

Scoping Report

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Belfast Community Plan (Belfast Agenda)

1.0 Introduction

This document constitutes Belfast City Council's Scoping Report for the preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment of its Community Plan (Belfast Agenda). It is prepared in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programme (NI) Regulations 2004.

The Community Plan is a statutory document that provides an insight into the future strategic direction the Council wants to take in respect of improving its economic, social and environmental wellbeing.

2.0 Contents and main objectives of Community Plan (Belfast Agenda)

The contents of the Community Plan (Belfast Agenda) broadly consist of the following:

- A Shared vision and shared outcomes for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the Belfast City Council area in the long term.
- Strategic priorities in the short to medium term for collaborative working between city partners and for sustainable improvement of services and wellbeing (economic, social and environmental) in the city.
- Ambitions, goals and indicators against which progress in achieving the outcomes can be monitored.

The contents of the Community Plan are tabulated in the A3 and A4 spreadsheets attached to the rear of this report.

3.0 Relationship with other plans

In many respects the Community Plan is the strategic forerunner of the Belfast Local Development Plan (LDP) and, according to legislation, the latter must take into account the former.

With this in mind, it is important to note that work has commenced on the preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) as part of the Sustainability Appraisal for the LDP. This will cover the same area as the Community Plan.

Other relevant documentation for this SEA includes:

- Regional Development Strategy 2035
- Biodiversity Strategy for NI 2020
- Sustainable Development Strategy NI 2010
- NI Waste Management Strategy 2013

- Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021
- A New Approach to Regional Transportation 2012
- Air Quality Strategy for England, Scotland, Wales and NI, 2007
- Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA) NI 2012
- SPPS 2015
- Preliminary Flood Risk Assessment (NI) 2011
- Living with Water Programme: Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan 2015
- Marine Plan for NI (draft 2016)
- Belfast Local Biodiversity Action Plan 2007
- Air Quality Reports (2010 onwards)
- Belfast City Centre Access & Mobility Study 2008 (DSD & DRD)
- Conservation Objectives for Belfast Inner and Outer Lough SPAs 2015 (NIEA)
- Belfast Lough Local Management Area Action Plan
- Belfast Urban Regeneration Potential Study Update 2012 (DSD)
- Queen's Quay Masterplan 2013 (DSD)
- Belfast Integrated Tourism Strategy 2015-2020
- Belfast Integrated Economic Strategy 2015-2020
- Belfast City Council Air Quality Action Plan 2015-2020

4.0 Existing baseline environment

While the existing environment is, for the most part, urban in character there are a number of key natural heritage designations in Belfast. These are itemized below, together with those for the built heritage.

Natural heritage

- Lagan Valley Regional Park Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)
- Belfast Lough Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site.
- Belfast Lough Open Water SPA
- 4 Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) – Inner Belfast Lough, Craigantlet Woods, Bellevue, Belvoir
- 60 Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCI).
- 4 Local Nature Reserves

In addition to the above there are the Belfast Hills (Areas of High Scenic Value), River Lagan, Parks and 86 Local Landscape Policy Areas (LLPAs).

Built heritage

- Circa 1330 listed buildings
- 13 Conservation Areas
- 57 Areas of Townscape Character
- 35 Scheduled Monuments
- 104 buildings and monuments listed on the Risk Register
- Belfast City Centre Area of Archaeological Potential.

5.0 Environmental Issues

The chief environmental issues pertaining to the Belfast Community Plan relate to the need to reconcile the Plan's aspirations to increase the residential population and employment levels with the need to protect the environment. These include:

- Air and Environmental Quality (including noise) – reducing reliance on private transport
- Waste Management – meeting landfill obligations
- Sewage capacity – investment in infrastructure required
- Biodiversity, flora and fauna – ensuring their protection in a mainly urban environment
- Cultural and built heritage – protecting the built heritage from insensitive redevelopment
- Landscape – safeguarding the unique setting of Belfast
- Flood risk (Climate change) – management & mitigation required
- Coast, marine and river – meeting licensing requirements and ensuring water quality

6.0 Approach to SEA

It is considered appropriate to undertake a high level strategic environmental assessment of the Community Plan and to defer the comprehensive detailed methodological assessment, as outlined in guidance, to the Sustainability Appraisal required of the LDP process. The Sustainability Appraisal incorporates the Strategic Environmental Assessment for Belfast. This approach is recommended for a number of valid reasons:

- As per Regulation 11 (3d) of the 2004 Regulations it will avoid duplication of the strategic environmental assessment.
- As per Regulation 11 (3c) of the 2004 Regulations the detailed contents of the strategic environmental assessment are best reserved for the LDP process, given its material weight in determining proposals on the ground that are likely to have significant environmental effects.

As in the case of the SEA prepared in 2016 for the Fermanagh and Omagh Community Plan, the approach to the SEA for the Belfast Community Plan will largely comprise the following stages:

- Scoping
- Assessment
- Consideration of mitigation, alternatives and monitoring

7.0 Scope and level of detail of SEA

In recognition of the above approach, the scope and level of detail in the SEA will focus on those matters that have the potential for adverse effects on the environment. These will include the following:

- Assess the Long Term Outcomes and Ambitions for 2035 particularly in relation to residential and economic growth.
- Assess the 4 groups of Priorities and stretch goals for 2021. This will involve their evaluation against SEA objectives collectively classified as natural environment, built environment and social environment. Emphasis here will be on the Priorities titled “Growing the Economy” and “City Development”. It is not necessary to environmentally test the set of priorities titled “Working and learning” as they are educationally based and, in terms of environmental effects, have little relevance for assessment. Equally, the assessment of Priorities titled “Living Here” will be limited to a small number of considerations, given that most of them positively resonate with the SEA objectives and indicators for Population and Human Health outlined in Appendix 5 of the 2005 ODPM guidance.
- Environmentally assess the workstreams linked to the above priorities, where feasible to do so.
- Consider mitigation, alternatives and additional monitoring indicators where applicable.

8.0 Conclusion

The high level, focused findings of this Strategic Environmental Assessment are intended to complement rather than duplicate the comprehensive and detailed Sustainability Appraisal that is in the process of being prepared for the Belfast Local Development Plan. In this regard, its primary focus is on ensuring that environmental protection is enshrined within the Community Plan.

Sharon McNicholl
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