



Topic Paper: Urban Design & Built Heritage

Local Development Plan 2020-2035



Belfast
City Council

Executive Summary

Context

The urban environment encompasses the totality of the built form of the city. It includes recent and contemporary developments and our built heritage assets – including archaeology, scheduled monuments, listed buildings, conservation areas, areas of townscape character, historic parks and gardens, historic buildings of local importance and vernacular heritage structures.

The Regional Development Strategy notes that cities, towns, villages and many neighbourhoods have unique identities and these should be recognised and built upon and enhanced.

SPPS includes planning principles to support good design and positive place-making whilst aiming to preserve and improve the built and natural heritage.

Urban Design:

One of the key themes emerging from background studies has established a number of key urban design problems within Belfast and the city core.

- **Connectivity** : Severance impact caused by the Westlink / M3 Bridge has fractured inner city communities from the city centre, thus creating pedestrian hostile environments – future plans should aim to re-stitch and improve connectivity
- **Design Quality** : The character, street rhythm and enclosure, quality of public domain, ease of movement, legibility, adaptability, diversity of land use and integration of built form, land use and transport all help play integrals roles in how a city functions on a daily basis for those who chose to work, live and socialise within the urban fabric.
- **Tall Buildings**: Can play an effective role within cities if they contribute to a cluster, draw attention to civic / visual importance, give focus to regeneration areas and provide new architectural icons. New policy may identify sites for taller buildings that account for city assets.

Built Heritage:

- **Legibility**: Good urban areas are legible (they can be read like a book), with recognisable routes, intersections and landmarks to Belfast help people navigate their way around.
- **Built heritage in numbers**: 13 Conservation Areas and 57 Areas of Townscape Character including the need for Article 4 Directions.
- **Pressures**: Demand for taller buildings as replacement of historic buildings.
- **Trees**: Offer character, amenity and aesthetic qualities – no protection of trees in ATCs in same way as trees within CAs.
- **Signage**: In some places a plethora of signage represents visual clutter.

Historic Buildings:

- **Regeneration**: Creative ideas into how abandoned derelict historic buildings can be reutilised to appreciate the rich historic built form whilst also exploring economic gains.
- **Opportunities**: To produce site specific policies for the protection of the setting of key listed / historic buildings.

Evidence Base	Social, Economic & Environmental Factors
<p>Urban Design Assess the opportunity to develop a series of masterplans for edge of city centre areas to promote a better sense of arrival into the city centre</p> <p>Evaluate the potential for masterplans to show how urban fabric, can be re-established around the proposed York Street Interchange, linking the Docks area to the city centre, and reducing the severance impact of the west of the city from the city centre resulting from the Westlink.</p> <p>Examine the possibility that strategic views should be identified to protect views that provide city identity - including key views into and out of Conservation Areas.</p> <p>Explore how taller buildings can be accommodated through identification of suitable sites.</p> <p>To provide a policy framework that would encourage the completion of an orbital boulevard around the city centre</p> <p>Conservation Areas, Areas of Townscape Character Need to formulate new, locally specific built heritage policies in relation to Conservation Areas and Areas of Townscape Character to ensure that change can be managed so as to protect their character, including the setting of key landmark buildings. These may include the demand for higher density developments, cumulative erosion of character through small scale changes.</p> <p>Encourage awareness of the value of the city's built heritage assets and how these can contribute positively to economic regeneration.</p> <p>Ongoing need to review and assess each of the 13 Conservation Areas and 57 Areas of Townscape Character – including the need for Article 4 Directions.</p>	<p>It is imperative the LDP policies ensure the preservation and protection of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Archaeological sites and monuments. • The local and historic significance of non designated heritage assets • Historic buildings through sensitive adaption and reuse • Areas of the City Centre where important buildings contribute to the legibility of the City as an historic Victorian/Edwardian commercial area so to address the legacy of poor shop frontages and signage. <p>The economic benefits of good urban design practices and the retention of built heritage can have a multiplier effect including locational desirability; and add to the product of Belfast as a heritage tourism destination.</p> <p>Continued use / re-use of buildings will make a positive contribution to the local environment, especially if the area has special historic or architectural qualities.</p> <p>Listed Buildings Formulating new, locally specific built heritage policies in relation to listed buildings including change of use and for the protection of the setting of listed buildings. The plan should provide a framework of socio economic policies encouraging restoration and re-use of listed buildings</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities for Growth</p> <p>To explore the creation of new landmarks through public art / sculpture</p> <p>To explore the potential for urban design to tackle hard interfaces located throughout the city thereby tackling community division.</p> <p>Shatter zones created by road infrastructure has impacted negatively on communities causing severance in and within communities thus exacerbating social marginalisation where the urban form has broken down causing creating urban blight and areas which lack definition.</p>

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this Topic Paper is to provide members with an overview of the urban environment issues in the Belfast City Council area and considers potential ways forward.
- 1.2 The purpose of the planning system is to secure the orderly and consistent development of land to facilitate sustainable patterns of growth and development whilst protecting and, where appropriate enhancing the natural and man-made environment. To achieve this aim it is essential that the development needs of society are properly identified.
- 1.3 This is one of a series of 17 topic papers which have been put together to inform the Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report for the Belfast Local Development Plan (LDP).
- 1.4 Each topic paper provides a summary of the evidence base required for the Sustainability Appraisal, Preferred Options Paper and Local Development Plan. They establish a baseline position and identify the key issues that need to be addressed.
- 1.5 By combining the evidence gathering stages for both the Sustainability Appraisal and Local Development Plan, we aim to streamline the documentation produced and avoid duplication. It will also help to ensure that sustainable development is embedded in the planning process and that sustainability appraisal is one of the main drivers informing the preparation of the Local Development Plan.
- 1.6 Each topic paper can be read separately but, inevitably, there are important related matters in other topic papers and background evidence.

Member Workshops

- 1.7 The series of topic papers provide elected members with baseline information to inform the preparation of the Local Development Plan. As such the information presented within this topic paper is intended to:
 - Build the capacity of the members to make informed planning decisions, particularly within the plan making context;
 - To provide a baseline synopsis of the urban environment issues facing the plan;
 - To set out options for a future vision for the urban environment of Belfast
- 1.8 These papers were presented to members for discussion at a series of informal workshops with Planning Committee Members throughout the Spring 2016, with key issues and opportunities for the City identified for consideration.
- 1.9 The original Topic paper entitled 'Urban Environment (Urban Design & Built Heritage) was presented at a workshop on 21st April 2016. It has since been updated to ensure the statistics referenced are up to date for publication alongside the Preferred Options Paper.

2.0 Policy Context

Regional Policy

- 2.1 The Regional Policy Context is provided by the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and regional policy statements. A summary of these documents as they pertain to plan making and urban environment policy is provided in the following sections.

Regional Development Strategy

Policy RG7 Support urban and rural renaissance

- 2.2 This policy notes that cities, towns, villages and many neighbourhoods have unique identities and these should be recognised and built upon and enhanced. It states that urban renaissance is the process of development and redevelopment in urban areas to attract investment and activity, foster revitalisation and improve the mix of uses, acknowledging that this can include the reuse of both listed buildings and of locally important buildings, particularly the reuse of vernacular buildings and industrial heritage buildings / structures. It seeks to ensure that environmental quality in urban areas is improved and maintained, particularly with adequate provision of green infrastructure, with greater significance being given to the design and management of the public realm.

Policy RG11: Conserve, protect and, where possible, enhance our built heritage and our natural environment

- 2.3 This policy notes that effective care of the environment provides very real benefits in terms of improving health and wellbeing, promoting economic development and addressing social problems which result from a poor quality environment.
- 2.4 It acknowledges that the region has a rich and diverse built heritage which contributes to our sense of place and history, represents a key tourism and recreational asset and notes that sustainable management of the built heritage makes a valuable contribution to the environment, economy and society.
- 2.5 An element of the policy is to identify, protect and conserve the built heritage, including archaeological sites and monuments, historic buildings and built heritage assets within cities towns and villages, including our historic townscape, Conservation Areas, key civic and publicly-accessible buildings, as well as everyday dwellings and shops. If these assets are recognised and managed they can make a positive contribution to regeneration. This will allow the maintenance of craft skills, and the development of a sense of place that can be respected by future development. It calls for the integrity of built heritage assets, including historic landscapes, to be maintained - including their surroundings.

Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS)

- 2.6 The SPPS was adopted in September 2015 to replace DOE PPSs as an aid to shorten and simplify the guidance. Core Planning Principles within this document include –
- Supporting Good Design and Positive Place-Making
 - Preserving and Improving the Built and Natural Environment

- 2.7 This notes that good design can change lives, communities and neighbourhoods for the better. It can create more successful places to live, bring communities together, and attract business investment. It can further sustainable development and encourage healthier living; promote accessibility and inclusivity; and contribute to how safe places are and feel.
- 2.8 It outlines that design involves shaping how all elements of the built and natural environment relate to each other through the construction of new buildings, restoration and redevelopment of historic buildings, creation of public spaces and environmental improvements.
- 2.9 It states that Good design identifies and makes positive use of the assets of a site and the characteristics of its surroundings to determine the most appropriate form of development, and also that design is an important material consideration in the assessment of all proposals and good design should be the aim of all those involved in the planning process and must be encouraged across the region. Particular weight should be given to the impact of development on existing buildings, especially listed buildings, monuments in state care and scheduled monuments, and on the character of areas recognised for their landscape or townscape value, such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Conservation Areas, Areas of Townscape Character and Areas of Special Archaeological Interest.
- 2.10 It states that new buildings and their surroundings have a significant effect on the character and quality of a place, defining public spaces, streets and vistas and creating the context for future development. It also states that place-making is a people-centred approach to the planning, design and stewardship of new developments and public spaces that seeks to enhance the unique qualities of a place, how these developed over time and what they will be like in the future; key to successful place-making is identifying the assets of a particular place as well as developing a vision for its future potential, the relationship between different buildings; the relationship between buildings and streets, squares, parks, waterways and other spaces; the nature and quality of the public domain itself; the relationship of one part of a village, town or city with other parts; and the patterns of movement and activity that are thereby established.
- 2.11 The RDS notes that the quality of our local environment is of exceptional quality providing an important contribution to our sense of place, history and cultural identity, a rich and diverse archaeological and built heritage as well as a distinctive and beautiful landscape. It notes that it plays a critical role in supporting the local economy.
- 2.12 It notes that its management requires conserving, protecting and enhancing the environment whilst ensuring it remains responsive and adaptive to the everyday needs of society, a wider objective of furthering sustainable development.

Listed Buildings

- 2.13 The SPPS recognises that listed Buildings of special architectural or historic interest are key elements of our built heritage and are often important for their intrinsic value and for their contribution to the character and quality of settlements and the countryside.
- 2.14 It stresses that development may be permitted where this will secure the ongoing viability and upkeep of the building, providing it respects its essential character and setting.
- 2.15 It notes that it may be appropriate for a LDP to highlight particular listed buildings and their settings which are integral to the character and inform broader heritage designations.

2.16 Similarly it notes that development in or adjacent to Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes, should take account of the impact of the proposal on the archaeological, historical or botanical interest of the site. The SPPS states that councils should identify Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes along with their settings through the LDP, having regard to the register and supplementary lists; and bring forward local policies or proposals for the protection of the overall character and integrity of these distinctive areas.

2.17 The spatial extent of the current 1334 listed buildings within the Council Area are shown in figure 1 below:

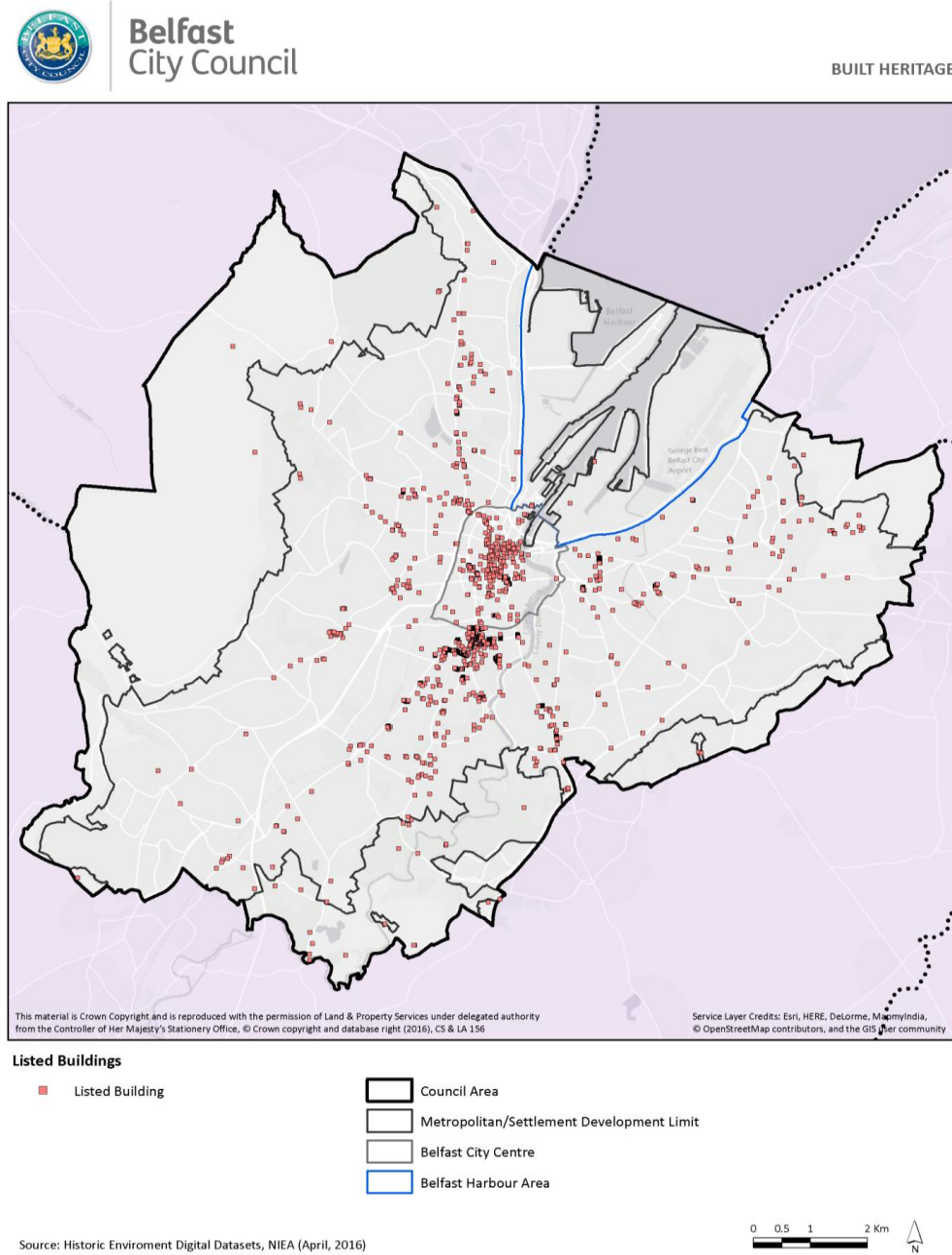


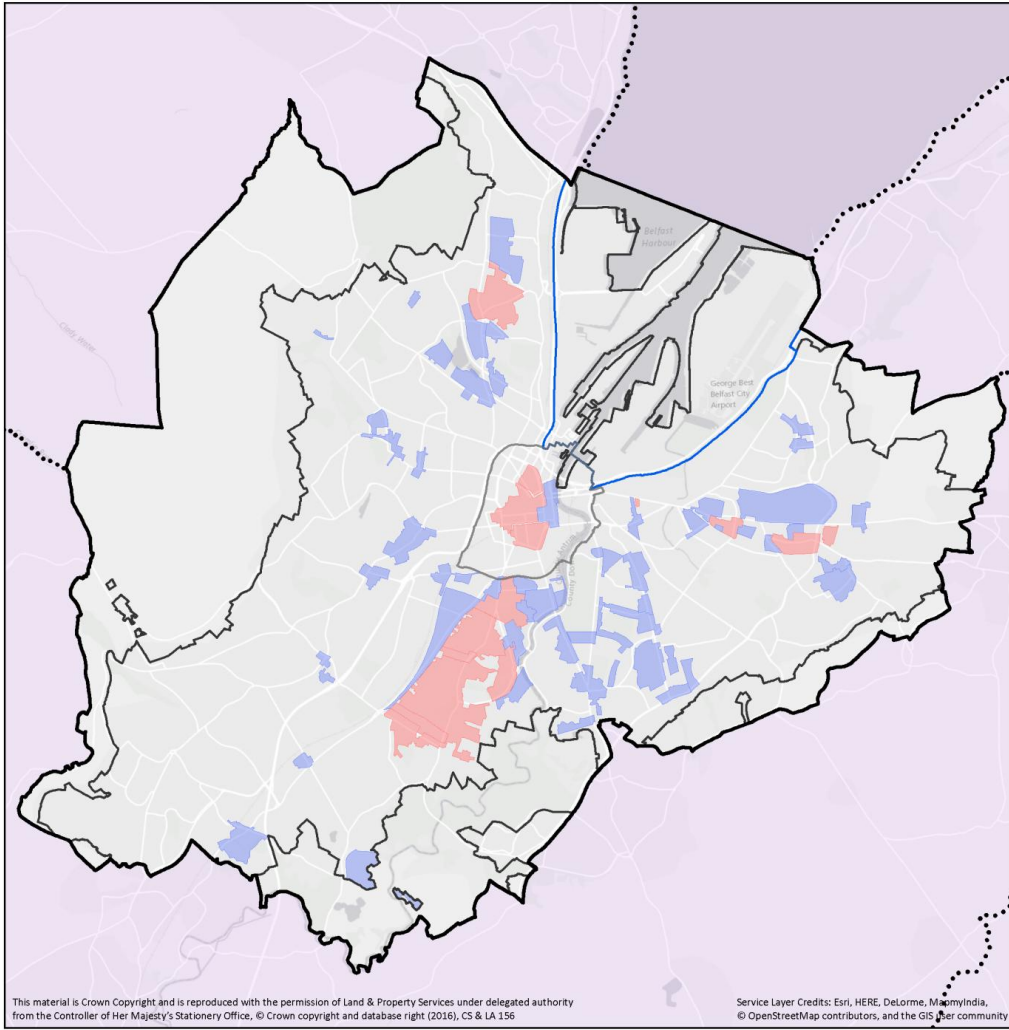
Figure 1
Listed Buildings

Conservation Areas

- 2.18 There are 13 Conservation Areas within the Council Area. The SPSS notes that in managing development within a designated Conservation Area the guiding principle is to afford special regard to the desirability of enhancing its character or appearance where an opportunity to do so exists, or to preserve its character or appearance where an opportunity to enhance does not arise. Accordingly, there will be a general presumption against the grant of planning permission for development or conservation area consent for demolition of unlisted buildings, where proposals would conflict with this principle.
- 2.19 In relation to the setting of designated Conservation Areas, new development in proximity needs to be carefully managed so as to ensure it respects its overall character and appearance. Important views in and out of the Conservation Area should be retained.
- 2.20 In the interests of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a Conservation Area, development proposals should be sympathetic to the characteristic built form of the area and respect the characteristics of adjoining buildings in the area by way of its scale, form, materials and detailing. The SPSS notes that the LDP may include local policies or proposals for their protection and / or, enhancement.

Areas of Townscape Character (ATC)

- 2.21 There are 57 Areas of Townscape Character within the Council Area. The SPSS notes that in managing development within ATCs designated through the LDPs process, the council should only permit new development where this will maintain or enhance the overall character of the area and respect its built form. It states that local policies or proposals and guidance for such areas should also be included in the plan or, where appropriate, in supplementary planning guidance. The spatial extent of these designations is shown in figure 2 below:



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Conservation Areas and Areas of Townscape Character

- | | |
|---|---|
| Conservation Area | Council Area |
| Area of Townscape Character/
Area of Village Character | Metropolitan/Settlement Development Limit |
| | Belfast City Centre |
| | Belfast Harbour Area |

Source: Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (Adopted September 2014)



Figure 2 – Conservation Areas & ATC's

Planning Policy Statement 6 – Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage (PPS 6)

2.22 PPS 6 contains policies related to:

- Archaeological Sites and Monuments
- World Heritage Sites
- Historic Parks, Gardens and Demenses
- Listed Buildings
- Conservation Areas
- Industrial Heritage
- Non Listed Vernacular Buildings

Archaeological Sites and Monuments

2.23 Archaeological sites and Monuments may be taken into state care or scheduled for protection under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995. These are identified in Development Plans which may also designate areas of significant archaeological interest (ASAs). PPS6 outlines the following policies:

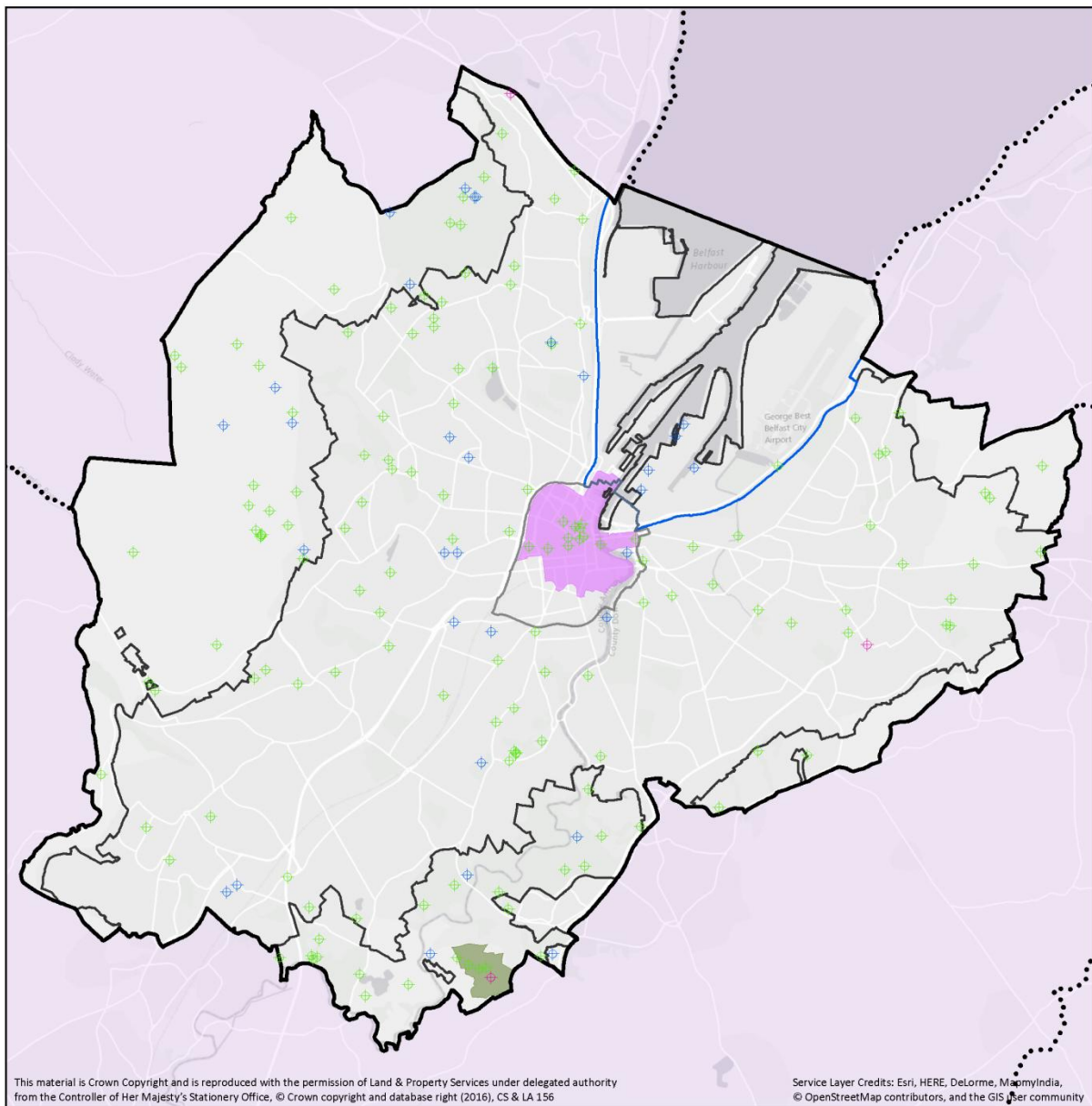
BH1 - The Preservation of Archaeological Remains of Regional Importance and their Settings Policy

BH2 - The Protection of Archaeological Remains of Local Importance and their Settings Policy










BH3 - Archaeological Assessment and Evaluation

BH 4 - Archaeological Mitigation

2.24 These policies seek to preserve and prevent development which would have an adverse impact on archaeological sites and monuments. The impact of development proposals on archaeological remains will require developers to submit archaeological evaluation / assessment reports. Conditions may be imposed on developments to mitigate the archaeological impacts of a development. Figure 5 below outlines the designated archaeological areas and monuments / sites within the Plan area.



Archaeology

-  Area of Significant Archaeological Interest
-  Area of Archaeological Potential
- Archaeological Sites & Monuments:
 -  State Care
 -  Scheduled
 -  Unscheduled
-  Council Area
-  Metropolitan/Settlement Development Limit
-  Belfast City Centre
-  Belfast Harbour Area

Source: Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (Adopted September 2014) and Historic Environment Digital Datasets, NIEA



Figure 3 – Archaeological designations

Historic Parks, Gardens and Demenses

- 2.25 Policy BH6 of PPS6 seeks to protect Parks, Gardens and Demenses of Special Historic Interest.

Listed Buildings

- 2.26 PPS6 outlines a number of policies in relation to Listed Buildings:
- BH 7 Change of Use of a Listed Building
 - BH 8 Extension or Alteration of a Listed Building
 - BH 9 The Control of Advertisements on a Listed Building
 - BH 10 Demolition of a Listed Building
 - BH 11 Development affecting the Setting of a Listed Building
- 2.27 The above policies relate to buildings listed as being of special architectural or historic interest. Permission will be granted for change of use of a listed building to ensure its ongoing use and its character is preserved. Under these policies alteration works should also ensure that the essential character of the building is preserved and that materials and details are retained. Advertisements are expected to respect the architectural form and detailing of the building. There is an operational assumption in favour of retaining listed buildings, and refusing developments which would adversely affect the setting of a listed building.

Conservation Areas

- 2.28 PPS6 outlines a number of policies in relation to conservation areas:
- BH 12 New Development in a Conservation Area
 - BH 13 The Control of Advertisements in a Conservation Area
 - BH 14 Demolition in a Conservation Area
- 2.29 Policies for Conservation Areas seek to ensure that new development preserves or enhances the character and appearance of the area, development is in sympathy with the traditional built form of the area, views and landscaping features (including trees and protected). The policies also state that extensions should be sensitive to the building extended. A more exacting standard of advertisement will also be expected. They also state that there is a presumption in favour of retaining a building that makes a positive contribution to the character or appearance Conservation Area.

Local Policy Context

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP)

2.30 A Technical Supplement to the plan contained an Urban Design Study whose Terms of Reference was to focus on the following areas; Belfast City Centre, the River Lagan, Arterial Routes and Town centres (Bangor, Lisburn and Carrickfergus), and:

- Analyse local character making reference to historical context, urban grain, street pattern, building blocks, height and massing of buildings, architectural style, building lines, views, public space, Patterns of movement, landscape, topography and nature of uses and activities;
- Identify characteristics of the local environment which are considered to be positive and which new buildings and space should respect and reinforce;
- Identify characteristics of the local environment which are considered to be detrimental and which harm the overall character of the area;
- Establish strategic design guidance with particular emphasis on key and / or sensitive parts of each area. The guidance should include recommendation on height and massing of buildings, building lines, the relationship between buildings and the relationship between buildings, streets, open space and the general public realm. Specific advice should be given on the appropriateness of high buildings in identified areas; and
- Establish strategic priorities for improving the quality of the visual environment, particularly at key parts referred to above. This could include, for example, the creation of new public space or the enhancement, improvement of pedestrian linkages, streetscape, public art, the introduction of landmark buildings and mixed development opportunities.

2.31 In terms of the existing urban structure, it identified:

- an East / West City centre spine (Grosvenor Road to May Street)
- a Secondary East West link (High Street)
- a Civic spine on Wellington Place / Chichester Street (RBAI to City Hall to Waterfront Hall).
- a North south link from Royal Avenue / Donegall Place to Bedford Street / Dublin Road)
- the Inner ring
- Westlink and M3
- Severance of the city centre caused by Westlink, M3, inner box, resulting in shatter zone of left over space, blight, little relationship with context and little frontage

This represents a Lynchian / legibility analysis at a city wide scale – refer to figure 3 below.

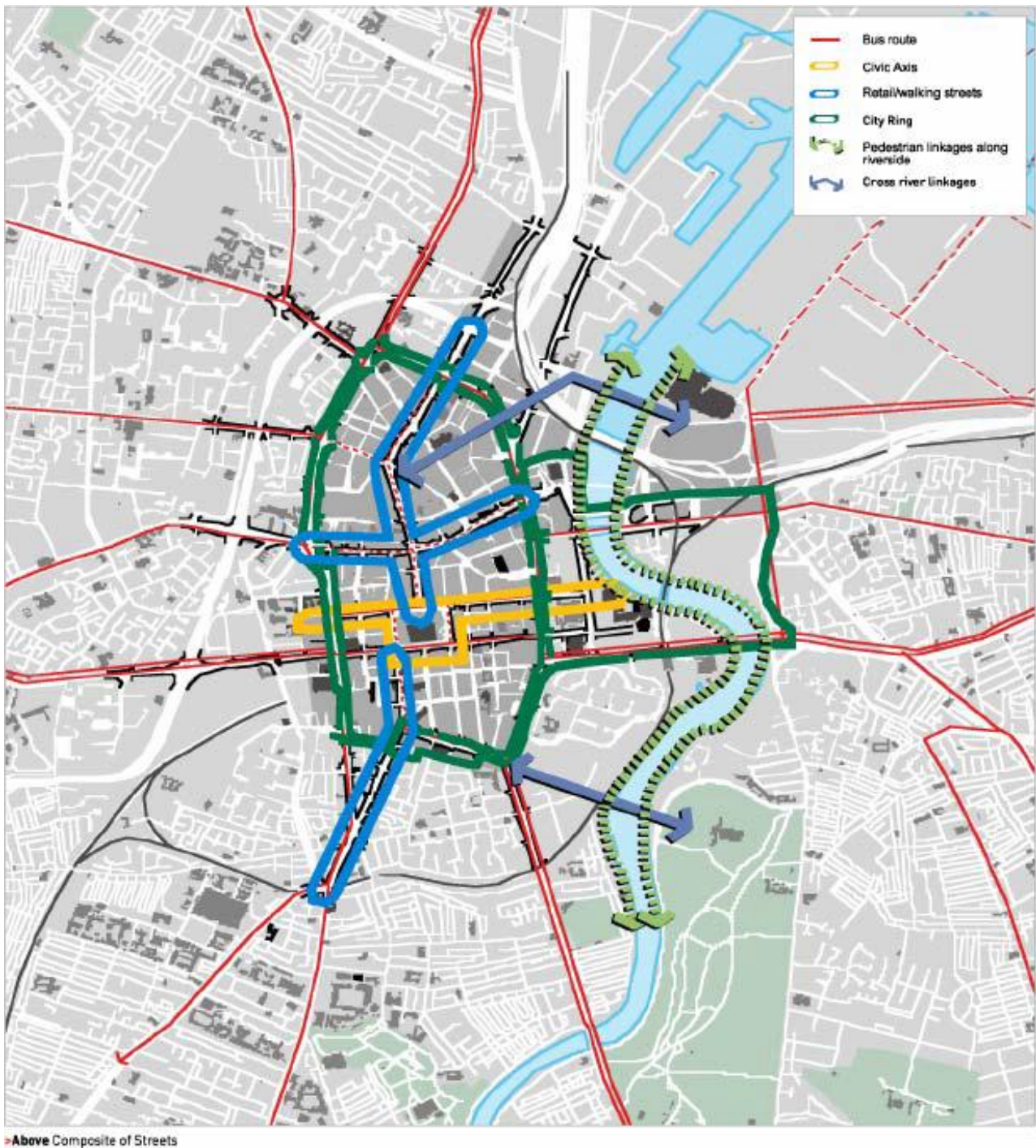


Figure 4 – Lynchian / legibility analysis of Belfast (Source: BMAP Technical Supplement 6 – Urban Environment)

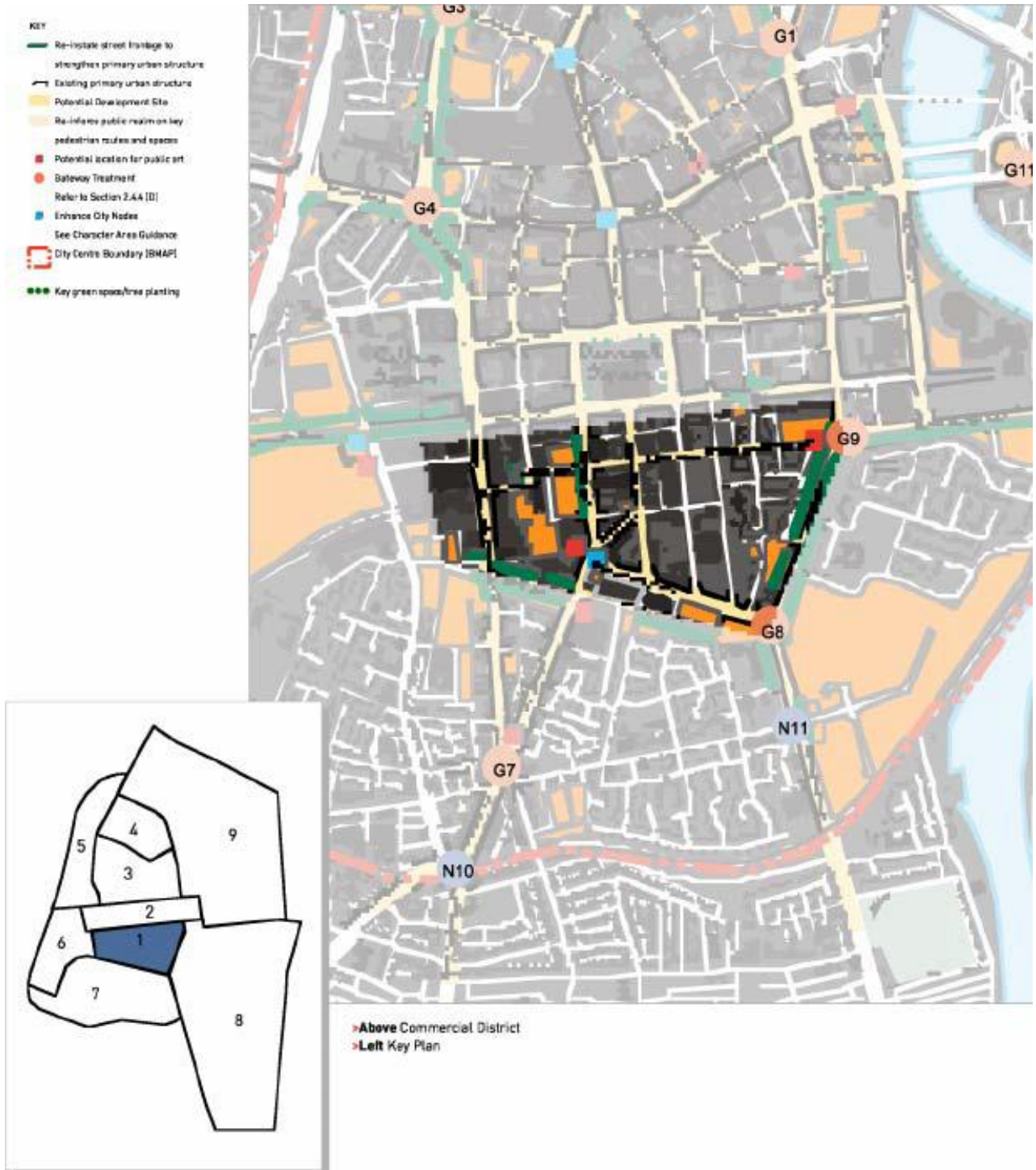
2.32 Key Urban design concepts underlying policy were:

- High Accessibility / High density Development Zones
- Character Areas
- City Centre Ring
- Belfast Cross
- Arterial Streets

These overlap with, for example, key streets / gateways fall within Character Areas

High Accessibility / High density Development Zones

2.33 Higher density development was proposed in accessibility zones - edge of centre transport interchanges - Grosvenor Road / Boyne Bridge, Central Station, Gamble Street. 9 Character Areas were identified – e.g. Commercial District, Civic Precinct, Old City, Scotch and Cathedral Quarters etc. Refer to figure 4 below.



- 2.34 The objective of these designations was to reinforce character as denoted by:
- Urban Structure and Grain - building size, plot size and street layout
 - Density and use Mix - ratio of built floor space to land area, diversity of uses
 - Scale: Height - minimum and maximum building heights
 - Scale: Street front massing - extent of subdivision of building block along street edge into a number of plots – i.e. grain
 - Key Streets
 - Nodes - important intersections which mark routes and assist orientation and way finding
 - Gateways - marking transition from inner suburbs to city centre requiring marker development
- 2.35 It identified similar themes to previous studies:
- Poor connections between parts of city
 - Poor public realm
 - Dominance of traffic (particularly at edges)
 - Poor street definition - many stretches of blank frontage
 - Recent development ignores existing context - grain, scale of streets and buildings
 - Under utilisation - vacant sites
 - Severance of city centre from Docks area
- 2.36 Common Objectives for the Character Areas were to:
- Create better links between different parts of city
 - Redevelop prominent vacant sites respecting scale and grain
 - Maintain a fine grain - continuous streets / plots / frontages
 - Promote Public Art
 - Continuous Riverside Walk / improved Crossings
 - Transform Inner ring to become urban boulevard
 - Increase building height / density to under-utilised sites
 - Design Statements for development at gateways / nodes
- 2.37 Guidance & Recommendations produced for the Character Areas included that relating to:
- Urban Structure; alignment; development hard to building edge (except where development creates significant open space)
 - Density and Mix Use: High Coverage / plot ratios / mix of uses
 - Scale: Height; Maintain character of varied heights and roofscape - minimum & maximum building heights formulated with taller building heights at gateways (e.g. min. 6 max 9 storeys - Commercial / min 3 storeys max 5 storeys; articulated roof form - Old City / min 3 max 5 storeys)
 - Scale: Massing; Variation in building grain, block / street frontage subdivision as guided by existing grain
 - Public Realm: Enhance public realm, paving, street furniture, landscaping
- 2.38 The latter was largely superseded by DSD's public realm scheme – 'Streets Ahead'.
- This document outlined **Key Streets** e.g. Boulevard, Main Street, Avenue, Cross City Axis. It also set out the features of a good street in urban design terms:
- Patterns - legibility through detailed scale, rhythms of subdivision of and height, frequency of gateways and nodes.
 - Variety – in terms of grain, architecture, skyline, uses, user experience etc.

- Enclosure - height to width ratio (open / narrow) / axial configuration (symmetrical, straight, curved, stepped)
- A Hierarchy of Movements - status and role affect legibility and usability

2.39 In relation to streets, it identified similar issues in relation to streets as those identified for character areas:

- Dominance of traffic
- Lack of consistency in materials / public realm
- Poor Public realm

2.40 Objectives for the key streets were to:

- Enhance character
- Consolidate City Structure
- Improve Cross city linkages
- Strengthen city centre to improve image / orientation

2.41 Guidance & Recommendations for key streets and gateways were:

- Min and Max Building Heights
- Façade Interface (building edge - zones for activity - interaction)
- Planting
- Public Realm - paving (Caithness stone / Granite kerb), street furniture, lighting; these were to reinforce character

2.42 These were **translated into policy** in BMAP 2015 Draft Plan - Part 4 Vol. 2 District Proposals in the form of Urban Design Criteria for each Character Area related to:

- Density
- Key Street: Street Frontages / gateways - Min and Max heights for buildings were set out
- Building Line – new development would respect the established building edge or with setbacks where appropriate to the use
- Massing - development was to shall reflect traditional plot widths / facades broken up visually to reflect traditional scale
- Other guidance stated that roof forms should be articulated with a broken roof silhouette and that new development should respect consistent plinth, cornice and string courses where appropriate

Operational issues in Implementing Urban Design Policies in BMAP

2.43 Previous approvals have undermined the ideal legibility scenario of a gradual increase in height as one approaches the city centre. There is a difficulty operationally in defending against a tall building when a tall building occurs on the adjacent site, e.g. Great Victoria Street, Queens Square etc or where planning history for a taller building exists – ‘tall building creep’.

Other local studies / plans & historical information

2.44 **The Draft Cultural Framework for Belfast Action Plan 2016-2020**, under theme one (Distinctly Belfast) includes an action to scope the potential for character and style guidelines to be included within planning processes by 2020. A further action would be to explore the option to develop an inventory of buildings of cultural significance by 2018 and

how this could be utilised by stakeholders to promote the conservation of Belfast's built heritage.

2.45 **The Linen Quarter Masterplan** focuses on the area to the rear of the City Hall. It seeks to improve the arrival experience through enhanced public realm at Brunswick Square, possible creation of a new open space at the junction of Linenhall Street, Clarence Street and Linen Hall Street West. It seeks creative and adaptive re-use of historic buildings and calls of guidance for new buildings to be produced.

2.46 Belfast City Corporation's **High Buildings Policy, 1968** outlined a concern at that time, expressed within the document, that high buildings would destroy the character of areas, streets and spaces, or would block historic views. It stated that high buildings should:

- not mar views of hills / views into city (from Lough, motorway, to Cathedral from Shankill), views from the city (city centre streets), views within the city (between Cathedral and Shankill / Castle Place to Quay);
- not dominate public open space;
- relate to other high buildings (Harbour, City Centre, University) / buildings of historic safeguard amenities (daylight, sunlight) of adjoining sites; and
- relate to transportation system.

2.47 The **Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 (adopted 89)** contained a number of urban environment related policies:

Conservation Strategy (for the gradual designation of)

- Policy C2 - Conservation Areas
- Policy C3 - Areas of Townscape Character

Landscape Strategy

- Policy L1 - The City Centre (environmental improvements, open space, landscaping)

City Centre Strategy

- Policy CC4 - City Centre Heritage (CA Designations)
- Policy CC6 - City Centre Renewal: Refurbishment of Buildings (encouraging mixed use, upgrading external environment)
- Policy CC8 - Environment (landscaping)
- Policy CC12 - High Buildings – this stated these should be sympathetic to traditional height with a plot ratio of 3 to 1 (gross floorspace to net site area).

Laganside Strategy

- Policy LS2 - Landscaping of Laganside (preparation of local planning schemes)
- Policy LS4 - Design of Riverside Development (new development to be of an urban scale with open spaces in the form of urban squares)

2.48 The **Belfast City Centre - Urban Design & Development Strategy (LDR International - 1993)** was a DOE urban design report commissioned for the city centre, which highlighted a number of problems:

- lack of high quality public realm
- poor quality open spaces
- lack of attractive public environment along river and linkages to city centre
- traffic and parking
- lack of housing in city centre

2.49 It contained a Framework for Environmental Improvements / Hierarchy of streetscapes, open spaces, and gateways:

- Streetscape Improvements - Pedestrian Streets, Pedestrian priority Streets and Image Streets (inner ring road boulevard and radial roads serving as gateways) (and associated landscaping, public realm, street furniture).
- Open Spaces - enclosed and outward orientated - Network of interconnected Streets and Open Spaces
- Linkages - To river via Victoria Square and Victoria Street, improvements to Queens Square and Custom House Square
- Gateways - sense of arrival through open space or articulated building form

2.50 It also contained a number of specific area proposals:

- Donegall Square;
- Shopping District;
- Office District;
- Cathedral District;
- Queens Square and Custom House Square.

2.51 **Urban design Objectives (CABE – By Design)** sets out generally accepted urban design principles, as below:

- Character (development should respond to local distinctiveness)
- Continuity and enclosure (definition of space and frontages)
- Quality of the public domain (streets / open spaces should be safe, attractive and functional)
- Ease of Movement (well connected, accessible, prioritise pedestrians)
- Legibility (image making / way finding through a mental mind map consisting of a framework of how we read an urban environment - Nodes, Edges, Paths, Districts, Landmarks)
- Adaptability (robust buildings that can accommodate a range of uses with varying economic demand over time).
- Diversity (promote a mix of uses)
- Integration and Diversity (sustainability by integrating built form, land use and transport).



Source: BMAP 2015

2.52 In summary it has been stated that:

Good urban areas are legible – they can be understood or read like a book
The goal of urban design has been given as the development of a strong urban image. This is the lacuna of much modern city planning.
To promote legibility through development that provides recognisable routes, intersections and landmarks to help people find their way around.

3.0 Issues and Approaches

3.1 The key issues for the Belfast City Local Development Plan area, in relation to the Urban Environment are set out below under the following headings:

- Urban Design
- Arterial Routes / Gateways
- Connectivity
- Tall Buildings
- Archaeology & Built Heritage
- Local Distinctiveness
- Energy Efficient Design

The paragraphs below provide a summary of the key issues of each subject and the potential approaches that could be taken forward within the LDP. Appendix 1 presents a more detailed narrative on the Plan Area supplemented by a montage of illustrations.

Urban Design – Issues

- 3.2 Good quality design is an integral part of sustainable development. Design quality matters and planning should drive up standards across all forms of development and seek to secure high quality design. This will enable the creation of permeable environments promoting ease of movement, shared space and balanced communities, as well as ensuring legible urban environments with a strong image, easy to read, understand and orientate through and the ability of development to adapt to socio-economic change. Good design will result in places functioning well, making them more attractive, safer, maximising site potential, responding appropriately to local character and contributing to sense of place.
- 3.3 Belfast has significant levels of dereliction and gap sites particularly within the city centre and inner core. It is therefore important to create places, buildings and spaces that are well connected, that work well for everyone, look good, last well, and will adapt to the needs of future generations. There is a need to enhance the quality of buildings, key routes and spaces, by considering amongst other things form and function; efficiency and effectiveness and their impact on well being and social cohesion.
- 3.4 Poor public realm has been an issue in Belfast, however this has changed recently within the city centre with implementation of the ongoing DSD Streets Ahead initiative. In the city centre there is a lack of public open space and lack of open space / squares linked by pedestrian walkways - e.g. Lanyon Place, Customs House square and riverside walkways are separated by hostile, traffic dominated spaces. There is a dominance of traffic (particularly at edges) creating a hostile environment for pedestrians and cyclists. Poor street definition is also an issue – there are many stretches of blank frontage with vacant / undeveloped / under-utilised sites.

Approaches

- 3.5 The following approaches should be given consideration in the context of the new LDP:
- The provision of clear and transparent design standards
 - Development proposals demonstrating how they are incorporating a high quality design approach
 - A pro-active response to dereliction and gap sites to re-establish the fabric of the city

- Creating places that are well connected and adaptable to future needs
- Particular attention on the contribution of high quality design to shared space, enhanced health and well-being, safety and security.

Arterial Routes / Gateways – Issues

- 3.6 Gateway corridors into the city centre help to promote a strong city image and an appropriate sense of arrival. The arterial routes that lead to these play an important role in connecting the city centre with its neighbouring areas and to the wider region, thereby influencing impressions of the city as people travel to Belfast to work, shop and be entertained. Many of the arterial routes and gateway corridors into the city require visual and physical enhancement. A large extent of the edge of centre area is given over to and dominated by a pedestrian hostile environment of traffic infrastructure. Approaches into the city from Bridge End, the Sydenham By-Pass are also a zone of discard and present a poor sense of arrival into the city – an inappropriate urban image in terms of legibility.
- 3.7 Investment in outer areas – Boucher, Abbeycentre, Titanic Quarter etc. may serve to undermine urban design objectives in the city centre such as recreating public spaces in the form of streets with definition and enclosure etc. if that investment has gone elsewhere. This suggests that a targeted approach to those areas in greatest need of improvement / intervention may be an appropriate way forward.

Approaches

- 3.7 The following approaches should be given consideration in the context of the new LDP:
- A focus on quality design, vibrancy and function of key arterial routes and city centre gateways
 - Promote key routes with a strong urban image, appropriate to the reading of these places as local centres, where people can live, work, shop and avail of entertainment opportunities, in a sustainable manner
 - Possibility of developing supplementary guidance to proactively target areas that have experienced fragmentation or severance of the urban form

Connectivity – Issues

- 3.8 There are areas of poor connectivity between parts of the city – this has resulted in physical separation of areas, difficulty of access and movement, and visual and psychological barriers. A ‘shatter-zone’ exists around the periphery of the city centre – with a high level of vacancy and urban blight etc. where the urban form has fragmented / broken down, with traffic dominance, lack of definition, frontage, enclosure and other urban design qualities. Social exclusion and development of segregated neighbourhoods may also result, compounding socio economic fragmentation in parts of the city.
- 3.9 Defensive architecture has often meant that development has been set back behind walls or other barriers, or has long blank frontages – which create dead frontage unattractive to pedestrian movement. Active street frontages promote vitality and surveillance of spaces making people feel safer. The issue is particularly pertinent due to the severance of the city centre from the Docks / Riverside and surrounding residential areas due to road infrastructure such as the M3, the Westlink motorway and cross-river rail bridges. Peace lines between different communities provide hard edges between particular communities and areas.

3.10 Particular issues have been identified with the following areas:

- The area between the river and the M3 Bridge – including the Sirocco site and the area between the Bridge End and Middlepath Street;
- The Docks Areas – including how connections will be improved between the area around Donegall Quay, Albert Quay and Corporation Square and the city centre
- The area bounded by the Westlink, Durham Street, Albert Street and the railway, subject to consideration of the proposed transport hub at this locality; and
- The area North of Castlecourt bounded by Smithfield Square North, Gresham Street, North Street and Millfield (Castlecourt itself presents a bulky, monolithic block severing permeability and links to the Library Quarter in terms of pedestrian flow / footfall
- The area around the proposed York Street Interchange at Corporation Street, York Street and Nelson Street (the severance impact at this location is likely to be exacerbated if the proposed works here go ahead)

Approaches

3.11 The following approaches should be given consideration in the context of the new LDP:

- Master Plans or Supplementary Guidance could be developed to identify specific development sites and guide development within them to enhance connectivity and assist in regeneration. This approach would provide strategic vision for these areas giving certainty for developers and the wider community. These would include provision for the public realm demonstrating how the areas can be made friendlier to pedestrians and cyclists.

Tall Buildings – Issues

3.12 The traditional legible structure of Belfast City has been broken down in the post war period with taller buildings occurring sporadically throughout the city – these previous developments have led to a somewhat random nature of tall buildings. More recently, an economic drive for tall buildings has resulted from prices paid for sites during the boom of the 2000s. The city centre represents the most sustainable location for taller buildings. This is an ongoing issue facing the city.

3.13 Whilst they perform important roles for the operational needs of the city (hospitals, educational buildings, office blocks and hotels etc.) consideration of the visual impact that taller buildings can have on key historic vistas and skylines needs to be taken into account. For example, the impacts they can have on views of other environmental assets such as the Belfast Hills or the setting of listed buildings. It is important to ensure that tall buildings do not have a negative impact on such features / buildings. Taller buildings also impact on economic activity, the amenity of surrounding uses and microclimate.

3.14 Tall Buildings may be acceptable in certain locations for example, if they:

- Contribute to a cluster
- Draw attention to locations of civic / visual importance (town centres / major transport interchanges)
- Contribute to an interesting skyline when grouped together
- Give focus / momentum to regeneration areas
- Form objects of long distance views
- Make a positive contribution to long distance orientation
- Provide new architectural icons for the new century

In legibility terms height / scale of buildings should increase as one approaches the tallest buildings of the city in the Central Business District – i.e. a legible increase in height as one moves closer to the city centre from the outer suburbs.

Approaches

3.15 The following approaches should be given consideration in the context of the new LDP:

- Existing key views and the setting of certain buildings and landmarks may warrant protection
- Option of general urban design policy in respect of tall buildings and/or requirement for minimum/maximum height guidance (as per BMAP)
- Directing taller buildings to sites where they can contribute to a strong urban image that



can aid legibility by providing landmarks, assisting way finding and orientation (accompanied by minimum/maximum height guidance)

- That any site identified will take account of key views in and out of designated Conservation Areas and key views of the hills surrounding the city

- A new policy may specifically state that just because a tall building exists on a site does not mean that a replacement tall building will be justified – e.g. Fanum House (Great Victoria Street – left)

Archaeology & Built Heritage – Issues

3.16 Belfast has a rich and varied built heritage recognised through the designation of 13 Conservation Areas and 57 Areas of Townscape Character. Its heritage assets are truly unique and reflect the city's particular evolution. The heritage evidence base set out in the Countryside Assessment charts the history and development of Belfast. This allows for areas which are likely to be of archaeological interest to be established. It also explores some of the influences that have shaped the development of Belfast and local styles of building and materials. It also sets out the extent of designated heritage assets within the city. Belfast also has 1300 Listed Buildings, 16 Scheduled Monuments, 19 registered Historic Parks and Gardens, one Area of Special Archaeological Interest (ASAI) and one potential ASAI.

3.17 In relation to built heritage there are ongoing pressures impacting negatively upon the character of Conservation Areas and Areas of Townscape Character:

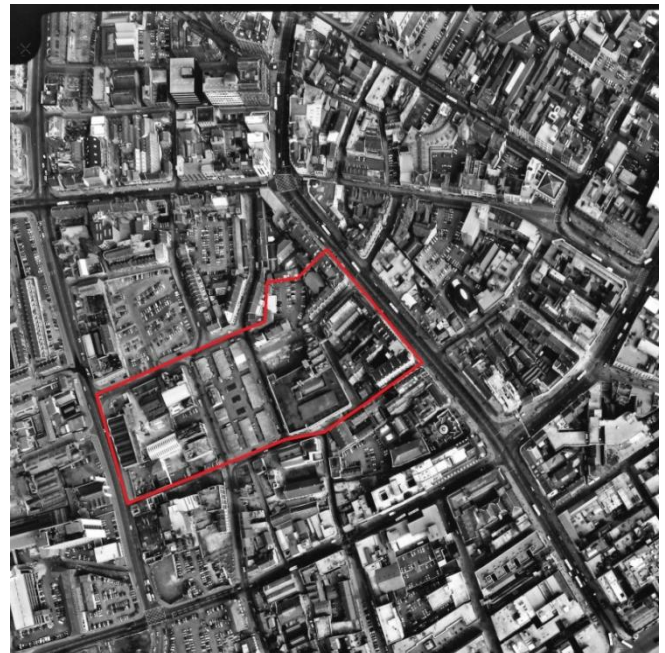
- Within the city centre there is an ongoing demand for taller buildings as replacement of historic buildings and on vacant sites;
- Within lower density designations ongoing pressure exists for replacement dwellings often to a higher density with associated need for car parking and loss of soft / amenity areas that contribute immensely to the character of these areas
- Trees within Areas of Townscape Character – often major contributors to their character, amenity and aesthetic qualities – are not protected in the same way as trees within Conservation Areas
- Within higher density designations pressures for HMOs, flat conversions, student accommodation etc. often result in the desire for large extensions vastly greater in bulk

than traditional rear offshoots that contribute to backland character. Backland areas to the rear of main frontage development add to character of an area as historic spaces that allow rear detailing (materials, brick bonding, dormers etc.), historic building layout and roof silhouette to be discerned. Historic returns also set up a rhythm in these subservient spaces. Traditional backland character is ascribed by a three dimensional massing of main blocks to the street frontage and subservient blocks to the rear - i.e. a clear hierarchy of place relationship.

- In detached and semi detached areas there is ongoing pressure for side extensions. Visual gaps between dwellings partly ascribe the character of this built heritage designations; these spaces allow appreciation of the visual depth of plots, the articulation of gables / side elevations with bay windows, stairwell windows, chimney flues, glimpses of the roofscape, backland character, landscaping elements beyond etc. These micro views add cumulatively to the character of the area.
- Minor changes often not requiring planning permission cumulatively erode the character of these designations, and this process is ongoing in many areas - loss of a historic chimney stack, removal of an original boundary structure, creation of a 'picture' window out of two openings of a vertical proportion, cladding over an historic elevation faced in brick, loss of historic window frames / doors, loss of front gardens etc.
- In some areas character has been eroded by a plethora of signage representing visual clutter

3.18 Important heritage buildings that contribute to legibility (reading of the city centre as an historic Victorian / Edwardian era commercial district) occur to the edge of the city centre without any statutory protection. However, within the city centre there is a legacy of many poor shop fronts and signage, undermining legibility and the creation of an aesthetically pleasing image. These present a poor shop window to the city for residents and visitors alike, whose main image of the city centre may be created by the ground level environment. Continuing investment in outer areas (such as Boucher, Titanic Quarter etc) may compound under-utilisation of the historic building stock.

3.19 The historic city centre photograph shows the grain of the area pre-development – with the image showing the area (outlined in red) where the historic grain / block structure and historic building fabric was lost to the 1980s development scheme.



Source: Land & Property Services

Approaches

3.20 The following approaches should be given consideration in the context of the new LDP:

- Identification of the heritage assets of the city, including additional policy criteria to address specific issues and demand pressures affecting the heritage assets in Belfast (as a supplement to the SPPS).
- Additional policy appropriate to the plan area will add value for developers and decision makers by creating greater certainty for investors, developers and individual property owners.
- Possible review of areas of Townscape Character
- Use of Article 4 Directions where appropriate

Local Distinctiveness – Issues

3.21 Local distinctiveness is important in promoting an individual sense of place, local identity and a place set apart from others in terms of character and uniqueness. The positive



features of a place and its people contribute to its special character and sense of identity. There is a danger that through globalisation, standard building practices, forms, products and architectural fashion can erode local distinctiveness and sense of place, creating an 'anywhere of place'. Designing for local distinctiveness involves the creative adaptation of latest building technologies with local building traditions and forms. Character and innovation are not incompatible. This will involve

responding to context such as topography, landscaping, existing grain, local building forms and materials, as well as the scale, massing and height of existing buildings.

3.22 There has been a propensity in recent years for new developments in many ways to mirror design approaches adopted elsewhere. Whilst this helps the city to build upon and utilise best practice, some concerns have been raised that this approach has compromised many of the key design elements which are unique to Belfast and help contribute to its character.

3.23 Some recent developments have ignored existing context - grain, scale of streets and buildings. In many areas there is a breakdown of character with lack of cohesion of frontages in terms of form / scale. May Street, for example (above, left) has a contemporary streetscape, however there is little reference to the parameters set by the context. Also, in relation to edge of city centre pathways into the city centre, in terms of legibility, these areas do not present an appropriately strong urban image in terms of height / scale of buildings. In many cases,



there is weak definition, lack of enclosure, lack of surveillance, dull materials, uninteresting roof silhouettes, failure to accentuate corners/key junctions etc. The image above of Shore Road shows inappropriate scale / enclosure in terms of hierarchy of place. Well designed corners enhance legibility by creating visual interest, providing identity and points of orientation. Corner marker buildings should be higher than surrounding buildings to emphasise distinctiveness and importance. They provide visual anchors with buildings (or features of) 'turning the corner'.

Approaches

3.24 The following approaches should be given consideration in the context of the new LDP:

- A stronger emphasis on the positive benefits to the appearance of the city which could be gained from their promotion through the LDP.
- Introduction of a general policy on local distinctiveness

Energy Efficient Design – Issues

3.25 Efficient use of natural resources is a key component of sustainable development. Therefore it is important that high standards of energy efficiency in development are promoted. Development is encouraged which takes energy efficiency into account in its design, if appropriate. The planning system can contribute to this objective by encouraging low carbon design approaches to reduce energy consumption in buildings, such as passive solar design.

3.26 There are a number of issues relating to energy efficiency that are relevant in the context of a new LDP:

- The Energy Efficiency Directive (EED) 2014 provides for the establishment of national energy efficiency target of 20% by 2020. This means that Buildings will have to be more energy efficient to reduce their need for energy and to reduce green house gas emissions.
- Most of today's buildings were designed for the climate that existed when they were built, and are not necessarily equipped to cope with current and future climates. Around 75% of the current building stock will be standing in 2050.
- In Belfast, homes and other buildings accounted for 80% of green house gas emissions in 2014 (from: 2005 to 2014, UK local and regional CO2 emissions: statistical summary).
- Northern Ireland has the highest utility bills of any region across the UK. High fossil fuel dependency is prevalent with a high percentage of homes in Belfast using oil for space heating.
- There are issues of energy security as fossil fuel has to be imported and increasing price volatility due to competition from other countries for the resource.
- Increasingly, new technology is being developed that will help society to shift to a low carbon future. Buildings will need to incorporate space for environmental monitoring, interactive portals, and connectivity to enable remote environmental monitoring for the management of energy usage.

Approaches

3.26 The following approaches should be given consideration in the context of the new LDP:

- Enabling householders and property owners to respond to energy uncertainty and future energy scarcity and to fully contribute to GHG emissions reductions to secure a low-carbon society that is adaptable to future needs and changes.
- Whilst changes to Building Regulations will mean that new homes will have to become more energy efficient, a BREEAM rating for energy efficiency for non-residential development could be specified, but consideration of the consequent impact on development viability in the city would be taken into account.

4.0 Opportunities

- 4.1 The city has numerous opportunities. Belfast has an attractive setting, with views of the hills from many places providing an attractive backdrop. It has an extensive riverside context with large stretches now accessible due to riverside walkways. These are attractive assets that can be utilised by new developments.
- 4.2 There is also the opportunity to develop a series of master plans for edge of city centre areas:
- the area between the river and the M3 Bridge – including the Sirocco site and the area between the Bridge End and Middlepath Street;
 - the Docks Areas – including how connections will be improved between the area around Donegall Quay, Albert Quay and Corporation Square and the city centre
 - the area bounded by the Westlink, Durham Street, Albert Street and the railway
 - the area North of Castlecourt bounded by Smithfield Square North, Gresham Street, North Street and Millfield
 - the Maysfield site
- 4.3 Development briefs may minimize uncertainty, speed up planning, promote development, identify constraints, stimulate interest, and set out design principles etc. They would provide a level of certainty for developers thereby facilitating inward investment and regeneration.
- 4.4 The new LDP would provide the opportunity to re-establish the urban fabric around the proposed York Street Interchange Corporation Street, York Street and Nelson Street – with potential for taller gateway buildings at the York Street, Westlink junction to visually link inner north Belfast to the city centre and provide a sense of arrival etc. It would also provide the opportunity to transform the inner ring around the city centre into a traffic-calmed orbital boulevard. There may be a need for proactive site assembly / creation (particularly on sites addressing the orbital boulevard).
- 4.5 Within the city centre in particular, there may be policy conflict between heritage and urban design – including developments that may have a detrimental impact on the setting of listed buildings. BMAP urban design guidance may conflict with character in terms of scale / height of street; it may adversely affect setting of listed buildings; or have an adverse impact on key views into or out of city centre conservation areas. A new Policy could state that where a conflict exists with conservation area policy / setting of listed building interests of heritage assets will prevail.
- 4.6 In relation to suburban Conservation Areas / Areas of Townscape Character there is an opportunity to replace policies contained in Planning Policy Statement 6 – Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage with a suite of locally specific policy / guidance responding to needs, demands and pressures specific to the Council area.
- 4.7 There may also be an opportunity to produce site specific policies for protection of the setting of key listed / landmark buildings within the city. The SPPS also permits the identification of non-designated heritage assets – building, structures or features which are not statutorily designated but are of local architectural or historic significance. These may include local halls, public houses, churches etc. that provide a sense of local identity and sense of place.
- 4.8 Belfast historically had a legible structure of urban villages though many have stretches of poor 'High Street' frontage in terms of definition / gap sites and poor frontages / facades, quality of retail offer and shop fronts. The latter and signage have much improved over

recent years with the Belfast City Council 'Renewing the Route' initiative. However an opportunity exists to restore, revitalise these village 'High Streets'. This could also facilitate the creation of better linkages between different parts of city.

- 4.9 There is an opportunity to redevelop prominent vacant sites respecting scale and grain for uses that will create a more sustainable, mixed use city and to further explore the creation of new landmarks through public art / sculpture. Also, to improve riverside crossings, as part of a continuous riverside walk.
- 4.10 There is a potential opportunity to create more rail halts to bring people in to higher density commercial developments without the need for transport by car and to create a more compact, legible city through developments that reinforce character and a sense of place. There is the opportunity to tackle community division and the hard interfaces located throughout the city with their associated vacant land through a process of community agreed urban design master plans for these areas, that may include open space accessible to all.
- 4.11 There is a possibility that strategic views should be identified to protect views that help provide city identity. This process may include identification of key / protected views from major public viewpoints (including views out of and into the Conservation Area). These would include protected views of the hills that help provide the city's identity and sense of place; e.g. westwards along Castle Place, east along High Street, westwards along Wellington Place, northwards along Victoria Street, westwards along Grosvenor Road, northwards along Royal Avenue and westwards along East Bridge Street.
- 4.12 The information contained within this topic paper has been used to inform the next stage of the LDP process, the Preferred Options Paper.

Table of Figures

No table of contents entries found.

Appendix A: Images

All photographs within the report, including below, unless stated, were taken by Belfast City Council's Conservation Officer during 2016



Poor shop frontages, city centre



Vacant units / 'confused' street character



Visual variety or visual discordance?



Blank frontage, North Street



Breakdown in coherent form & character



May Street - Historic streetscape - neighbourly, respectful of context, human scale



A shatter-zone around the periphery of city centre – with a high level of vacant sites, urban blight etc. where the urban form has fragmented / broken down, with traffic dominance, lack of definition, frontage, enclosure and other urban design qualities that constitute a good street in urban design terms.





Poorly defined node, York Street



Inappropriate scale / enclosure – Shore Road



Setbacks detrimental to street definition, Ormeau Avenue



Carrick Hill, Belfast

Tall Buildings:



High Street



Bedford Street



Queen's Square

Great Victoria Street



Landmark Buildings:



Ewarts Warehouse, Bedford Street, Belfast



Customs House, Custom House Square

St. Joseph's Church, Pilot Street



Key Views:



westwards along Castle Place,



East along High Street



westwards along Wellington Place,



northwards along Victoria Street,



westwards along Grosvenor Road,



northwards along Royal avenue,



westwards along East Bridge Street,





from Lanyon Place



from Odyssey Plaza,



from bridges,



views from river and riverside walks, and,



southwards along University Road