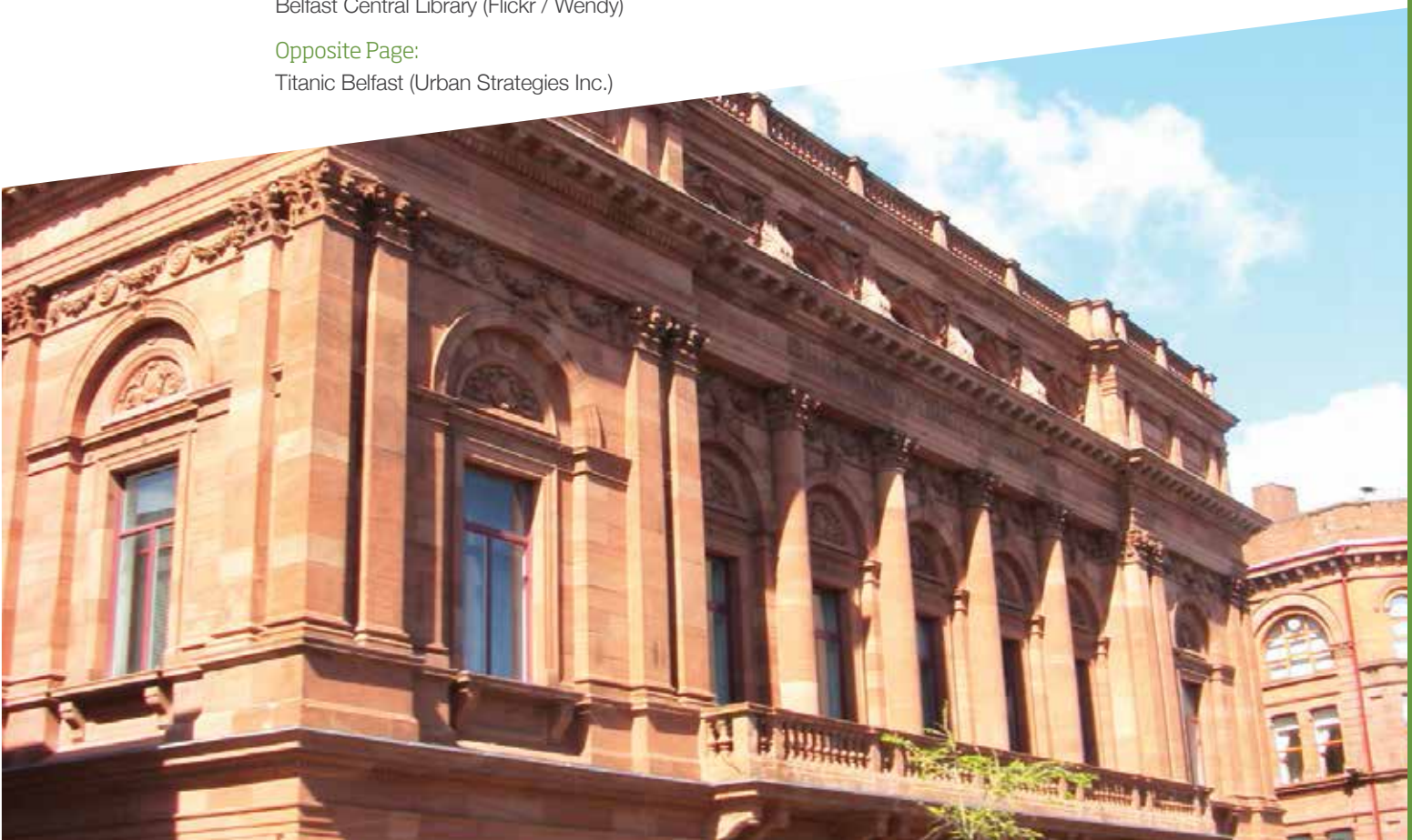
Whilst Belfast is renowned for the quality of its top tier labour force, several studies have identified the presence of a large under-skilled labour pool and noted the relative lack of innovation and entrepreneurial activity in comparison to other cities. Almost 17% of the working age population have no formal qualifications, putting Belfast 62 out of 64 UK cities, and Belfast ranks 64 out of 64 cities in its rate of business start-ups. People, their talent, creativity and energy are the drivers of the modern economy and Belfast must develop the best in its domestic population and attract in-migration of skilled newcomers. Surprisingly often it is the new people in a city who become its most dynamic drivers. Both the Ulster University (UU) and Queen's University are actively seeking international students and that programme should be recognised as a source for new entrepreneurship.

Queens' University is an important part of the education sector in the city. The University plays an important role not only in terms of education and innovation but also via its job creation, employment and tech start-ups as a consequence of its relationship with the NI Science Park, in collaboration with Ulster University. With a significant capital programme in the pipeline it is important that the linkages between the city centre and the University are enhanced.

The relocation of UU enhances the educational offer of the city which already houses Queen's University and Belfast Metropolitan College. UU presents a major opportunity to enhance the skills base available to the city centre. The university's capability in IT, digital media, applied arts and professional services and its extensive outreach and continuing education programmes and connections to many of Belfast's cultural, institutional and business organisations will amplify the already substantial impact of having such a large student and faculty presence in the centre.

This Page:
Belfast Central Library (Flickr / Wendy)

Opposite Page:
Titanic Belfast (Urban Strategies Inc.)



To maximise the benefits of the relocation, these links must be actively targeted, promoted and communicated. The already established Campus Community Regeneration Forum can work to ensure that connections to adjacent communities are well-established, so that the university, and by association the city centre, can be beneficial to the community. Belfast's greatest source of untapped potential lies in the talent of the residents of communities where aspiration and access to education are extremely low. Creating avenues for those who have traditionally been excluded from the labour market to access education and opportunities will simultaneously benefit individuals and the broader economy. In particular, there should be vocational and skills training linked to Belfast's emerging growth sectors. One possibility to further enhance the city centre's role in community educational uplift would be to establish a school in the centre with links to the nearby institutions and businesses.

Compared to other cities, the lower level of innovation and entrepreneurial activity noted in Belfast could be addressed by exploring strategies for more flexible business support structures that similarly placed cities have implemented. Several have created 'cheap, quick, simple' spaces such as incubators for new economic activity. Typically in cleaned-up former industrial buildings, such spaces offer inexpensive, short-term, "bare bones" locations for start-up business, along with an innovation culture and communal support services. Manchester's The Sharp Project, London's iCity HereEast and The Artworks Elephant and Toronto's Wychwood ArtBarns are all useful examples of creative incubator facilities that cater to this low cost/high content market. Not only are these spaces beneficial in terms of their creative infrastructure, they can generate a physical attraction as iconic pieces of architecture that reincorporate elements of a city's industrial past. The many vacant and underutilised sites in proximity to the new UU campus offer an opportunity to create an employment and innovation district that extends the energy of the university and Cathedral Quarter.

The proposed 'Creative Hub' should be further pursued alongside partnership working with the City's Universities and Colleges to develop new approaches to support innovation and collaboration. Opportunities to connect the Creative Hub to the Central Library and Queen's should also be explored, potentially as part of the Central Library's plans for expansion, as libraries in several other cities such as Birmingham, Toronto and Vancouver are becoming the locations for the cutting edge of innovation and information dissemination to the wider population. Should the BBC decide to relocate, a site in this part of the centre is preferred to take full advantage of compatibilities with these institutions.

The provision of innovation/incubator/digital/creative facilities could also be combined with a human capital competition. New York City, in an attempt to jump-start its digital innovation

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sector and to fill redundant downtown office buildings, has instituted a competition with both a cash prize and offer of free space to the most exciting start-ups with the greatest business potential. Consideration will also be given to inventive ways to stimulate innovation such as a competition, possibly for an integrated city centre "app".

This Page:

1 Toronto Public Library - Public Tech Centre with 3D Printer (Pinterest / Toronto Public Library)

2 The Sharp Project, Manchester (Flickr / James Thorp)

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2

Opportunities

- Support the ongoing work of Queen's University Belfast, and the NI Science Park, in terms of its continued investment in the city through education, research and development and job creation with consideration of how the impact of this can be further enhanced.
- Support the Campus Community Regeneration Forum to develop a comprehensive outreach programme between the Ulster University and surrounding communities.
- Manage the connection between city centre business, cultural, professional and institutional communities to ensure targeted skills training.
- Continue to pursue the proposed "Creative Hub" and establish connections with complementary institutions.
- Explore the potential for using the SMART city concept with a potential option being a Belfast city "app".
- Contribute to a site options analysis for potential BBC relocation and work closely with the BBC and partners to facilitate the preparation of a preferred site if needed.
- Develop a masterplan and regeneration strategy for the Ulster University district with a focus on improving community educational connections and fostering the creation of an innovation district.

3.6 Create a Green, Walkable, Cyclable Centre

The new promenades and open spaces along the River Lagan and the landscaping implemented as part of the Streets Ahead programme have made great improvements to the feel and flavour of the city centre and have clearly prioritised the pedestrian environment. City centres have to work on foot, and Belfast has shown excellent direction in making that environment more attractive. The compactness of the centre, and its clear definition by the river and major roads, mean that few places are more than a fifteen minute walk apart.

There are however still too many places that feel too far away, notably the east bank of the Lagan, the northern end of the city centre, City Quays, Titanic Quarter and the surrounding communities, most of which have to be reached after crossing a motorway or rail barrier. What needs to be shortened is the perceived distance, by establishing a lively interesting pedestrian experience along the route. The 'filling-in' of the northern end of the centre with the UU buildings and related activity will transform what is now the centre's least active district.

The introduction of the Belfast Rapid Transit (BRT) system to the centre, with its distinctive vehicles and image, could do much to promote transit as an alternative to driving. A promotion campaign for the new BRT system could emphasise the remarkable comfort, convenience and efficiency it will offer alongside the realisation that nowhere in the centre is more than a few minutes away from a stop – and Titanic Quarter and the Odyssey, now perceptually distant, are easily accessible. It would be prudent to advance the implementation of the north/south line to

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This Page:
St. Stephen's Green, Dublin (Bryan O'Brien / The Irish Times)

demonstrate the comprehensive accessibility of the core by quality transit.

The city centre's flat terrain and relatively wide rights-of-way provide the conditions necessary to enhance and connect the bike network. This should be further exploited to maximise its potential and the benefit of the new Belfast Bike Share scheme. The completion of a system of high-quality bike paths linking the centre to surrounding districts, in particular making use of the riverside trails, would connect many significant destinations, creating, in effect, bike arterials.

The centre is lacking in green space, in tree-lined streets, in the softness that can provide relief in the most densely developed part of a great city. There is a great opportunity to provide a sizeable new open space in the north end by considering option for the parking area around St. Anne's Cathedral for green space and linking it to Buoys Park and Writer's Square and the Streets Ahead Phase 3 proposals. The centre's traditional office core would also benefit from the introduction of a new urban square to function as a café and meeting place for office workers, adding to its amenity and confirming it as the premium office district in the region. Several potential locations for a small square exist and could be realised in conjunction with new office construction. The tired feeling of the district could be turned around with the introduction of "Streets Ahead South" – an extension of the Streets Ahead programme south of City Hall on Linenhall Street.

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Much good work has been done along the river as it runs through the centre, with new landscaping and public spaces such as at Donegall Quay. A more transformative plan for the river corridor is still required, giving it a much stronger presence and establishing it as the major green/blue open space in the city. The plan would include more vertical elements, with major tree plantings and public art, and potential for dramatic new pedestrian bridges linking City Quays to the Odyssey and the Gasworks to Ormeau Park. A reimagining of Oxford Street could create a much needed soft edge between the core and the river. Continuous bike and pedestrian paths along both sides of the river would link to the new cruise ship port in the Titanic Quarter and include signage identifying nearby destinations and distances to the city centre.

Rebalancing the scales between tarmac and soft landscaping on city centre streets must be another priority. Completing the missing South Link of the Inner Ring Road connecting better to the south of the city and to the Transport Hub is a first step. Then the entire ring should be tamed, humanised and greened to reduce severance from adjacent communities. The Inner Ring Road should become a grand tree-lined boulevard, stitching together the centre and its surroundings instead of keeping them apart. With the introduction of the York Street Interchange there will be excess road capacity on some of the worst offending portions, notably the Dunbar Link, that can be reallocated to support cyclists and pedestrians. Great Victoria Street should also be a focus – its public realm made worthy of the gateway status it will hold with the implementation of the Transport Hub. A landscape transformation would add delight to what is now a hard, arterial street. Aligning these aspirations with the intentions of key city partners such as Transport NI will be crucial in developing these ideas for the benefit of the wider city.

Policies for the City Centre

Opportunities

- Develop key bike arterial routes giving access to the centre.
- Ensure bike rental and parking facilities are abundant in the city centre.
- Plan a major new open space in the northern part of the city centre, combining existing open spaces at Buoys Park and Writer's Square and the land around St. Anne's Cathedral.
- Develop a transformative landscape vision for the river corridor through the centre and extending to the Titanic Quarter.
- Consider how the Oxford Street area can better connect to the city centre, to the river, and further east and what opportunities this could bring for Lanyon Place, St George's Market and the new Waterfront Hall .
- Revitalise the public realm of the traditional office core by implementing 'Streets Ahead South'.
- Identify a location for a new public square in the traditional office core.
- Complete and transform the Inner Ring Road by:
  - Completing the redefined South Link
  - Recreating it as a tree-lined urban boulevard where possible, particularly along Great Victoria Street and the Dunbar Link
  - Implementing 'super crossings' at key intersections.

This Page:
River Animation - Portland, OR Pedestrian / Cyclist Bridge (Alta Planning)

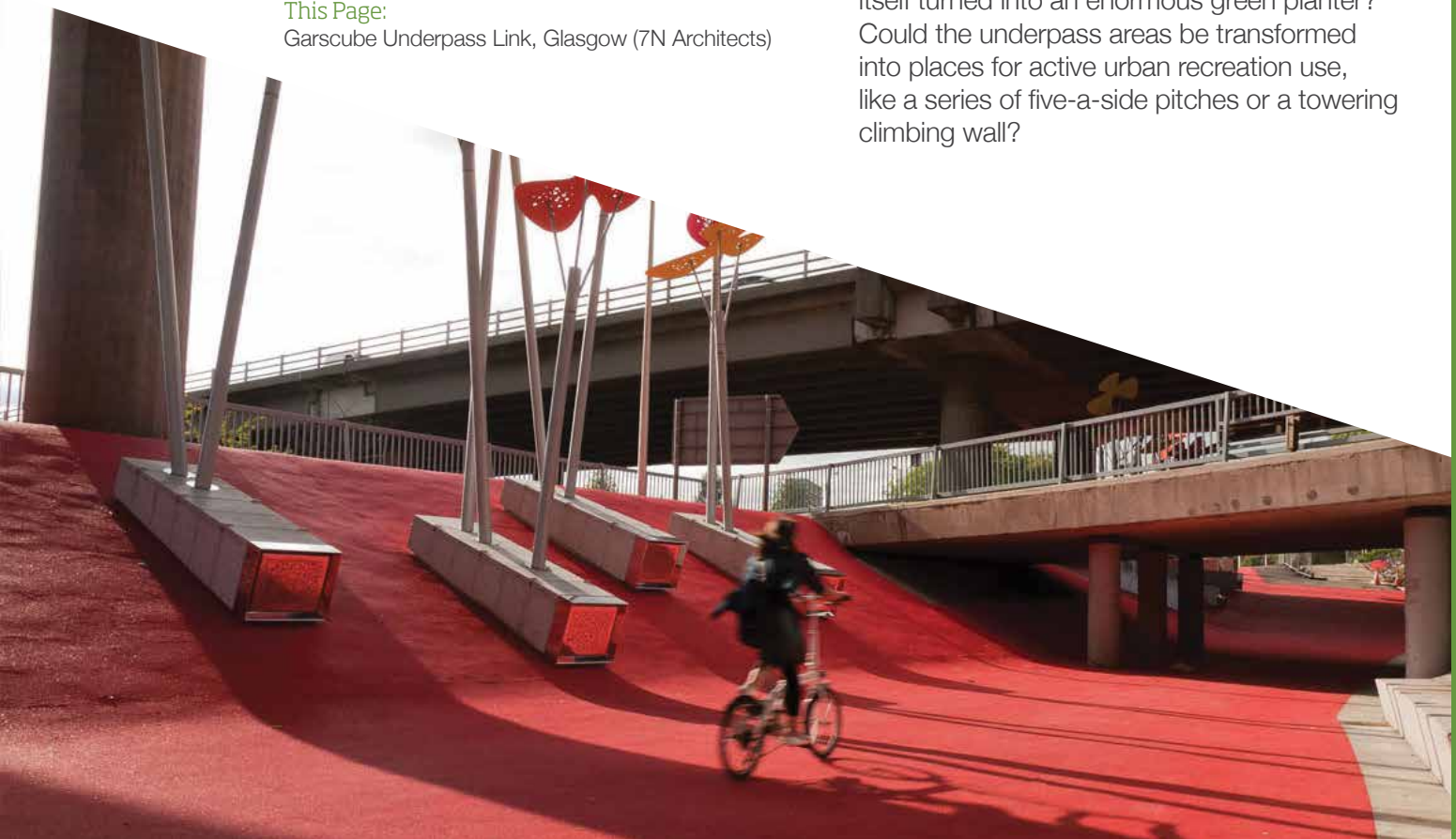
3.7 Connect to the City Around

Whilst the hard boundaries of the river and arterial roads define a compact and identifiable city centre, they also add to its isolation from surrounding communities. If the centre is to belong to everyone in Belfast these physical barriers have to be overcome. There are several important opportunities to re-establish pedestrian, visual, transport and development connections with areas of neighbourhood connectivity (see page 107: Special Action Areas and Neighbourhood Connectivity). These connections can be made through landscaping and tree planting, through the proper urban design of BRT connections and through emphasising visual connectivity. All the corridors leading in and out of the centre are in need of improvement, but priority could first be given to those that lead to unique destinations just outside the centre, like the Crumlin Road Gaol, the Gaeltacht Quarter, Queen's University and the Botanic Gardens, Titanic Belfast, and Ormeau Park. Some development infill opportunities exist along these connections for new residential, community or retail/restaurant uses.

This Page:
Garscube Underpass Link, Glasgow (7N Architects)

Too much of the city centre turns its back on the communities that surround it. Redevelopment and public realm works should ensure a more welcoming design. The improvements envisaged for the CastleCourt Shopping Centre must also incorporate features to soften its relationship to the west; the completion of the South Link of the Inner Ring Road should act as a connector, not a separator, of communities to the south.

At the north of the centre great care must be taken to ensure that the proposed York Street Interchange is designed to facilitate north/south pedestrian, bike and visual connection to the greatest extent possible. Most cities, like Birmingham, are now removing their elevated motorway systems. It is understood that the interchange is needed to alleviate existing traffic around the Inner Ring Road, but there is still an obligation to design it in the most sympathetic way possible. Some "out of the box" thinking is required. Perhaps the pedestrian underpasses could be made truly remarkable with public art, or the interchange itself turned into an enormous green planter? Could the underpass areas be transformed into places for active urban recreation use, like a series of five-a-side pitches or a towering climbing wall?



Policies for the City Centre

The M3 underpass leading to City Quays is in need of similar treatment to properly draw that area into the core and make its office development more attractive. To be even more ambitious, car parks could be replaced with uses such as restaurants, theatres or galleries, bringing activity and with it security, to a now desolate environment. The Shoreditch Railway Arches in London have recently become a hotspot for new restaurants, bars and art spaces. It is not difficult to imagine the M3 infrastructure being used in a similar way.

Two new river crossings, at City Quays/ Odyssey and the planned Gasworks/ Ormeau Park bridge would greatly improve the connectivity between the city centre, East Belfast and the Titanic Quarter and supplement the recently enhanced Lagan Weir pedestrian and cycle bridge. Such developments can also be designed as stylish objects in the skyline, providing wayfinding assistance and contributing to the River Lagan corridor transformation and Belfast's image as a waterfront city.

Opportunities

- Connect the City Centre to the wider city neighbourhoods
- Improve the visual impact and pedestrian connectivity through the M3 and York Street interchange through public art, landscaping interventions and community sports facilities.
- Construct two new pedestrian bridges across the river at City Quays/Odyssey and Gasworks/Ormeau Park.
- Make improved connections to the Crumlin Road Gaol, the Gaeltacht Quarter and Queen's University though streetscaping, signage and infill development.
- Work with the owners of CastleCourt to improve connectivity and permeability from the north and west sides as part of redevelopment.

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3.8 A Shared Space and Social Impact

All of the improvements proposed have a sound economic or urban planning rationale, to bring the centre to the level of competitiveness, quality and sense of place befitting a major European city. Belfast is not, however, an ordinary city and it must also have the centre it needs; a place for everyone from every part of Belfast, a shared common ground. In the context of a divided city, the centre needs to be a place where people can come together to shop, have fun, have a drink or a meal, listen to music and participate in the life of the city around them. The design and management of the centre has to foster that sense of space for everyone – children, students, older people, people from the east, west, south and north. This involves things as simple as being able to sit by the river, have an ice cream, ride a merry-go-round; and things as complicated as major festivals, events and celebrations. The centre needs to focus on what appeals to and attracts all Belfast's citizens. The measure of success for this vision for the centre of Belfast will be that it is a welcoming and attractive place for everyone.

A number of opportunities suggest themselves. Currently the city centre has little to offer children, and as a result parents rarely choose to bring their little ones along on errands or make intentional expeditions to the centre. But the wants of children are simple. A patch of grass for cartwheeling, a jungle gym for climbing, a pop-up stand for snacking – very minor alterations can make the environment much more hospitable to children. Public realm interventions throughout the city centre, but particularly along the river, should keep children in mind, and in so doing will make the city more appealing to people of all ages and physical ability.

Sports and recreation for both youth and adults is another great opportunity. The success of T13 has shown that there is an appetite for such activities in the city centre. The potential for urban sports in underpass areas has already been mentioned. Vacant sites offer another possibility. 'Meanwhile' uses of sites such as Sirocco could turn derelict areas into a public asset while they are awaiting development. In addition to

Opposite Page:

1 Culturlann - Gaeltacht Quarter (Doherty Architects)

2 Samuel Beckett Bridge, Dublin (Wikimedia / Kank)

3 Crumlin Road Gaol, Belfast (crumlinroad.com) ari)

4 London Cycle Superhighway (Flickr / D1v1d)

This Page:

Belfast City Hall (Tourism NI)

inexpensive sports facilities, community gardens and opportunities for passive recreation could be included. Belfast has no shortage of arts, culture and community groups that would be willing to take responsibility for such spaces.

The river itself can be a space that brings people together. People are drawn to water, so why not make the river more than something to look at? Kayaking, paddle boating, floating restaurants, floating art festivals, floating orchestras, light shows – the river is a natural focus for casual, enjoyable, uncomplicated activities that appeal to all.

Fostering the city centre as a shared space is not something that should be left to piecemeal efforts. There is a management role in terms of programming space with activities and events big and small. Ensuring that the centre offers a physical and social landscape that is welcoming and inclusive to everyone is one of the Council's key responsibilities. An appropriate mix of uses should be located in the city centre as part of our overarching aims for shared space. The future of the city centre as a truly shared space will rely on achieving a vibrancy and vitality that can, in part, be fostered through the provision of mixed-use and mixed-sector developments. In order to achieve this we must encourage the development of appropriate community infrastructure and other associated uses to support the variety of sectors and organisations that currently use the city centre as well as attracting new users. Accordingly, in consideration of any project or policy, Shared Space will be addressed and promoted to ensure it is a key consideration for all city developments. Alongside Council's continued investment in all parts of the city through our various funding streams Belfast is experiencing investment in a range of sectors including business, education and research, however, the social impact of this investment must be realised. Council will continue to develop wider programming to ensure social benefit is an integral element of city investments.

Opportunities

- Make public spaces in the city centre friendly for all ages through the design of street furniture, inclusion of playgrounds, etc.
- Locate facilities for informal sports and leisure activities in the city centre.
- In consideration of any project or policy Shared Space will be addressed and promoted to ensure it is a key consideration for all city developments.
- Increase water activity on the River Lagan such as boating, floating restaurants, floating art festivals, etc.

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Opposite Page:
Kayaking in San Francisco Bay (Flickr / City Kayak)

This Page:
1 Five-a-side pitch, Shoreditch, London
(Urban Strategies Inc.)

Pic Below: Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, Belfast
(media.ireland.com)

Culture Night, Belfast (Belfast City Council)

04

Projects and Places in the City Centre

04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

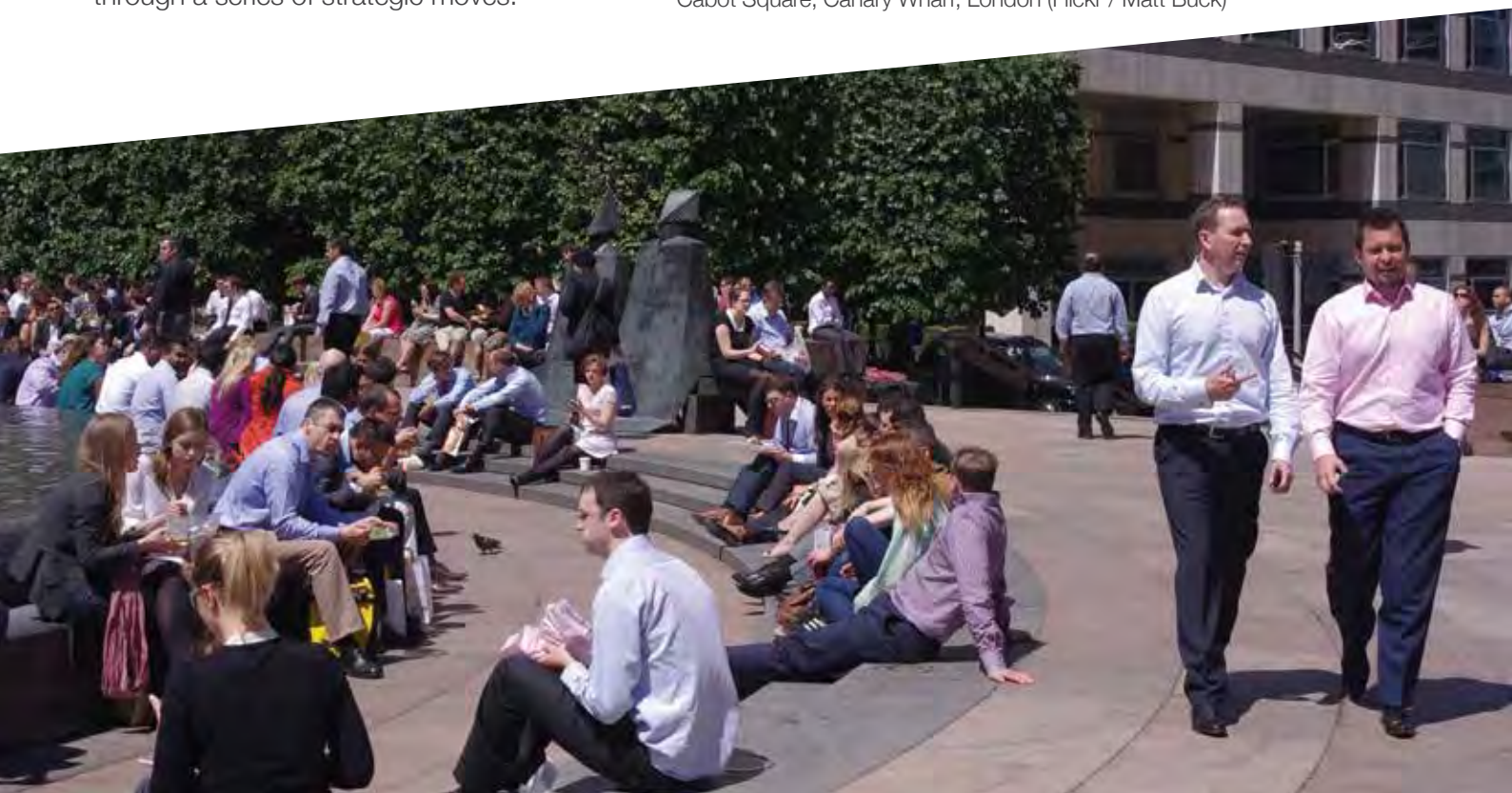
To facilitate the implementation of the eight policies for the city centre a series of key projects have been identified which support the vision for the different districts of the centre within the context of the whole. The projects are intended to focus efforts on discreet initiatives which will help to achieve the policies and create a liveable and economically thriving city. Many of the projects are to be undertaken in partnership with the private sector or other organisations. In key areas of the centre these projects come together to create a critical mass of initiatives that must be coordinated to maximum effect. Five Special Action Areas have been identified at a greater level of detail to help guide shorter term implementation.

4.1 South Centre

Vision

The South Centre is, and should be, the primary focus of Belfast's office sector. As such, it is at the centre of Northern Ireland's knowledge economy, an essential driver of the region's economic growth. In a highly competitive inter-city environment, it must attract high quality employment by providing the kind of spaces that the knowledge economy is looking for. Whilst the city centre has other concentrations of office development, the South Centre must retain its primacy by revitalising its office function through a series of strategic moves.

This Page:
Cabot Square, Canary Wharf, London (Flickr / Matt Buck)



Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Planned/Proposed Interventions

1 The Belfast Transport Hub
2 Great Victoria Street streetscape improvements
3 Donegall Square landscape improvements
4 'Streets Ahead South' on Linenhall Street
5 Linenhall Square
6 Completion of the Inner Ring Road 'South Link'
7 The proposed Ormeau Park pedestrian bridge
8 Shaftesbury Square

Projects

Great Victoria Street Transport Hub

The proposal for a new transport hub at Great Victoria Station is to be welcomed as a major improvement in the convenience and connectivity of the regional rail system and associated transport links. Significant increases in passenger traffic are anticipated. The opportunity is not just one of engineering, however, it is a chance to redefine the gateway to Belfast City Centre, and is therefore deserving of attention from Belfast City Council as a project of civic importance. The streetscaping and landscaping treatment of Great Victoria Street should reflect its role as a civic gateway. Although a very challenging project with many site constraints and infrastructure- related demands, a major re-design of the station and of the ground floors and street environments of the Great Victoria Street frontage would give the station a much stronger presence in the city centre. Given the experience of other urban rail stations, this would lead to greatly enhanced development potential on a significant number of vacant sites in and around the hub. Improvements to the secondary entrance on Glengall Street would similarly improve development prospects on the north side of the station.

04

Projects and Places in the City Centre

The new transport hub presents the ideal conditions for long term development of a new Grade A office district in the adjacent area. The premises which would be vacated by the BBC, if it decides to relocate, are located to the immediate east of the station, creating a sizeable development opportunity for Grade A office space. There are also numerous surface car parks on Great Victoria Street, Bruce Street / Hope Street and Glengall Street which could accommodate new office development.

In partnership with Translink, the Strategic Investment Board and other stakeholders, Belfast City Council should work to achieve the following elements:

- Make the new transport hub front onto Great Victoria Street.
- Maximise retail opportunities in the approach to the station.
- If the BBC relocates, prepare the vacated sites for redevelopment as prestige office sites taking advantage of station accessibility.
- Identify other adjacent sites or buildings with Grade A office potential.
- Upgrade the public realm of Great Victoria Street with trees and extensive soft landscaping.

Grade A Office Development in the Traditional Office Core

A new Grade A office district adjacent to the Belfast Transport Hub is a longer term solution to an immediate problem. Grade A office space is needed now to satisfy the backlog of demand and prevent footloose firms from taking their back office functions to other comparable cities. Whilst Titanic Quarter and City Quays are able to absorb some of the demand, some firms prefer the accessibility of the traditional office core.

It is important to intervene in the office core to accommodate new growth and reverse its current decline. There are several excellent sites for Grade A office infill on Bedford Street and Linenhall Street. As the private sector is not currently developing offices in this area on its own – rental values have only recently started to rise – the public sector can play a role to de-risk new development activity. Various means could be used, such as providing forward funding to a developer/ investor to enable a development to proceed, agreeing to take the head lease on a potential project, taking an equity stake in a project by co-investing with a private sector partner or simply providing a rental guarantee.
A feasibility study could be undertaken to test, on a real project basis, how public sector funds could be deployed to support office development, how such a project could work and whether it would meet investment criteria for the relevant funding.

Opposite Page:
Berlin Hauptbahnhof (Wikimedia)

This Page:
Spinningfields, Manchester (Flickr / Adam Clark)

04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

Streets Ahead South

The Streets Ahead programme has made a substantial difference to the overall feeling of the retail core. The care and expense put into the streetscaping is evident and the entire district is uplifted by the quality of the public realm. The traditional office core is in need of similar treatment. The district feels somewhat tired and lacklustre, unbefitting of the most important locus of commerce in the province. Extending Streets Ahead down Linenhall Street from City Hall to Ormeau Avenue would create a grand central avenue to anchor the office core. Enduring materials and high calibre design would inspire confidence in potential investors. Such a rejuvenation of the public realm of the office core would enable it to be more competitive with new development areas as a location for Grade A office development.

As part of Streets Ahead South a new open space should be located in the office core. Office workers in the area currently have little choice in regard to where to enjoy a morning coffee, eat lunch with friends or take a phone call in the sun. A prime opportunity exists at the southern end of Linenhall Street, should the BBC decide to relocate and vacate its building on Ormeau Avenue. The listed façade could be maintained and the block could become the site of a new public open space, potentially framing a distinctive new Grade A office building.

The Belfast City Centre Public Realm Masterplan identifies the area south of City Hall as phase 6 of the Streets Ahead programme.

Completion of Re-Imagined South Link

The lack of definition of the south end of the city centre can be largely attributed to the reservation of a road corridor for the unfinished South Link of the Inner Ring Road. Instead of being framed with development, Bruce Street, Bankmore Square, Bankmore Street and Ormeau Avenue are fronted by surface car parks and undefined open spaces. Completion of a re-designed South Link from Great Victoria Street to Cromac Street would not only enable the connecting streets to function more effectively to distribute traffic flow across the city centre but would also reduce blight and improve the interface between the city centre and the communities to the south and east including Sandy Row, Donegall Pass and The Markets and create a greater connection to Queen's University Belfast improving student accessibility to the city centre. The wide road reservation would allow the South Link to be completed as a grand tree-lined boulevard connecting towards the new Belfast Transport Hub with comfortable pedestrian provision, potentially including a linear open space with road traffic moving freely. Development sites would be opened up and the street could be properly framed with buildings instead of car parks. Devoting special attention to appropriately locating and designing pedestrian crossing points would enhance permeability between residential neighbourhoods and the city centre.

This Page:
Belfast Streets Ahead streetscaping (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Opposite Page:
One Angel Square, Manchester (Flickr / The Cooperative)

Guidelines

The following guidelines concerning land use, built form and public realm have regard to guidance in BMAP, regional planning policy and other planning documents. They are intended to complement existing guidance rather than replace it. However, should any guideline conflict with statutory guidance then the latter will prevail.

Land Use:

- Offices should be the primary use in the district.
- Residential development may be considered along the South Link but should not be considered in the traditional office core or surrounding the Great Victoria Street Transport Hub.
- Retail should be encouraged in the traditional office core where appropriate on the ground level to serve the office population.
- Prestige office development should be located within the traditional office core or adjacent to the Transport Hub.
- Lower intensity office development should be located in the Gasworks.

Built Form:

- Buildings should be used to frame streets and create spatial definition, particularly along the South Link.
- Development in the traditional office core should maintain the grid network, tight setbacks and medium scale that characterise the area today.
- Greater height could be permitted for new development surrounding the Transport Hub.
- Adaptive reuse opportunities should be considered to preserve heritage buildings on Great Victoria Street and in the traditional office core.

Public Realm:

- The public realm of Linenhall Street should be upgraded with “Streets Ahead South”.
- Open space provision in the south centre can be enhanced with a renewed Blackstaff Square, a new square on Linenhall Street and a linear greenspace as part of the completion of the South Link.
- Shaftesbury Square should be renewed through traffic calming measures, improved pedestrian crossings and upgrading of the public realm in order to support reinvigorated retail, restaurant and entertainment to strengthen the link to the south.
- Great Victoria Street should be re-designed as a tree-lined gateway boulevard to the centre.

4.2 The Core

Vision

The Core should be Belfast's retail heart, providing a regionally competitive retail offer and a shopping experience that is unmatched anywhere else in Northern Ireland. It should be based upon two intersecting arcs of retail activity – the historical retail spine of Donegall Place and Royal Avenue and the curved dumbbell with Victoria Square and CastleCourt at either end. Recognising that the retail market is changing and Belfast's ability to support retail has limits, the introduction of a degree of mixed use will create a realistic model for regeneration and a diversified offer. The redeveloped North East Quarter could be the centrepiece of the reinvigorated retail core.

This Page:
Cardiff City Centre (Shelley Sandzer)

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Planned/Proposed Interventions

1 North East Quarter including Royal Exchange
2 Inner West Area including CastleCourt and Castle Street
3 Bank Square
4 Donegall Place
5 Belfast Metropolitan College
6 City Hall Courtyard
7 The Inner Ring Road

Projects

North East Quarter

The Urban Regeneration Potential Study and Retail Capacity Assessment provides the underpinning evidence that there is capacity for a single retail- led, mixed-use development in the Belfast area over the short to medium term, with development commencing in the next 4-5 years. There is a strong argument that this should be in the North East Quarter, as the retail core is currently blighted by the vacant block, which interrupts what should be a strong retail axis from Victoria Square to CastleCourt. Bringing the North East Quarter block back to life is essential to creating confidence in city centre retail and preventing further slippage of the retail offer. However, concerns about the retail market and high vacancy rates in the centre suggest that it would be unwise to rely too heavily upon retail-led regeneration to transform the block. A refreshed Framework Plan is required for the North East Quarter to recognise the realities of the market.

An anchor use should be found for this block, reusing some of the block's heritage buildings and/or constructing infill development in the large vacant space in the middle of the block. If a major retailer such as John Lewis, Brown Thomas or Harvey Nichols can be located in Belfast this is one of the two recommended

locations. The patronage it would draw would then support other retail in the North East Quarter. Alternatively, a major institution such as the BBC could become the regeneration driver. A strategy of filling the rest of the block with smaller mixed uses could then be pursued. Other institutional uses, leisure/ entertainment uses and student or market housing on upper floors should all be considered. The centre of the block offers the opportunity for a courtyard- style open space where the Smithfield Market could potentially be relocated.

Ensuring the city centre remains the thriving retail centre of the region is critical for Belfast's future. Measures similar to those proposed for Grade A office development should be considered. A feasibility study could be undertaken to test, on a real project basis, how available public sector investment funds could be deployed to support retail development, how such a project could work and whether it would be worthwhile based on return on investment and in the context of the recent rise in rent per sq ft.

This Page:
Grote Markt Terras, The Hague (Wikimedia / Joris1919)

Inner West including CastleCourt and Castle Street

Both the physical environment of the CastleCourt Shopping Centre and its retail offer are in need of a refresh to upgrade the asset and maximise its potential for the city centre. CastleCourt is currently a major impediment to both north-south and east-west connectivity, a situation which any redevelopment should rectify. A north-south galleria through the middle of the shopping centre would add an important connection, essentially creating a route from Bank Square through to the blocks to the north of CastleCourt which are prime opportunities for redevelopment, potentially with the addition of residential and other uses. These blocks also offer the other excellent location in addition to the North East Quarter for a major anchor store in the centre such as a John Lewis, Brown Thomas or Harvey Nichols.

The existing configuration of the shopping centre turns its back on the west side of the city, with a large fenced car park as the frontage on Millfield. A more welcoming frontage should be presented to that part of the city. The connection across Millfield should draw shoppers from Belfast Metropolitan College and the residential neighbourhoods to the west.

As a gateway from the west and direct route into the retail core Castle Street is well used by the community but its retail offer is disappointing and characterised by high levels of vacancy. The proposed extension to the Primark store at the corner of Castle Street and Donegall Place will consolidate its role as a retail anchor on the street and should be used to catalyse regeneration. Another opportunity to rejuvenate retail on Castle Street that should be explored is encouraging the relocation of some vendors from the Smithfield Market to Castle Street should that block be redeveloped. This district, including Bank Square, both sides of Castle Street and adjoining smaller streets and alleys is in need of comprehensive reinvention through active retail management and programming. It has the potential to become its own distinctive district to complement the Cathedral Quarter.

Donegall Place Retail Management Strategy

The slippage of the retail offer on Donegall Place in recent years is concerning because Donegall Place is the traditional face of city centre retail. A proactive approach should be taken to improving the quality of the retail offer in this critical area. Similar to what was done to reinvigorate streets such as Marylebone High Street in London, a retail management strategy for Donegall Place would take a coordinated approach to identifying needs, preparing sites, luring retailers and facilitating turnover to more desirable uses. Such a strategy would support the Urban Regeneration Potential Study's finding that managed retail floor space is important in retail centres and Belfast City Centre has a much lower proportion in comparison to similar cities.

City Hall

The iconic neo-classical City Hall with its white marble turrets and pergolas is one of the city centre`s greatest assets. Already a tourist destination, visits could be substantially increased with the creation of an additional attraction. However, there are other similar heritage opportunities in the area that could support Belfast's ambitions to expand its festival activity.

The proposed extension to the Primark store at the corner of Castle Street and Donegall Place will consolidate its role as a retail anchor on the street and should be used to catalyse regeneration. Another opportunity to rejuvenate retail on Castle Street that should be explored is encouraging the relocation of some vendors from the Smithfield Market to Castle Street should that block be redeveloped.

Guidelines

The following guidelines concerning land use, built form and public realm have regard to guidance in BMAP, regional planning policy and other planning documents. They are intended to complement existing guidance rather than replace it. However, should any guideline conflict with statutory guidance then the latter will prevail.

Land Use:

- The retail core should be the centre's primary retail and mixed-use district.
- Retail uses should be the dominant use at street level.
- Residential uses should be encouraged on upper floors of heritage buildings and as infill development on appropriate sites.
- The retail offer should be strengthened with complementary activity such as institutions, cultural facilities, restaurants, cafes and entertainment venues.
- New businesses should be encouraged to occupy vacant storefronts and meanwhile uses also considered.

Built Form:

- Renewal and new development should preserve and add to the dense, connected network of streets and lanes characterising the area.
- Development should respect and adhere to the low to mid-rise scale and built form of the core.

Public Realm:

- There should not be significantly more pedestrianisation in the retail core.
- The right balance must be struck between road allocation dedicated to BRT, the car, bicycles and pedestrian activity.
- Enhanced streetscaping and landscaping of junctions and streets such as Millfield and Divis Street is required to invite entry to the city centre from the west.
- Open space provision in the core can be enhanced with the renewed Bank Square, a courtyard space in the interior of the North East Quarter and a public square on one of the blocks north of CastleCourt.

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Opposite Page:
Liverpool One (Rex Features / Jeff Blackler)

This Page:
1 British Museum, London (Flickr / Spiros K)

Pic Below: Marylebone High Street, London
(isabelcostelloliterarysofa.com)

4.3 The North Centre

Vision

The North Centre should be home to Belfast's growing learning and innovation culture. Benefiting from the Ulster University, the Cathedral Quarter, Belfast Central Library, the proposed creative hub and potentially the BBC, the North Centre will be at the forefront of Belfast's digital, media and innovation activity. The primary goal for the North Centre should be to cultivate these advantages and spread the benefit to surrounding neighbourhoods and the whole of the city centre.

This Page:
Commercial Court, Belfast (Tourism NI)

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Planned/Proposed Interventions

1 Ulster University District
2 Potential BBC Locations
3 Belfast Central Library and Library Square
4 Cathedral Gardens and Writer's Square
5 Dunbar Link/Inner Ring Road
6 York Street Interchange
7 Potential underpass projects
8 Potential Gamble Street Halt

Projects

Ulster University

The northern section of the city centre is the most in need of radical improvement. It has the greatest real and perceived vacancy and is the most dominated by traffic. The new Ulster University (UU) city centre campus will be transformational in terms of its physical presence and the broad activities it will generate.

The presence of urban universities can, if properly directed, have a powerful beneficial impact in the immediate surroundings and in neighbouring communities. The Community Campus Regeneration Forum is already taking steps to ensure benefits from the university are captured for surrounding neighbourhoods, which include some of the most deprived communities in Belfast.

The development industry has recognised the opportunity brought by the university and the next few years could see a substantial increase in investment in this part of the city including the potential Northside development. It is crucial that this major redevelopment project delivers an appropriate scale of development and mix of uses to harness the regeneration potential of the university, and that stakeholders in the area and throughout the city are engaged throughout the process.

04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

The university must become the energiser of the whole district around the campus, in much the same way Queen's University has been in the south of the city, requiring a coordinating strategy and masterplan, the elements of which are listed below:

- Enhancement of the pedestrian and activity environment around the new campus.
- Cathedral Gardens, a major new open space around St. Anne's Cathedral.
- York St. Interchange transformation.
- Implementation of improved transit connections including the Gamble Street Rail Halt and north-south BRT.
- Connections across the Westlink and M3.
- Incubator/innovation uses for vacant buildings north of Dunbar Link
- Connections to the BBC, Belfast Central Library, the proposed Creative Hub, other educational institutions and existing Cathedral Quarter assets.
- Business outreach for training programmes and human capital development.
- Community engagement/skills enhancement programmes.

The high vacancy rate and low value development north of the Dunbar Link offer ideal conditions for the creation of an innovation district that builds upon the energy of the new campus and connects with existing innovation activities across the city. Taking a cue from similar developments in other cities, Belfast could use these sites to provide 'cheap/quick/simple' spaces such as incubators for new economic activity.

BBC

New BBC facilities have been shown to have had a powerful regeneration benefit for communities such as Salford and Cardiff. In combination with the Ulster University, the BBC could affect a comprehensive transformation of the northern part of the city centre. It is not only the physical presence of the BBC that is important, but ensuring that connections to the city centre's academic and training institutions are maximised and relationships with city centre cultural, media and other related businesses are enhanced. To this end, a working group should be formed to take forward the BBC project including Belfast City Council, the BBC, the Ulster University, Queen's University, NI Screen, the Northern Ireland Science Park, and relevant Government Department.

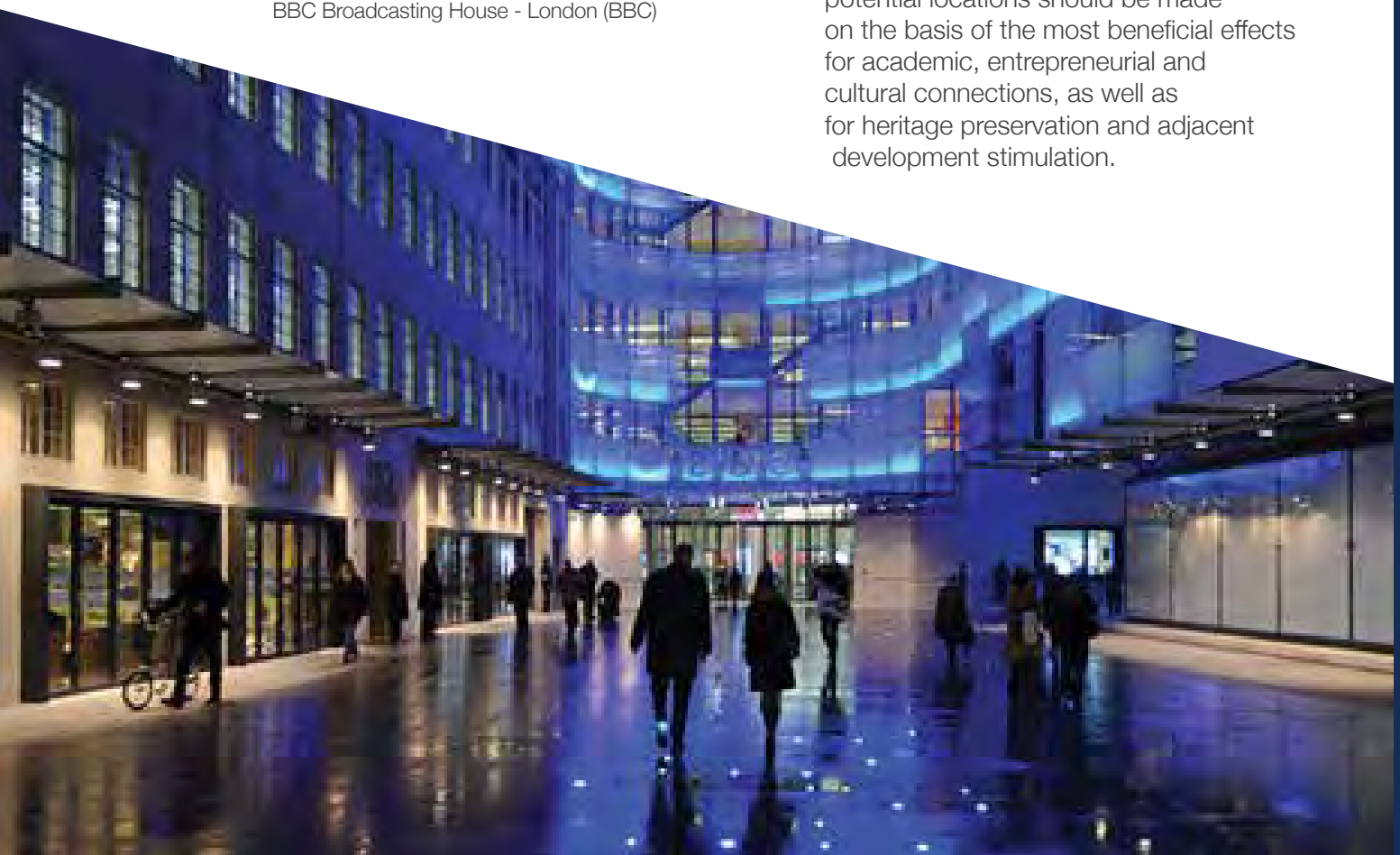
The public sector could take an active role in aiding the BBC's relocation by conducting a site options analysis and facilitating preparation of a preferred site. Three potential locations which should be analysed in greater detail are:

- Lands to the rear of Belfast Central Library, creating a complex of the Library, the Telegraph building, with the BBC fronting on an urban square in between.
- A site in new and renovated buildings in the centre of the North East Quarter, with an entrance on North Street.
- A cleared site north of Great Patrick Street in the York/Nelson/Great George Street block.

Assessment of these, and possibly other, potential locations should be made on the basis of the most beneficial effects for academic, entrepreneurial and cultural connections, as well as for heritage preservation and adjacent development stimulation.

Opposite Page:
Ulster University - York Street Campus Rendering (Feilden Clegg Bradley Studio)

This Page:
BBC Broadcasting House - London (BBC)



04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

Belfast Central Library Expansion

The proposed expansion of Belfast Central Library to become a more modern, user-friendly, multi-media community hub of information fits in very well with the vision for the North Centre. There are numerous synergies with other institutions in the area that should be explored, particularly the Ulster University and Creative Hub and potentially the BBC. There may be an opportunity as part of the expansion to find a home for the BBC digital archive in the Central Library.

This Page:
1 Belfast Central Library (Wikimedia)

Pic Below: Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester (timeout.com)

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Legend

- Extent of Cathedral Gardens
- New Open Space
- Donegall Street traffic calming
- Potential pedestrian priority streets
- St. Anne's Cathedral integrated within Cathedral Gardens

Cathedral Gardens

The North Centre offers the best opportunity for a bold new open space in the city centre. Buoys Park, Writer's Square and the area currently used for parking surrounding St. Anne's Cathedral should be combined to create a public open space of significant size where events, festivals and celebrations could be held. The design of Academy Street, Donegall Street and Exchange Street should facilitate their use as an extension to Cathedral Gardens when large events require their closure.

Cathedral Gardens should be soft, green and shaded. It should provide relief from the harsh urban environment that surrounds it and should be a haven for those who seek a place for quiet contemplation or a peaceful chat. Conversely, it should be busy, active and fun. It should be where talkative UU students eat their lunch and outdoor festivals set up their tents. As the only opportunity for significant open space development outside of the Lagan Corridor, Cathedral Gardens must be multi-purpose, multi-activity – flexible enough to serve all needs.

Cathedral Gardens is proposed to be a part of Streets Ahead 3, albeit at a reduced scale. To achieve an open space large enough to serve multiple purposes and capable of hosting the largest events, it is recommended that in the long term Cathedral Gardens be expanded as described and illustrated above.

04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

York Street Interchange

The York Street Interchange will alleviate a significant bottleneck at the M2/Westlink junction which adversely impacts city centre traffic volumes and congestion levels on a daily basis, therefore the interchange is viewed to be strategically important for vehicular access in the city. However, careful design of connecting north-south routes for pedestrians and cyclists and creative solutions to reduce the visual impact of the interchange and make use of otherwise dead space are required.

Some modest investment in the design of the interchange with the aim of improving development and regeneration potential and non-motorised movement could have significant future benefits. Council's engagement with DRD and other partners to ensure that the barrier effect of the interchange is minimised will continue.

Underpass Projects

Both the proposed York Street Interchange and existing M3 are major barriers to connectivity in the north end of town restricting crucial access to the Harbour and City Quays development. Making City Quays feel like a part of the city centre is dependent on finding a way to humanise the underpass. A simple programme of greening would make a big difference and is a solution well aligned with the Northern Ireland climate. The motorway and interchange could be draped in planter boxes that disguise the harsh concrete with vines. Equally simple, a programme of vibrant public art and lighting could brighten up the dreary environment, making it seem much safer.

Going a step further, the underpass areas could actually be turned into productive community spaces. In Toronto the area under a raised expressway was turned into the delightful "Underpass Park." Underpass areas would also be perfect for the construction of skate parks (there is one under the M3 already), five-a-side pitches or climbing walls. Shoreditch in London provides a fine precedent. Thus a detriment could be transformed into an asset by providing space for sports and recreational activities, something that is lacking elsewhere in the city centre.

At the upper end of the effort and expense spectrum, underpasses could be lined with development such as restaurants, bars or galleries. With so many options for transformation, there is no reason for underpasses to remain barriers to connectivity.

This Page:
Animation of underpass space with programming and lighting - A8ernA, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (NL Architects / Luuk Kramer)

Opposite Page:
Underpass Park, Toronto (waterfrontoronto.ca)

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Legend

Dunbar Link streetscape improvements, (including widened pavement, cycle lanes, and tree-planting) (1)

Underpass improvements (2)

Improved pedestrian junction crossing

Guidelines

The following guidelines concerning land use, built form and public realm have regard to guidance in BMAP, regional planning policy and other planning documents. They are intended to complement existing guidance rather than replace it. However, should any guideline conflict with statutory guidance then the latter will prevail.

Land Use:

- Institutional uses anchor the district (Ulster University, Belfast Central Library, potentially the BBC).
- Innovative digital / technology / media uses spawned by the university should be encouraged to cluster in the area.
- Provision of cheap and cheerful start-up space should be supported on low value sites north of the Dunbar Link.
- Student housing should be a secondary use – ideally it should not be permitted on sites with potential for higher value employment uses.
- Continuation of the development of small scale restaurants / entertainment / cafes in the Cathedral Quarter should be encouraged.
- Upper levels of heritage buildings should be redeveloped as quality residential and student housing.

Built Form:

- The completion of a street façade on the Dunbar Link will add spatial definition to the area.
- Buildings around Cathedral Gardens should provide a mid-rise street wall around the new open space.
- Higher buildings can be permitted on Frederick Street but should step down towards existing low-rise residential development.
- Sympathetic and appropriately scaled infill development should be considered in the Cathedral Quarter.

Public Realm:

- Completion of Streets Ahead Phase 3 should be a priority, and treatment of streets around Cathedral Gardens should facilitate their incorporation into the open space when closed.
- The landscaping balance should be shifted in favour of soft landscaping over hard paving materials.
- Radical reallocation of road space on the Dunbar Link will allow creation of a heavily landscaped and tree-lined boulevard on this part of the Inner Ring Road.

Opposite Page:
5-a-side pitch, Shoreditch Railway Arches, London (Urban Strategies Inc.)

POWER
LEAGUE

4.4 Lagan Corridor

Vision

The River Lagan should be Belfast's recreational spine, bringing the city together with a delightful open space to be shared and enjoyed by everyone. Belfast is, and should be celebrated as, a waterfront city. It is time to re-orient the centre towards the river and transform this once negative space into the city's greatest public asset. A major integrated landscape, urban design, redevelopment and programming initiative will recreate the Lagan Corridor as a magnet for locals and tourists alike.

This Page:
Liffey Boardwalk, Dublin (Flickr / Aapo Haapanen)

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Planned/Proposed Interventions

1 Potential Oxford Street improvements
2 Continuous Waterfront Promenade
3 Proposed Gasworks-Ormeau Park Pedestrian Bridge
4 Potential City Quays-Odyssey Pedestrian Bridge
5 Residential Waterfront Development Opportunities
6 Central Station
7 Expanded Waterfront Hall Conference Centre

Projects

Oxford Street Reconfiguration

Oxford Street and Victoria Street currently form part of the overall Inner Ring Road as an internal one-way loop. This loop carries large volumes of traffic during peak hours and forms a significant barrier between the traditional core and the river. The rationalisation of Oxford Street into a re-balanced area with a pedestrian, cyclist and public transport focused boulevard could unite the centre and its waterfront. Calming of the street's high level of vehicular traffic by reducing its existing four lanes to one lane limited to public transport and local access traffic should be explored. This would allow extensive pedestrianisation of the street with a wide footpath that would accommodate activity such as food vendors and entertainers or expansive patio and café space. Attractions which are currently divided from each other by wide roads and traffic, such as St. George's Market and Waterfront Hall, would suddenly become accessible. Development sites along the river would become much more attractive. A landscaped softening of the city centre's hard edge would provide a much smoother transition to the water. However, accommodating the planned rapid transit scheme will be essential in this area given its proposed routes.

In order to facilitate the transformation of Oxford Street and remove another barrier to city centre-waterfront connectivity a reconfiguration of Victoria Street would also be required and this should be analysed further to assess its viability. Traffic lanes could be re-purposed where practical so that it becomes a two-way route, and one lane could be reallocated to support pedestrians and cyclists. A larger junction footprint may also be necessary to accommodate traffic from Queen's Bridge. The introduction of the York Street Interchange is expected to alleviate some of the existing traffic demand around the Inner Ring Road, making the reconfiguration of Oxford Street and Victoria Street feasible. The recent infrastructure realignments which reallocated existing areas of road infrastructure within the city centre to improve the balance between public transport, the private car, walking and cycling, is an example of how this could work in practice through reduction of general traffic through the city centre. A post project evaluation of these realignments showed significant reductions in traffic along sensitive links such as May Street and Chichester Street.

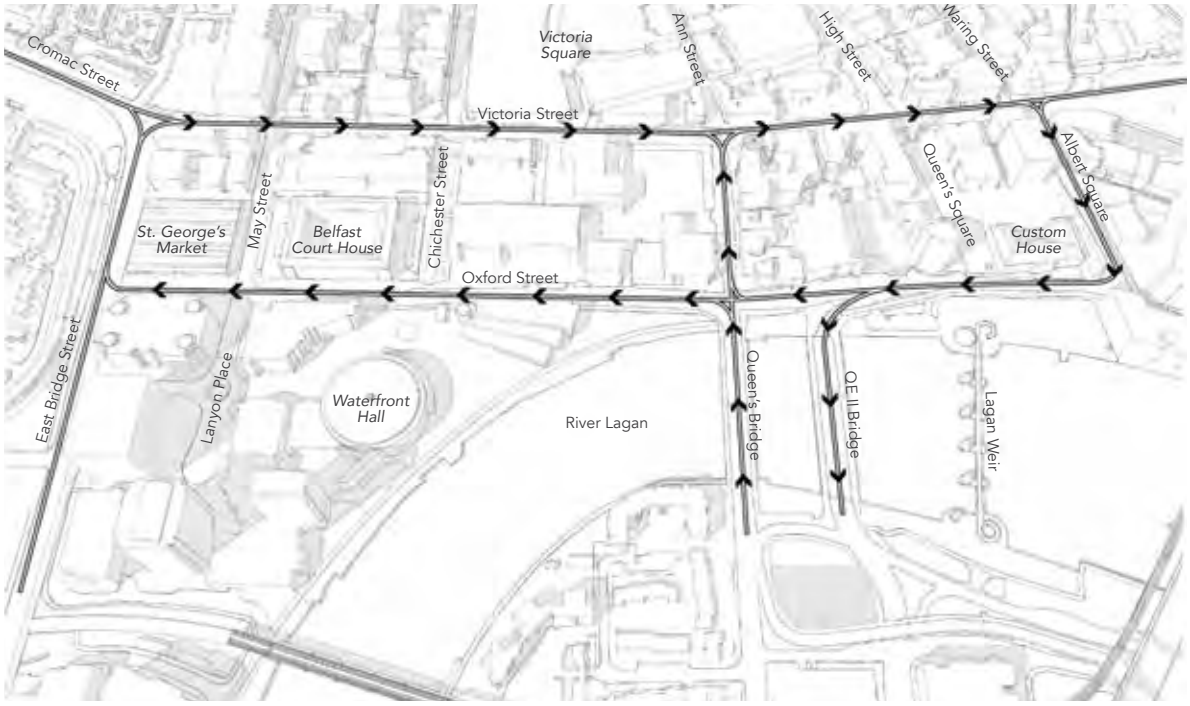
Another key element to facilitate the transformation of Oxford Street is the addition of the redefined South Link to complete the Inner Ring Road. This would provide the enabling measure for a true gyratory system around the city centre, reducing unnecessary circling and 'rat-running' of traffic. The reconfiguration of the Oxford street area is based upon the aspiration to connect the city centre to the river and to connect the east of the city back toward the city centre while also providing an opportunity to improve the public realm around St George's Market, Lanyon Place and the Waterfront Hall. Further detailed work will be required to analyse the viability of the reconfiguration outlined here and work with city partners including Transport NI should be carried out to explore the opportunities for enhancing this area and achieving these aspirations.

Continuous Waterfront Promenade

A continuous and generous promenade should run on both sides of the river with provision for both pedestrians and cyclists. Where there is no spatial provision for a waterfront promenade, floating boardwalks and pontoon walkways should be employed to maintain continuity. On the east side of the Lagan the promenade should begin at the cruise ship docks and continue south through Ormeau Park, drawing tourists beyond Titanic Belfast to discover the other attractions that the city centre offers. On the west side of the Lagan the promenade should extend from City Quays in the north to at least the Gasworks in the south. The two new pedestrian bridges, along with the widened and improved weir, will provide multiple connections that turn the promenade into a loop that can be used as a venue for charity runs and school races.

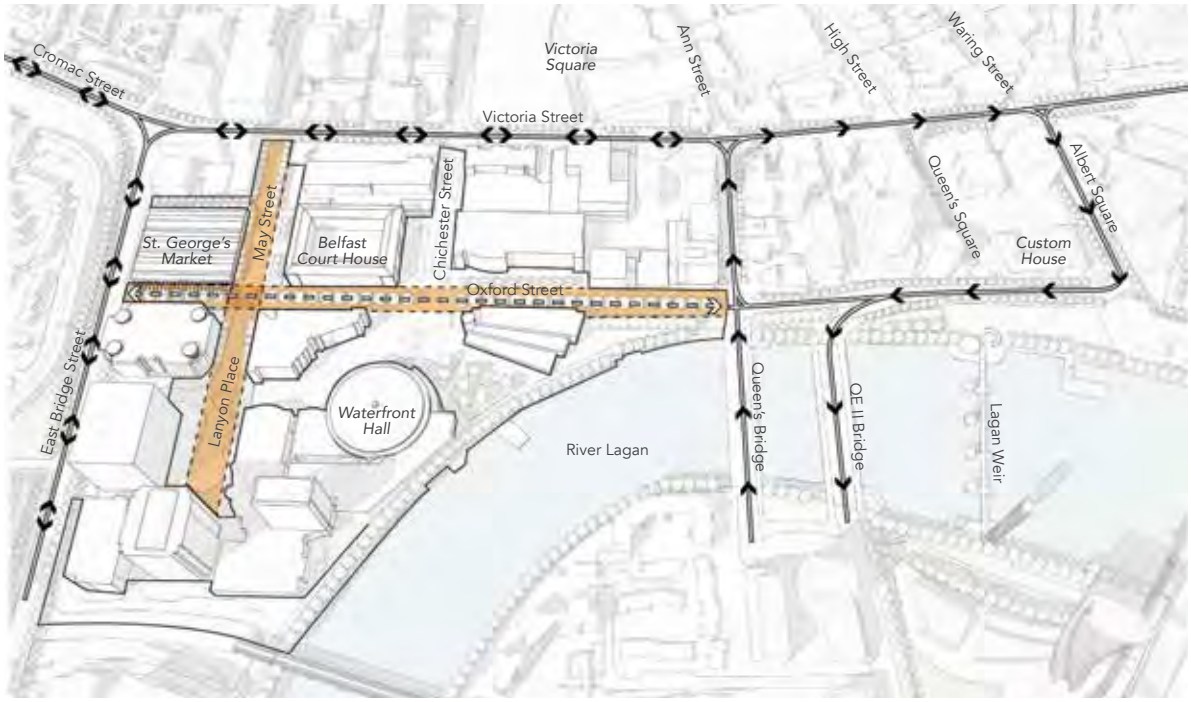
This project would consist of the following elements:

- Connection of existing and provision of new pedestrian and cycling pathways along the River Lagan.
- An extensive landscaping programme to thoroughly 'green' the promenade.
- Public art installations at strategic locations.
- Provision of bike stands and cycle share docks.
- Larger open spaces along the course of the promenade.
- Wayfinding to direct users to attractions along the length of the promenade as well as nearby city centre destinations.



Currently Oxford Street and Victoria Street form a one-way gyratory system that adjoins the Inner Ring Road and forms a barrier between the city centre and the River Lagan.

Legend
One-way road



Legend
Potential one-way road
Potential two-way road

Potential Public Realm improvements and balanced infrastructure for all modes.

Projects and Places in the City Centre

Two New Pedestrian Bridges

Two new pedestrian bridges would significantly improve connectivity and transform the relationship between open spaces and development sites on the two sides of the river. Ormeau Park, a significant greenspace on the fringes of a city centre lacking in greenspace, can be made accessible from the centre by the construction of a bridge from the Gasworks to its north end. The Odyssey and Titanic Quarter, close enough to walk to from the core if only there were a pleasant way to do so, can be made perceptually much closer by a bridge from City Quays to the Odyssey. As Titanic Quarter continues to develop its residential, office, institutional and cultural offerings and as the Odyssey Trust begins to develop its surface car parks, convenient access across the river will become even more critical. Whilst necessary for purely functional reasons, the bridges also offer an opportunity to add some drama and style to the Lagan Corridor. The design of the bridges should be of the highest quality, preferably with a strong vertical element to make them visible and recognisable from afar as new architectural icons for Belfast.

River Animation

The development of the Lagan Corridor as a recreational destination in the city centre can be assisted by encouragement and programming of water-based activities. Belfast has already seen the potential of this strategy with the success of the Tall Ships Festival. Multiple events and activities, both big and small, are required to fully realise the recreational potential of the waterfront. Boat launching points and boat rental services should be provided for the urban boating enthusiast. Floating restaurant barges, performance stages and art exhibits can add an extra dimension to culinary and cultural experiences. Dramatic bridge lighting can make a spectacle out of necessary pieces of river infrastructure. The natural pull of water should be exploited to bring people together in organised and informal activities.

Programming of the open spaces along the corridor can also be used to draw people in and create excitement. Fairs, outdoor markets, fun runs, concerts – in the context of an urban waterfront, the more activity the better.

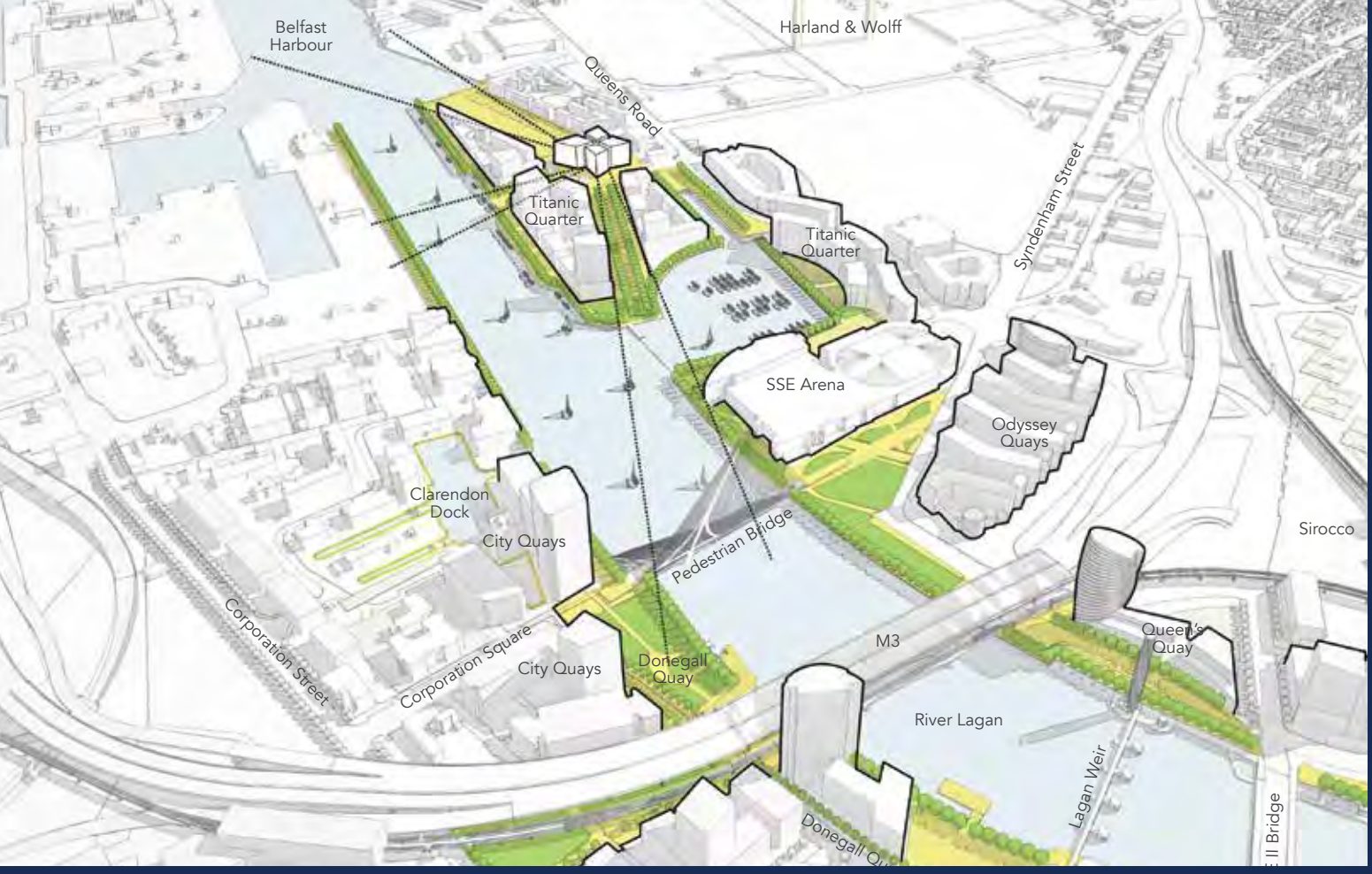
This Page:

1 Floating bike path, Kingston Upon Thames

2 Passerelle Simone-de-Beauvoir - cyclist and pedestrian bridge, Paris (blog.bmykey.com)

1

2



Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Legend

New Space

View Corridor

Waterfront Residential Development

Increasing city centre living is essential to the health and vibrancy of Belfast City Centre and experience from other cities has shown that waterfronts are a prime location for residential development. Sites for new residential development along the River Lagan include Titanic Quarter, City Quays, Odyssey Quays and Queen's Quay. Sites in public ownership should be evaluated for residential development potential. Market and Development Briefs should be prepared for all key development sites, in discussion with landowners if privately owned. The use of financial models to underpin and support funding package applications should be explored. The potential to retrofit and retain some existing former industrial structures could also be considered as a means of preserving Belfast's remaining waterfront heritage.

This Page:

1 Waterfront development with wide open space buffer, Sodra Vallgatan, Malmo, Sweden (Flickr / La Citta Vita)

Guidelines

The following guidelines concerning land use, built form and public realm have regard to guidance in BMAP, regional planning policy and other planning documents. They are intended to complement existing guidance rather than replace it. However, should any guideline conflict with statutory guidance then the latter will prevail.

Land Use:

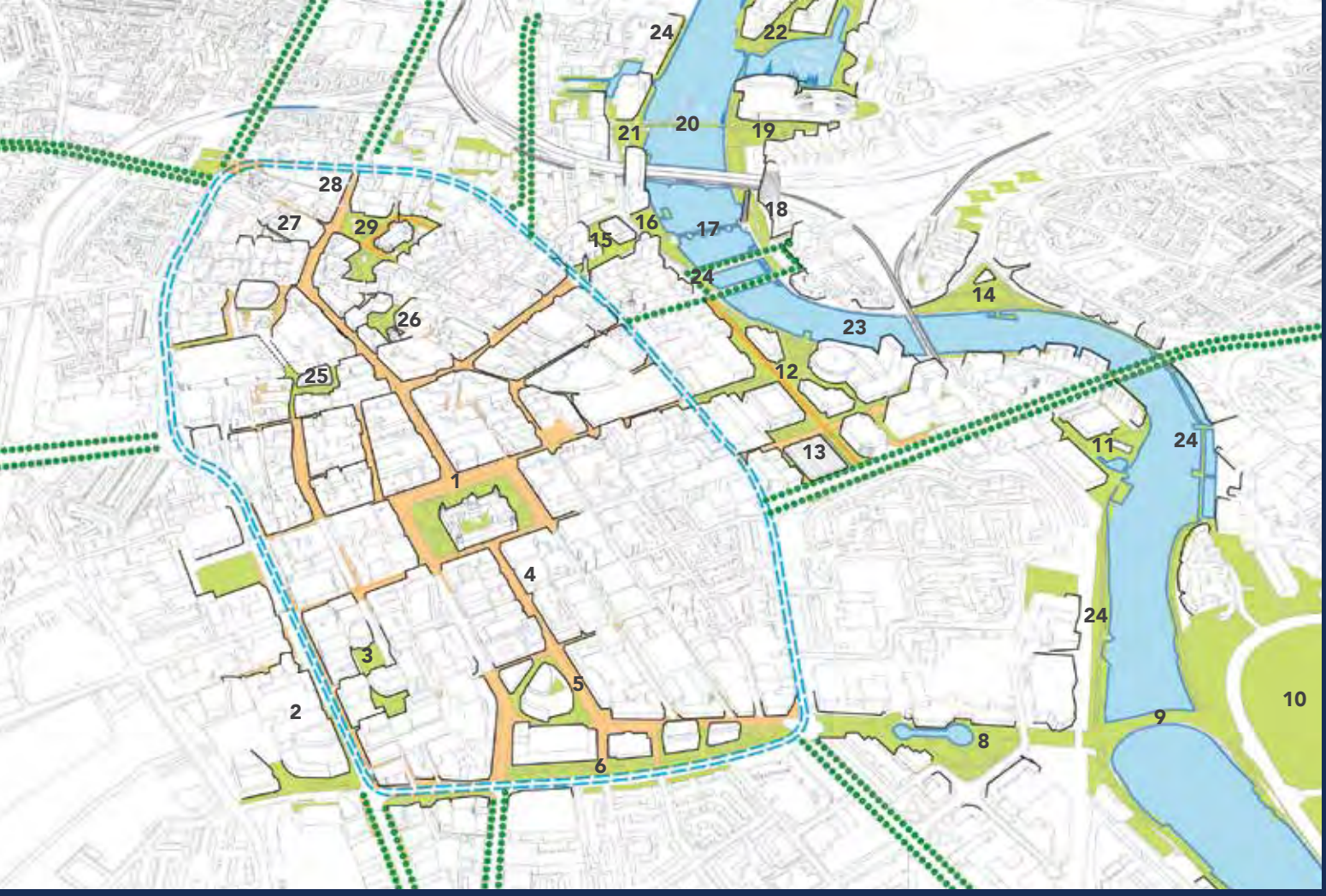
- Residential development should be encouraged along both sides of the river.
- Office development should be accommodated at City Quays, Titanic Quarter and the Maysfield site.
- Additional significant entertainment and cultural uses should be encouraged at key sites such as the Customs House and Titanic Quarter.
- Meanwhile uses such as sports fields and community gardens should be introduced on the Sirroco site.

Built Form:

- Development in the Titanic Quarter should maintain views of Titanic Belfast from key points.
- Development along the river should maintain views of and permeability to the water.
- Development along the new waterfront promenade should not overhang the promenade.
- Taller buildings should be permitted along the river in line with existing development.
- Heights and massing should be scaled down closer to existing neighbourhoods.

Public Realm:

- The Lagan Corridor should be radically 'greened' with trees, grass and gardens.
- The waterfront promenade should be punctuated by larger open spaces which could include parks, sitting docks or plaza space.
- A generous buffer of open space should be provided between development and the river.
- Frequent connections should be provided from adjacent streets and neighbourhoods to the river.
- Design of public spaces should cater to all age groups, with particular attention to elements for children.
- The Queen's Quay arterial road 'knot' should be simplified to eliminate dead space and improve configuration of development sites.



Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Legend

- Open Space (actual and potential)
- Shared Streets (A mix of pedestrian-only and traffic calmed streets)
- Improved Inner Ring Road
- Improved community connections

Open Spaces

1 Donegall Square
2 Great Victoria Street Transport Hub
3 Blackstaff Square
4 Linenhall Street - 'Streets Ahead South'
5 'Linenhall Square'
6 Newly Imagined 'South Link'
7 Shaftesbury Square
8 Gasworks Open Space
9 Proposed Ormeau Park Pedestrian Bridge
10 Ormeau Park
11 Belfast Central Station Public Realm
12 Oxford Street/Waterfront Hall Public Realm
13 St. Georges Market Open Space
14 Sirocco Open Space
15 Custom House Square
16 Donegall Quay
17 Lagan Weir
18 Queen's Quay Open Space
19 Odyssey Quays Open Space
20 City Quays-Odyssey Pedestrian Bridge
21 City Quays Open Space
22 Titanic Quarter Open Space
23 River Lagan
24 Riverfront Promenade
25 Bank Square
26 New Open Space
27 Library Square
28 Streets Ahead North Expansion
29 Cathedral Gardens

4.5 City Centre-Wide Projects

Not all projects fit neatly into one of the four areas defined for the city centre. Some might be implemented in any of the four areas, some must be implemented at a wider spatial scale, and some are not specifically spatial at all. This section details seven projects for the city centre as a whole.

Projects

SMART City

Cities are increasingly reliant on the gathering and analysis of real-time data to support effective decision-making, citizen-focused services and the optimisation of resources. A 'smart city' approach seeks to ensure that the necessary integrated physical and digital technologies are in place to make this possible.

In pursuing such an approach Belfast already has important elements in place including a physical digital infrastructure, recently enhanced by a £16.7 million investment in ultrafast broadband capacity and City WiFi. The city also has a burgeoning digital SME ecosystem that has a growing world-wide reputation in data analytics and cyber-security.

We will bring together innovative SMEs, our local universities and other partners to build on these elements to develop a smart city road map that exploits the potential of city data and new technologies. The road map will encourage private and public sector investment in Internet of Things sensors, systems, analytical tools, and user interfaces such as mobile phone apps. This would support new integrated approaches to, for example, city centre transport and parking; waste management, smart street lighting and an enhanced retail and visitor experience. The road map will establish a city data platform that encourages commercial innovation including the creation of an integrated city 'app'.

New Tourist Attraction/Event

The city centre tourism offer must be improved. One strategy would be to create a second major attraction/destination to complement the success of Titanic Belfast. Many suggestions have been made regarding the nature and content of such a new facility, with considerable support for a contemporary visual art gallery. Several potential sites could be considered, but sites which involve the retention/re-use of heritage buildings in combination with modern additions might make the best statement about the new city centre.

Three possible sites are:

- The Customs House
- North East Quarter
- The Crumlin Road Courthouse

Opposite Page:
Preston Guild 2012 Square Food Festival
(Flickr / Tony Worrall Foto)

The content and programming for such a gallery should be formulated to present a unique combination of local and global, contemporary and heritage, traditional and modern media, all connected to the art, media and innovation scene of the centre.

Securing funding for the development of a new attraction may however prove difficult and may result in competition for funding with excellent existing facilities such as the MAC. Another strategy that should therefore be considered is the establishment of a major annual or biennial cultural festival. There are many aspects of Belfast's distinctive culture that could present interesting themes for urban tourism development. Belfast's rich literary history, particularly the strong connection to Seamus Heaney, suggests a literary festival. The strong local music and storytelling scene could be further developed into an annual event. The growing interest in genealogy research suggests an opportunity to draw in the worldwide Northern Irish diaspora. There may be an opportunity to ramp up one of Belfast's many existing festivals into an event with an international reach. Rationalisation of the existing festival programme is certainly indicated, with a differentiation between local events and larger festivals with the potential to become a major tourist draw.

04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

Reimagining the Inner Ring Road

The Inner Ring Road, composed of Cromac Street, Oxford Street / Victoria Street, Dunbar Link, Frederick Street, Millfield Street and Great Victoria Street, currently forms a partial gyratory loop around the city centre. It performs an important function for the overall flow of traffic into and out of the centre and provides linkages to the main arterial routes around the city. It is this gyratory function which largely facilitated recent transport infrastructure changes by directing general traffic onto the Inner Ring Road whilst discouraging use of the city centre as a through route. However, the existing ring road is limited from acting as a complete gyratory due to the missing South Link between Great Victoria Street and Cromac Street. The re-imagining and completion of this missing link to complete the ring road would enable greater network simplicity and reduced traffic congestion within the core area.

Currently, the Inner Ring Road forms a major barrier that effectively divides the city centre into inner and outer zones with up to six lanes of traffic that must be crossed by pedestrians if they are to enter or leave the inner zone.

The redesign of the Inner Ring Road should give it a coherent identity as a grand, green urban boulevard. The extent to which this can be achieved will differ along different portions of the ring road. Where major road space reallocation is possible, such as at Oxford Street, Victoria Street and the Dunbar Link, the addition of a tree-lined median or linear greenway should be considered. Where it is not possible to reallocate space from cars to people, the programme may consist simply of major tree planting and other soft landscaping within existing sidewalk provision. The severity of the barrier created by the Inner Ring Road will be substantially reduced if it becomes a soft, green, aesthetically pleasing street rather than a hard grey one.

This Page:
Manchester Moves International Dance Festival (Flickr / James)

Opposite Page:
1 Treed arterial (Avenue Louise), Brussels (Flickr / Stephane Mignon)

2 Pedestrian super-crossing, Cardiff City Centre (AECOM)

Pedestrian 'super-crossings' should be provided at key points of demand along the Inner Ring Road to facilitate safe and convenient pedestrian movement between the city centre within the ring road and the neighbouring areas outside it. At super-crossings pedestrian movement is prioritised over road traffic in order to provide a direct route without the need to cross traffic in multiple signalised stages. Differentiated paving materials are often used to indicate to pedestrians and motorists alike that these crossings are to be treated differently.

Super crossings are proposed at the following three junctions:

- Divis Street/Millfield
- York Street/Frederick Street
- Dunbar Link/Corporation Street

Junction improvements are proposed at eight further locations along the Inner Ring Road.

These improvements would provide greater priority and connectivity for pedestrians and are located on the main routes into the city centre that cross the Inner Ring Road:

- Cromac Street/Ormeau Avenue/ Ormeau Road
- Cromac Street/May Street/ Victoria Street
- Oxford Street/May Street
- High Street/Victoria Street
- Dunbar link/Nelson Street
- Clifton Street/Carrick Hill/ Donegall Street
- Peter's Hill/Carrick Hill/North Street
- Wellington Place/College Square East

The Inner Ring Road also provides the opportunity to rationalise parking provision and management in the city centre. There are in excess of 10,000 parking spaces in the city centre, yet drivers frequently complain that they cannot find a space due to the fact that the spaces are split between 52 uncoordinated and poorly signposted car parks. A reduction and rationalisation of parking locations is proposed whilst maintaining the current capacity. The Inner Ring Road should act as a recognisable gyratory system that can lead motorists to convenient parking opportunities. High capacity car parks should be accessed from the Inner Ring Road with real-time information on how many spaces are available in each location displayed along the road. This will reduce congestion caused by drivers circulating on lower capacity city centre streets as they search for a parking space. It will also open development sites within the city centre on smaller car parks which are no longer needed.

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04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

Cycle Network

Cycling is gaining momentum in Belfast as both a leisure pursuit and a form of transport. The facilities to support cycling have improved in recent years but the cycling network is still rudimentary and has largely developed in a piecemeal fashion in relation to other schemes, as opposed to forming around a defined plan for cycling.

Cycling in the city centre has been given a boost in visibility by the Belfast Bike Share scheme. Launched in April 2015, the first phase of the scheme provided 30 stations at key locations within the city centre.

The focus on city centre regeneration, introduction of the bike share scheme and formation of the DRD Cycling Unit represent an ideal moment for Belfast City Council and DRD to work together to crystallise a strategy for cycling in Belfast and ensure that cycling is a central consideration of planning. The cycling network needs to start well beyond the city centre and offer continuous and legible routes to the centre.

The key steps to completing and upgrading the cycle network include:

- Design of a network that incorporates current routes and is matched to current and future patterns of movement.
- Completion of missing links on radial routes.
- Establishment of new routes between major origins and destinations.
- Expansion of signage on core cycle routes.
- Provision of abundant bike parking facilities.
- Reallocation of road space on the Inner Ring Road to create a segregated cycle superhighway that can perform the same role for cyclists that the ring road currently provides for vehicles.

This Page:
Amsterdam riverfront bike lane (Urban Strategies Inc.)

Opposite Page:
Ottawa riverfront (Urban Strategies Inc.)

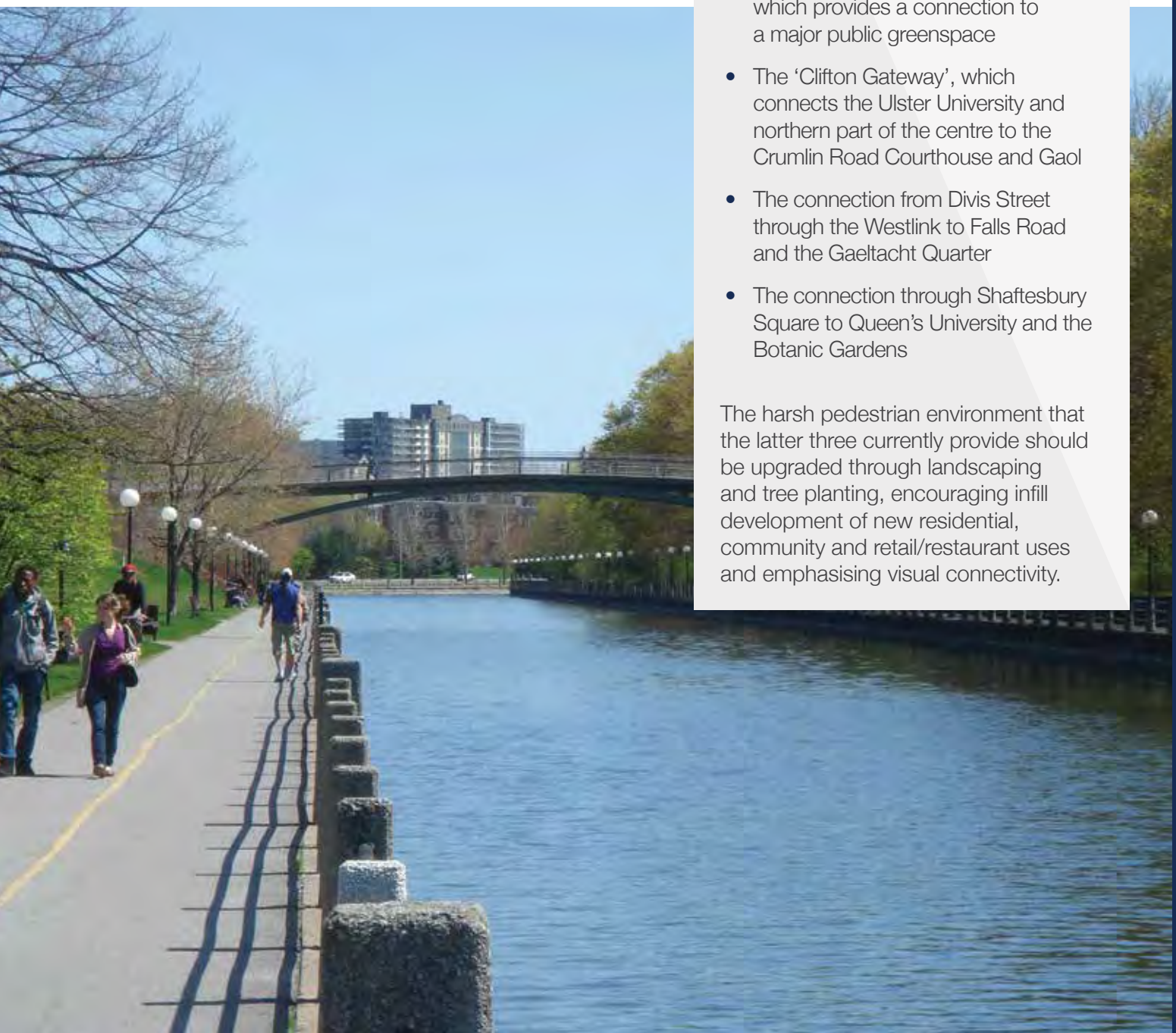
Community Connections

The city centre needs to embrace and welcome Belfast residents, many of whom never venture to enter it despite living on its doorstep. The road reallocation, greening, supercrossings and enhanced junctions on the Inner Ring Road will make a significant difference to the interface between the centre and some of the closest residential communities. A similar programme must be undertaken to re-establish pedestrian, visual, transport and development connections for communities that are a little further out.

All the corridors leading into and out of the centre are in need of improvement, but five have been identified for prioritisation due to the connections they provide to important destinations.

- A pedestrian bridge from City Quays to the Odyssey, which draws Odyssey Quays and Titanic Quarter into the city centre
- A pedestrian bridge from the Gasworks to Ormeau Park, which provides a connection to a major public greenspace
- The 'Clifton Gateway', which connects the Ulster University and northern part of the centre to the Crumlin Road Courthouse and Gaol
- The connection from Divis Street through the Westlink to Falls Road and the Gaeltacht Quarter
- The connection through Shaftesbury Square to Queen's University and the Botanic Gardens

The harsh pedestrian environment that the latter three currently provide should be upgraded through landscaping and tree planting, encouraging infill development of new residential, community and retail/restaurant uses and emphasising visual connectivity.



04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

City Centre Management

Many of the policies and projects in this strategy will require the active management of the city's retail offer and an integrated programme management approach to activities, festivals and events across the city centre's events spaces. It is all part of the fundamental imperative to increase the level of excitement, activity and 'buzz' in the city centre. The current lack of coordination caused by piecemeal planning by different organisations leads to conflicts and missed opportunities. One- off events often fail to capture the potential for lasting benefit to the city centre.

Current structures for the delivery of events and animation of the city centre should be reviewed . New structures should be put in place to coordinate retail promotion, reduce the long and short term problem of shop vacancies, implement meanwhile uses of vacant spaces, encourage activities such as urban sports, animate the city centre and organise major annual festivals. Belfast City Council must work with bodies such as Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM), the proposed new BID Company which may replace BCCM, Visit Belfast and other public, private and third sector organisations in a coordinated fashion on joint initiatives.

The objective of this review should be to foster the development of the city centre as a thriving retail centre and a fun, welcoming and shared space for everyone in Belfast and the tourists who choose to visit.

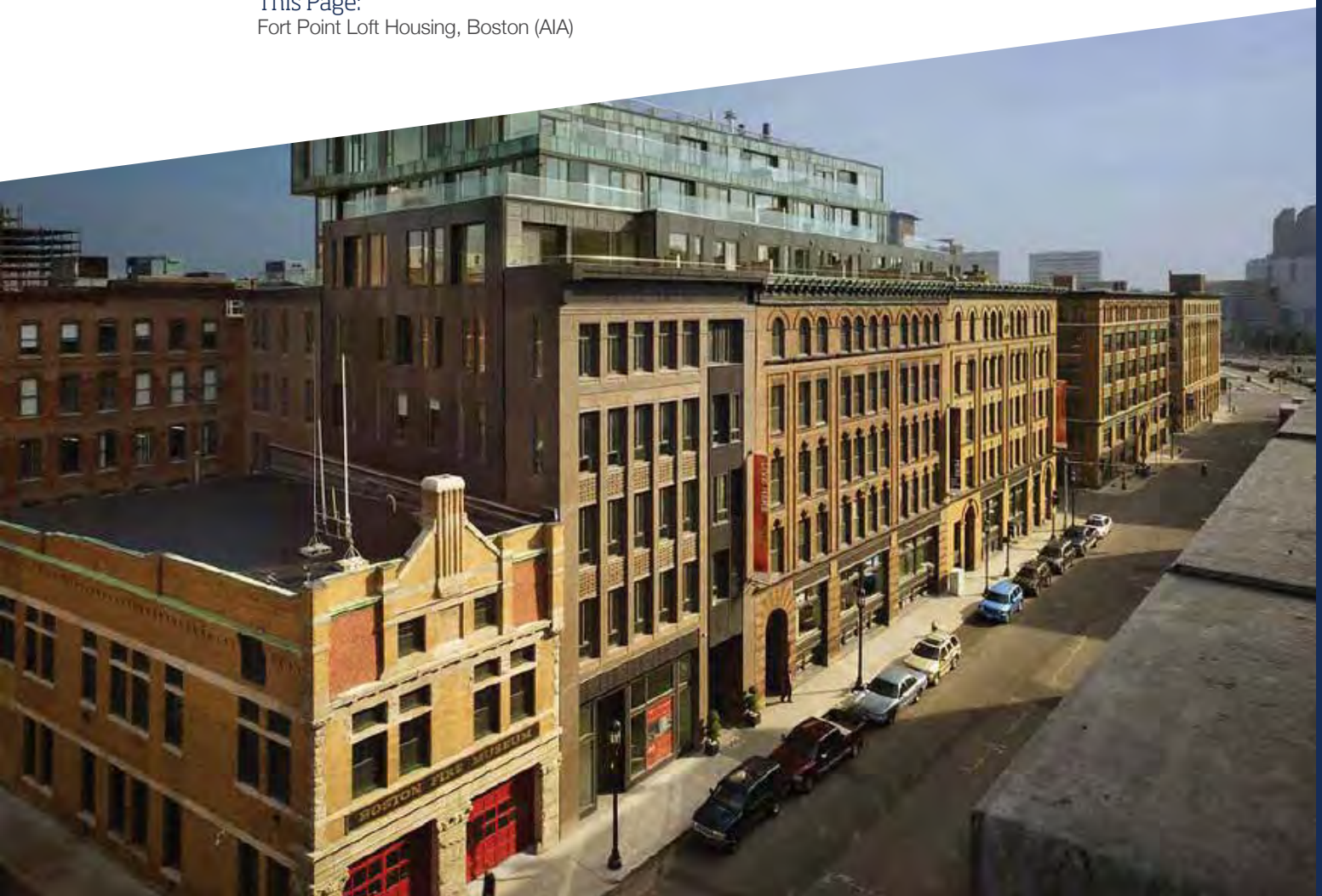
Conversion of Vacant Space

Belfast City Centre has a plethora of beautiful heritage buildings, many of which are entirely vacant or vacant on the upper floors and are in danger of deterioration. Its fine architectural legacy is an asset that Belfast cannot afford to lose, therefore a strategy to preserve these buildings and bring them back into use must be found. The development of student housing in the former Belfast Metropolitan College Building at College Square East is to be welcomed and more of such opportunities should be sought out and encouraged. Student housing in particular is well suited to heritage conversion projects. Hostels and hotels are also possibilities although all uses should be considered.

Conversions to more permanent market and rental housing should also be pursued. Apartments in converted historic buildings will appeal to the young professionals who will likely be the source of new city centre residents in the short term. Second floor spaces above retail units which are frequently vacant offer another potential source of inexpensive housing that might also improve the viability of ground floor shops and provide a home for enterprises with specific social benefits ideally suited to city centre locations. For modest cost, old warehouses could be made habitable and used as live/work spaces by creative types. A pilot project should be undertaken to determine what regulatory changes and incentives/financial support are required to facilitate the conversion of vacant space to housing.

Opposite Page:
Liverpool Mathew Street Festival (Flickr / Ji Ruan)

This Page:
Fort Point Loft Housing, Boston (AIA)



4.6 Special Action Areas

The Regeneration and Investment Strategy has set out in previous sections a number of overall policies and projects for the city centre and its four major sub-areas. To achieve the desired results for the improvement of the centre these policies, with respect to economic development, transport, urban design, retail management and other initiatives, have to be implemented in a coordinated fashion. In the process of undertaking the strategy it was clear that certain areas within the centre were in need of such an immediate, detailed and integrated planning approach.

Five Special Action Areas (SAAs) have therefore been identified as parts of the centre where a phased approach could be taken to preparing more intensive local plans to forward their regeneration in line with the larger ambitions of the Strategy. In order to ensure that environmental protection remains central to planning in Special Action Areas the feasibility of preparing a strategic environmental assessment should be considered an integral part of the preparation of any future local plans.

These are also areas where a more pressing need for action has been identified, either to coordinate the beneficial effects of major new institutional developments, such as the Ulster University or the expansion of Waterfront Hall, transport improvements such as those proposed for Great Victoria Street station, or to initiate the comprehensive regeneration of a declining retail area, such as in the North East Quarter and the area between Castle Street and CastleCourt.

The five areas identified are the Inner North, Inner West, the North East Quarter, the Transport Hub and South Centre, and Oxford Street and Eastern Bank. To differing degrees more intensive planning work is already underway or contemplated in each of these areas. What is anticipated for each SAA is that a comprehensive action planning exercise would be undertaken that prepared a more detailed local master plan. This would identify specific projects and initiatives along with urban design and transport guidance for their realisation. The plans for the SAAs would not be restricted to physical planning matters but would also set out any required programmes with respect to social, educational, economic development, retail and event management, marketing and related actions. As far as is possible, such plans would be accompanied by an implementation and delivery schedule identifying the proposed timing and source of funds.

Also identified on the map of the Special Action Areas are the areas of neighbourhood connectivity which are integral to the success of the city. Our work developing out of these Special Action Areas includes our ongoing engagement plan with inner city communities.

The plans for the SAAs would not be restricted to physical planning matters but would also set out any required programmes with respect to social, educational, economic development, retail and event management, marketing and related actions.

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

Legend

Special Areas

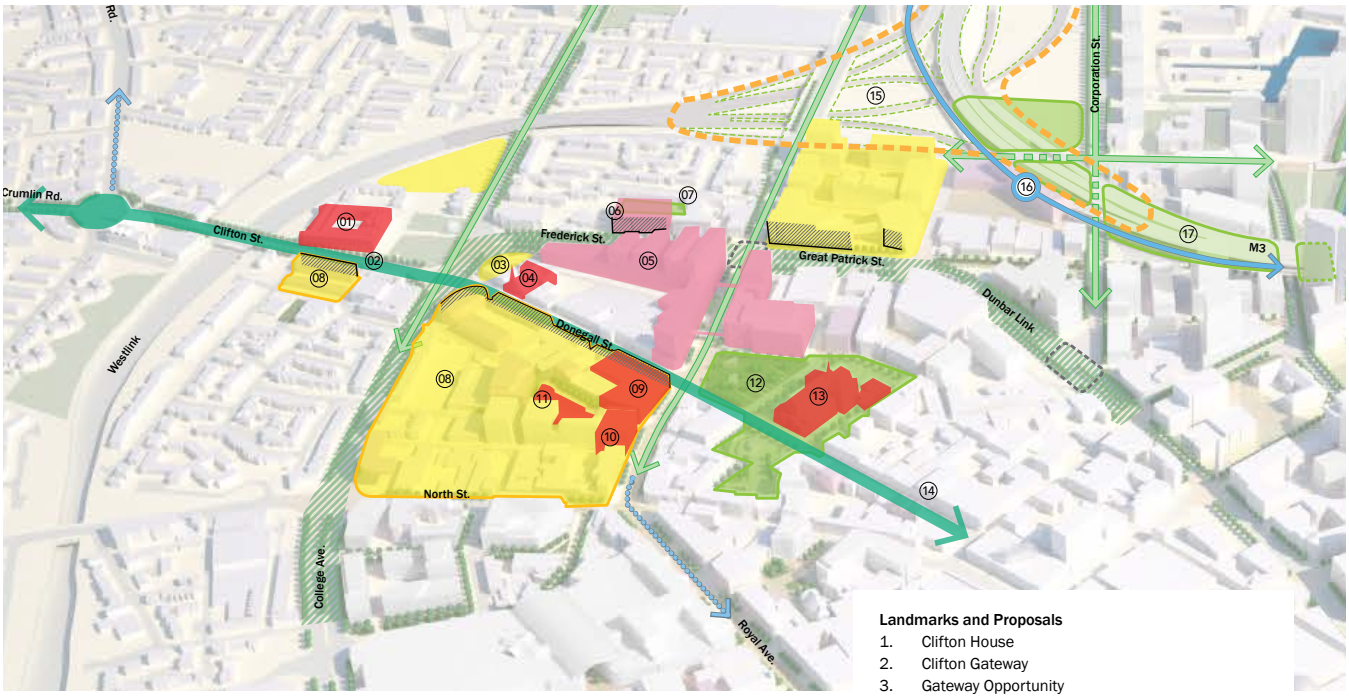
Neighbourhood Connectivity

04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

Inner North

The Inner North area is the most advanced of the SAAs in terms of detailed comprehensive planning. The relocation of the Ulster University to its new location at the northern end of the city centre has significant beneficial impacts that need to be planned at a more detailed level. A public sector 'strategic advisory group' has been established to facilitate the development and maximise the regeneration benefits of the university relocating to the city centre. As part of this work, a Campus Community Regeneration Forum, involving representatives from the university and statutory sector, along with representative community and business organisations has been established. The Forum will oversee a plan for the SAA, the major elements of which are set out in the plan above. The planning area extends from the immediate area around the new campus to make improved connections to the centre, north and west. This also includes the development of a programme of educational, employment and community initiatives.

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.



Ulster University – Belfast Campus
Historic Buildings & Landmarks
Plan Proposals
Development Opportunities
Active Street Frontage
York Street Interchange
Potential Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) - North South Line
Rail Connection & Gamble Street Rail Halt
Inner Ring Road - Traffic Calming & Streetscaping
Open Space / Recreation Opportunities
Enhanced Community Connection
Interchange Greening Zones
Super Crossing

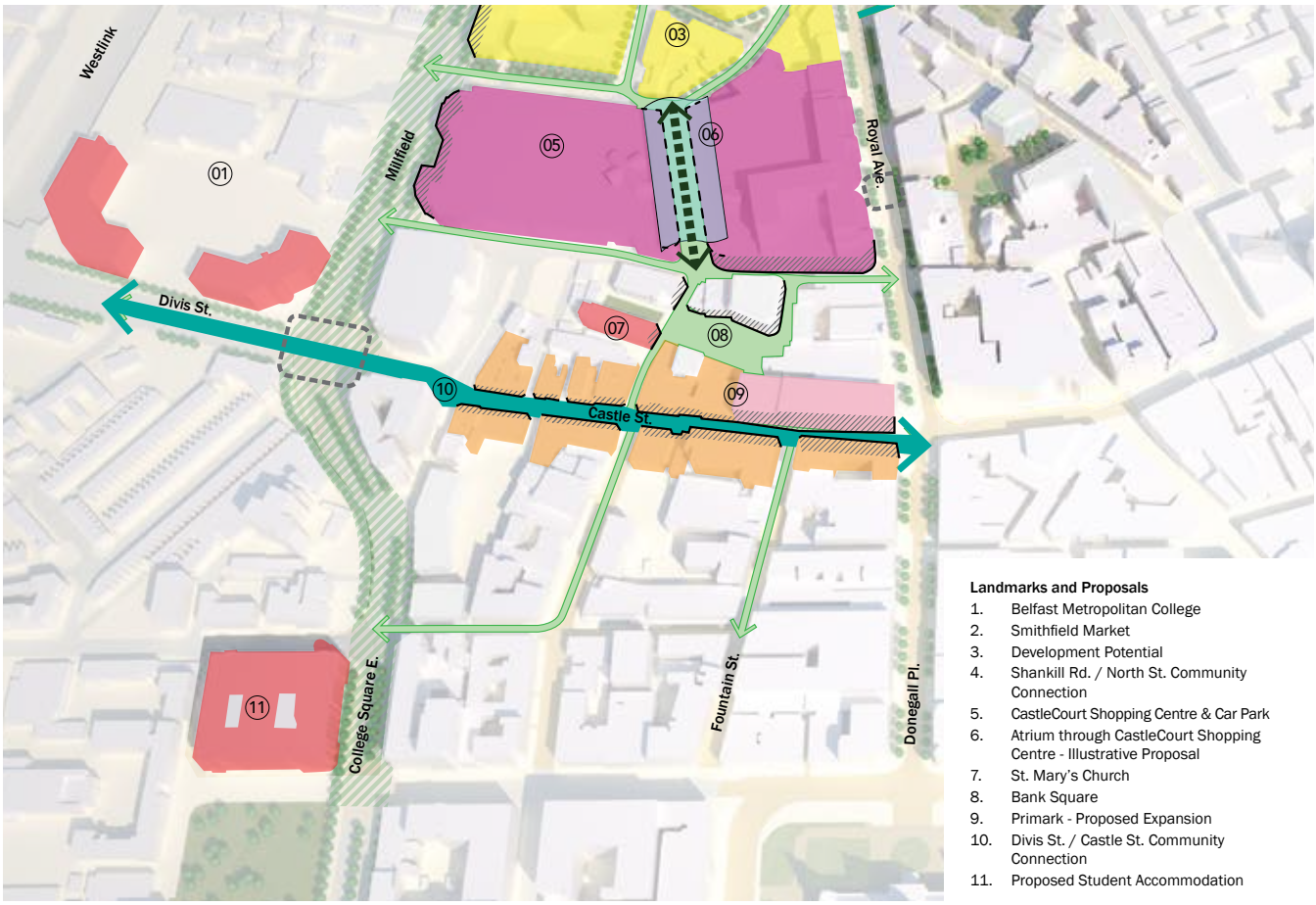
Landmarks and Proposals

1. Clifton House
2. Clifton Gateway
3. Gateway Opportunity
4. St. Patrick's Church
5. Ulster University
6. Proposed Multi-Storey Car Park
7. Potential Open Space
8. Northside Development Area
9. Belfast Telegraph Building
10. Belfast Central Library
11. Library Square
12. Cathedral Gardens - Existing / Regeneration Strategy Proposed
13. St. Anne's Cathedral
14. Creative Hub Proposal Area
15. York Street Interchange
16. Gamble Street Rail Halt - Proposed
17. Underpass Open Space/Recreation

Inner West

The Inner West area consists of the area along the western edge of the city centre. This area, home to the CastleCourt Shopping Centre, the Smithfield Market and Bank Square, traditional retail streets like Castle Street, and the hub of the black taxi service, has been exhibiting a general retail decline. A comprehensive programme of improvement is required including the revitalisation of CastleCourt, the fostering of the restaurant and entertainment offer around the newly improved Bank Square, and an imaginative marketing initiative to spark the renewal of the vacant shop fronts along Castle Street and adjacent streets. The plan for the SAA should cover a slightly larger geography as indicated on the plan above to ensure that the area is properly connected to surrounding communities through streetscape and urban design improvements.

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

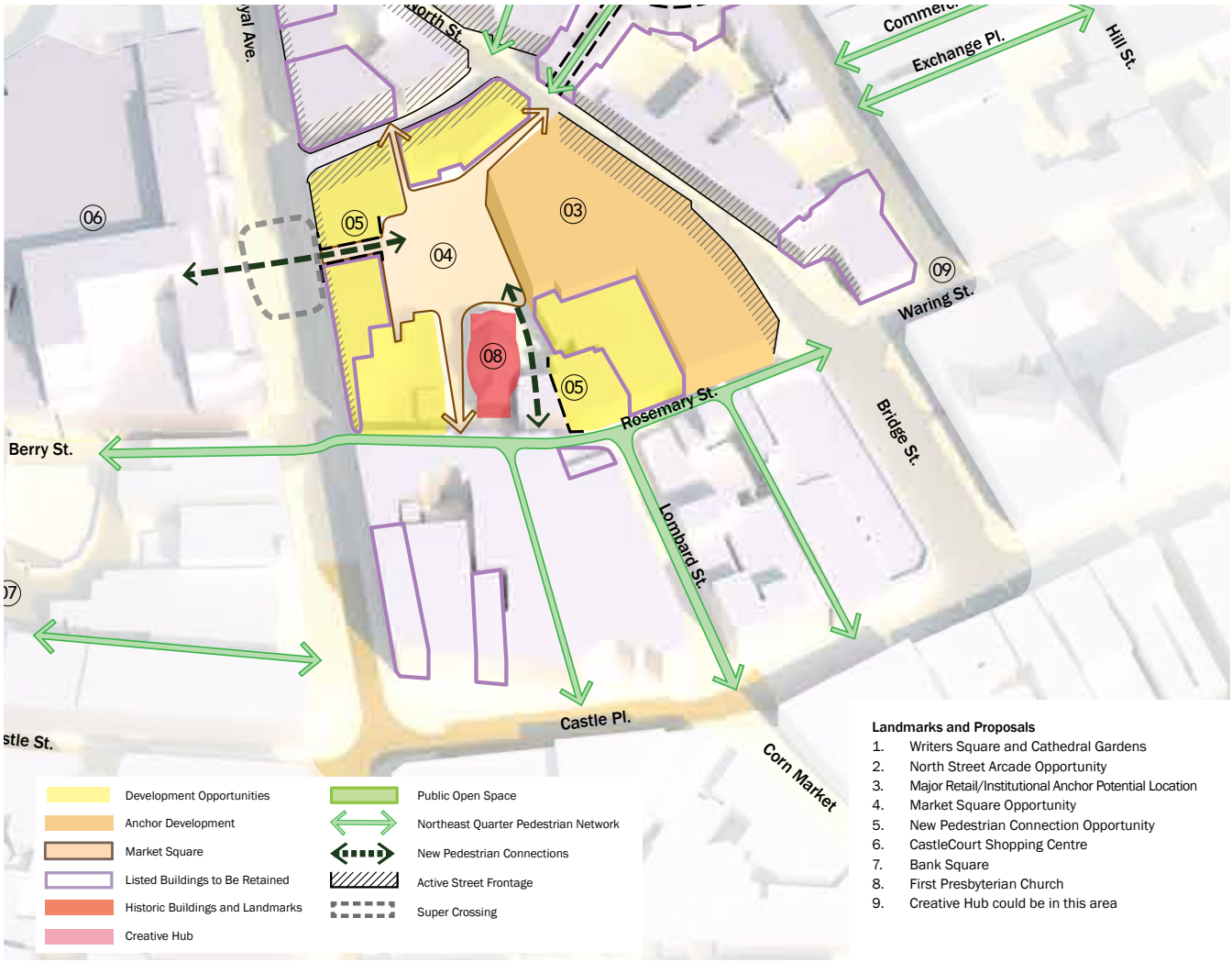


04
Projects and Places in the City Centre

North East Quarter

The North East Quarter is in need of a major retail or institutional anchor to fill the gaps in the North Street location and ignite regeneration in the rest of the area. A complement of smaller retail, cultural, community and residential uses can then be attracted to the remainder of the block. The existing fabric is a good mix of fine heritage buildings suitable for reuse and low quality structures that can be demolished to make way for new development. The plan for the SAA should set the framework of buildings to be retained, development opportunities, open space opportunities, and key pedestrian connections, particularly to connect the area to CastleCourt to the west and the Cathedral Quarter to the northeast.

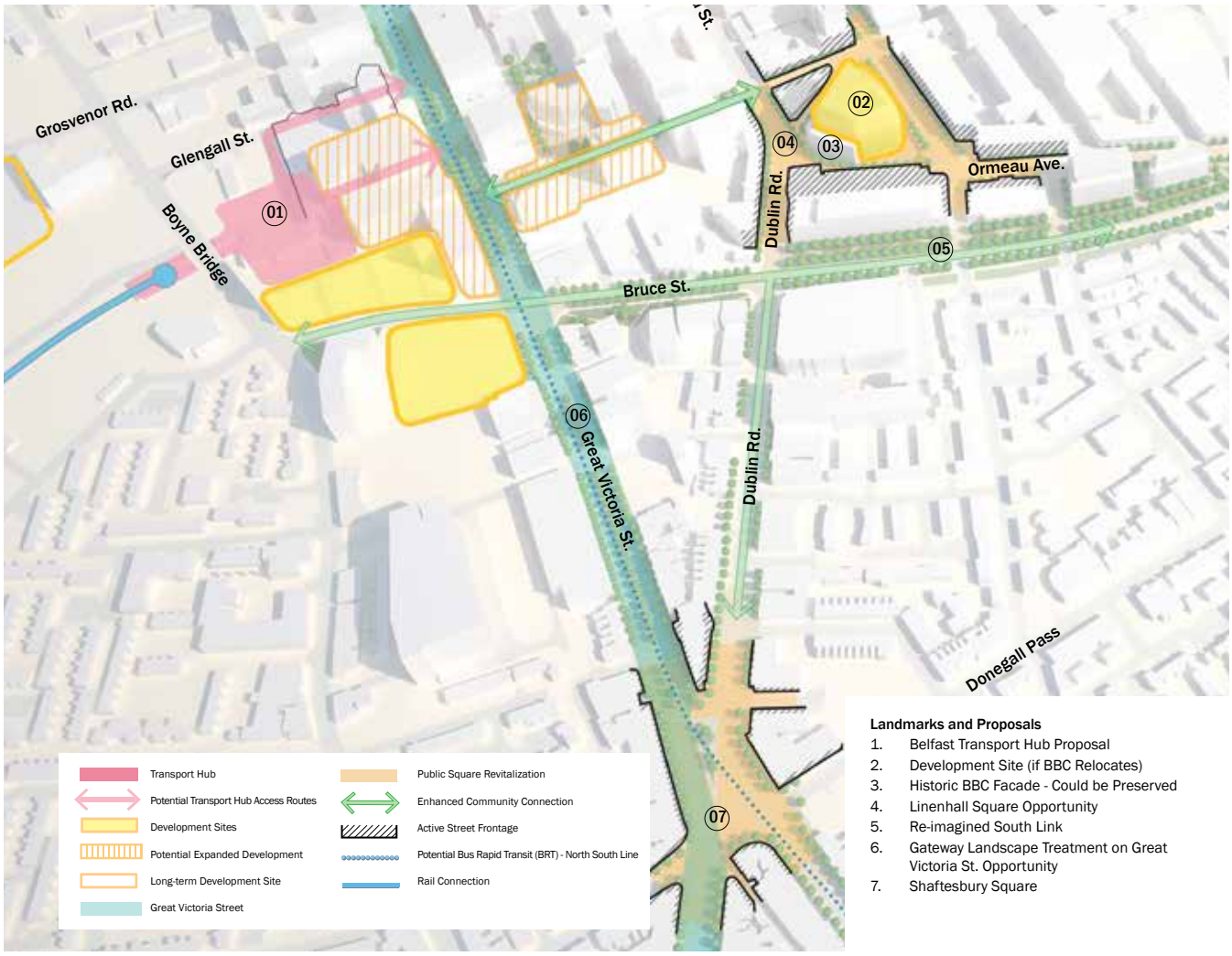
Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.



Transport Hub and South Centre

The development of a new transport hub around Great Victoria Street station has been identified in the strategy as one of the key transformative interventions for the city centre. It is critical that the design and development of the hub recognise that it is not simply a transport facility but part of a major city building opportunity. The SAA sets the transport hub in its wider urban context within the southern part of the city centre, identifying the potential directions for that urban role. Detailed work on the transport hub design is now underway and that should be set within the frame of an SAA plan to ensure the realisation of these wider city ambitions.

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.

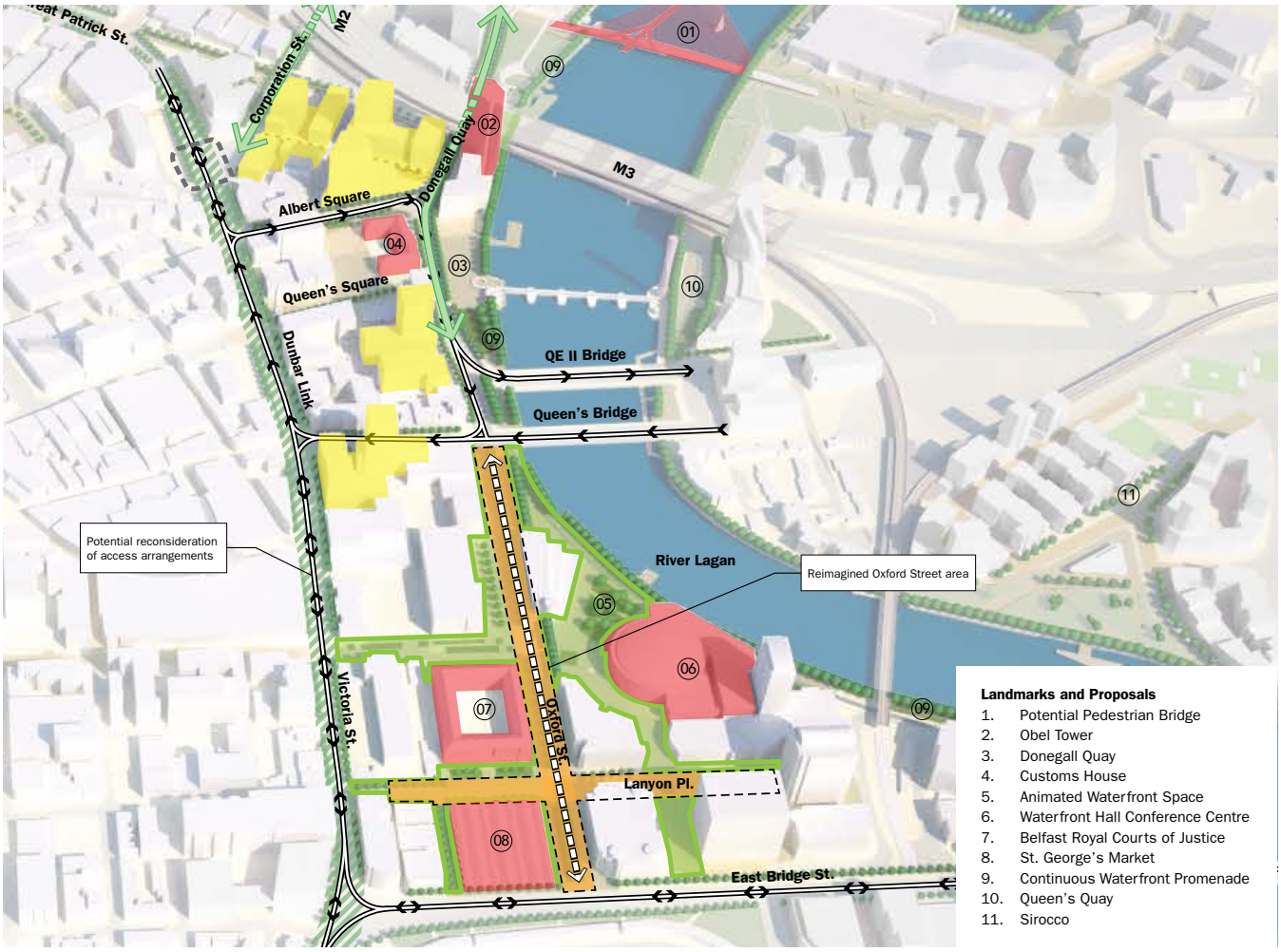


Projects and Places in the City Centre

Oxford Street and the Eastern Bank

The regeneration strategy suggests the significant re-working of the one-way system along the west bank of the River Lagan between Albert Square and East Bridge Street in order to achieve a more connected and pedestrian-friendly relationship between the river, the St George's Market, Waterfront Hall (now undergoing expansion) and the balance of the city centre. Central to the proposals is the traffic calming of Oxford Street, to make it a unifying rather than dividing street. To ensure a comparable level of quality in the public realm on the eastern bank of the river, the design of the river frontage in Queen's Quay and Sirocco also requires careful attention in the SAA. The plan for the SAA should therefore focus on traffic movement, local access, road investment, street landscaping and open space design, as well as identifying and promoting the premium development opportunities on the riverfront and recreational, retail/food and event opportunities such a transformative plan could foster.

Not to scale. For illustrative purposes only.



Reimagined Street Connecting to River
Historic Buildings & Landmarks
Development Opportunities
Inner Ring Road - Public Realm & Streetscaping
Open Space / Recreation Opportunities
Enhanced Community Connection
Super Crossing

05 Implementation

The strategy has been developed following extensive consultation and engagement with partners and stakeholders. Now that it has been finalised, we need to focus on delivery as we will only realise our aspirations for the city centre by ensuring that the projects, policies and opportunities described are followed through and delivered.

The next step involves developing implementation plans including, but not limited to:

- Plans for each of the Special Action Areas,
- Exploring potential for public realm schemes and enhancing city streets,
- Furthering regeneration schemes including the North East Quarter,
- Supporting major projects including the proposed Transport Hub and Belfast Rapid Transit,
- Consideration of the social impacts of the Strategy and development of a social impact plan,
- Development of a city transport and parking strategy,
- Creating a plan for the digital and creative sector,
- Development of a festivals strategy, and
- Creation of a cultural plan.

Other plans and strategies will also undoubtedly follow, all of which will be shaped by the emerging Belfast Agenda.

The council has now established a City Centre Development Fund which we will use to kick start some projects in partnership with the private sector. The stakeholders from across the city who were central in developing the strategy also have vital roles to play in delivering it. We will therefore continue to work in partnership on its implementation for the benefit of everyone in the city.