

The Belfast LDP

Comment by 

The Belfast Local Development Plan (LDP) provides a 'once in a generation' opportunity to position Belfast as an open and inclusive city, casting off any negative remnants from the past.

The spatial aspects of The Belfast Agenda, the city's community plan are intended to be delivered through the LDP. The size and scale of the development envisaged could result in a truly transformative programme that could ensure that the City is able to compete with cities around the world, to attract investment and create new opportunities and ensure that the next generation commits their future to a renewed Belfast.

However, this potential will only be realised if the ambition of the Plan, expressed through new physical developments, is underpinned by a new vision for how people live together and build a shared society. It is notable that the Plan does not specifically address this and therefore does not contain any plan as to how it will tackle this significant and historical challenge .

In terms of building a shared society, the potential is now clear: this re-development of the central area of the City has many significant and substantial advantages. The LDP area:

- contains many public spaces and facilities which are already shared spaces and are not scarred by territorial claims; and a high proportion of land is undeveloped or unused at present and is therefore less subject to territorial claims;
- contains commercial and business premises that rely on workforce integration now and must be able to attract the best talent in the future;
- universities and colleges are also less hidebound by divisions and again must develop to compete- and to ensure that the City to retain students post qualification;
- this area of the City can attract new people from around the world, many of whom will be well qualified, creative people, often entrepreneurs and investors, who will be able to transcend existing divisions – provided that they are not deterred by them;
- the central area inevitably connects to and communicates with all of the many different neighbourhoods and can eventually help to drive change throughout the City.

These represent real and vital advantages and significant opportunities which this LDP can now harness.

There are however a number of key steps that have to be taken to ensure that this potential is realised. These have to be firmly positioned within the Plan, and be delivered through both physical planning and design measures and by developing a programme which gains the support and confidence of all communities through direct engagement and involvement: the Plan has to be developed with the community, not presented to the community.

The first step is to create a vision to support the Plan. This means that the Plan must present a compelling picture of the future, in other words a clear statement of the outcome that is envisaged, in terms of the housing and facilities that attract and support all communities – and in cultural terms what the area will look like and feel like in say 15 years time.

This will be an undertaking in itself, but can only be successful if the process itself is not seen to be driven by those with vested interests. It must bring in new voices and be seen to be led by all parts of society, not dominated by a political process. To transcend political differences, civil society and business leaders should be encouraged to offer their vision of a shared society and the benefits it will bring.

Second, the process must recognise the legitimate fears that people will have and will want to express – and must be addressed. Change inevitably entails uncertainty and there will be concerns about community safety, cultural identity and the place of communities in a changing City in particular. These need to be discussed and dealt with in practical terms.

Third – and partly to assuage these concerns - **the planning process must be undertaken largely by, or with, the community itself**, to enable communities to see that their concerns are being addressed and to give them a real stake in the Plan. It also helps to demonstrate that such concerns are shared with other communities too – that despite the apparent differences between communities everyone has the same agenda. And communities will know best what a shared space looks like and how to reflect this in the design process and make it work. Once established by them, they will wish to defend what they have created and sustain it for the future in the face of future negative voices and extremists.

Next Steps

Request that the LDP clearly and explicitly express the ambition of a shared community within the Plan area and to commit to the development of housing, workplaces, schools, community facilities and public spaces on an integrated basis – without walls or barriers of any type. And that ‘integration’ includes faith, social class, ethnicity, nationality and other divisions. Further, that this commitment is also seen as a pathway to more integration in Belfast as a whole and beyond.

Establish a new partnership, involving leaders from business, civil society, the education and other statutory sectors, as well as political leaders is established to lead the agenda, with new voices who can transcend existing divides and who can bring new ideas and perspectives.

SHARED CITY PARTNERSHIP COMMENTS ON THE BELFAST LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN DRAFT PLAN STRATEGY 2035

1. Background

The Shared City Partnership (SCP) is a formal Working Group, which reports to the Council's Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, and, as such, all recommendations of the Partnership are subject to the agreement of that Committee and to ratification by the full Council.

The Shared City Partnership is made up of Elected Members, statutory bodies and a range of sectors including faith, community and voluntary, trade union and the private sectors.

Its role is to assist the elected political leadership of the Council, staff, diverse civil society interests and partnering agencies to engage pro-actively on all Good Relations issues on behalf of citizens and be a collective voice, promoting a common vision for Good Relations in the City.

At its meeting on 10th September 2018, the Partnership agreed to arrange a briefing session to which the Strategic Director and relevant Officers be invited to provide information and discussion around the contents of the LDP Draft Plan Strategy. This took place on 25th September 2018. Subsequently, Professor Ted Cante CBE from the iCoCo Foundation facilitated a workshop with the SCP on 15th October to lead discussion on issues around urban planning and cohesion. This was to assist the SCP to offer comments in relation to the Draft Plan Strategy and its alignment to good relations principles, implications and outcomes.

2. Stipulations

The SCP appreciates that the LDP Plan Strategy sets out the strategic policy framework for the plan area as a whole across a range of topics. It marks the second stage of the LDP Plan process with the aim of considering responses to the public consultation prior to submission to a soundness based independent examination. Following this examination, the findings will be sent to central government who will then issue a binding report which Council is required to formally adopt. The Plan Strategy alongside designations in BMAP will become a principal consideration when determining future planning applications for development in the City.

We also understand there will be a third stage which will be the preparation of the draft Local Policies Plan which will provide detailed land use proposals regarding the future development of Belfast . It will also be subject to the same requirements as the Plan Strategy and when adopted both will become the principal consideration when determining future planning applications for development in the City.

While acknowledging that the Strategy is a regulatory and planning document, the SCP would wish to offer comments from a good relations perspective and ask that consideration be given to how we ensure alignment in terms of good relations with the Belfast Agenda (BA), LDP and the future draft Good Relations (GR) Strategy currently in development.

3. Vision and Strategic Alignment

In relation to the vision in the document, we acknowledge the close association with that contained in the Belfast Agenda. However, as in the BA, it could refer to a city shared for all its citizens and welcoming to all. This would give particular credence to the particular issues, which are associated with the City and with the legacy of conflict.

The SCP welcomes the fact that community cohesion and good relations is regarded as one of the main strategic policies upon which the Plan is built. The current Together: Building a United Community Strategy reflects the Executive's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. It outlines how government, community and individuals will work together to build a united community and achieve change against the following key priorities:

- our children and young people
- our shared community
- our safe community
- our cultural expression

Each of the four key priorities also has a set of tangible and practical commitments including shared education, barrier removal and shared neighbourhood areas.

4. Shared City and Services

In addition, the Strategy has made a commitment to the concept of community cohesion and Good Relations. The LDP's Policy SP4 – Community cohesion and Good Relations states that "The council will support development that maximises opportunities to build strong, cohesive communities and that makes a positive contribution to Good Relations". This provides a strong policy context to drive the development of cohesive communities. The strategic policy adopts a core planning principle to create and enhance shared space and to promote social cohesion and Good Relations in the plan area. Belfast has high levels of neighbourhood segregation, which has constrained development and connectivity to all parts of the City. The Belfast Agenda is promoting inclusive growth to address social and economic inequalities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Increasing diverse neighbourhoods and access to opportunities through the spatial planning process is therefore an integral part of the LDP.

This means considering how all communities may be affected by development and ensuring that proposals help to improve community cohesion, foster social integration and inclusion, reduce isolation and improve access to opportunities in the City.

In order to achieve this commitment, the wider policy implications of housing segregation (92% in social housing in Belfast) and educational segregation need to be addressed in tandem. It is widely accepted that children are aware of difference from a very early age. Therefore, can the LDP be a way of helping to address and promote contact within a spatial context and one of the mechanisms which could assist with creating the conditions for change?

This is acknowledged in para 7.5.5 which states that “the planning system has an important role to play in addressing the physical legacy of the conflict, but is also able to make a valuable contribution to the less tangible goals of fostering community cohesion and promoting good relations. There is recognition that the urban form and the location of services are vital in the promotion of community relations. Well-designed inclusive physical spaces where everyone feels welcome can facilitate positive social interaction, which can help to change behaviours and foster strong cross community relationships.”

In the Belfast (2030) vision (Belfast Agenda conversations) ‘Good Relations’ was regarded as a top priority. People said they would like to see issues addressed including removal of interfaces/peace walls, concerns around symbols and expressing cultural identity and more shared space.

The following GR themes emerged when respondents were asked “what would you like Belfast to be like in 2030?”

- A peaceful and shared city.
- A welcoming, caring and compassionate city.
- A vibrant and culturally diverse city, where everyone is respected and treated equally.
- A clean, healthy and safe city where everyone has access to good housing, quality green spaces, services and facilities that enable them to be happy, safe and active.

We realise that this Draft Plan Strategy is a technical document. However, a city is not purely comprised of buildings. What really goes to make the spirit of a city is its people. Can the Strategy reflect explicitly the shared city ethos through its policies in all of the strategic aims and objectives as outlined in the results of the Belfast Agenda conversations?

Can we look at integrated planning around services to ensure they promote and encourage sharing? In the same way as people don't live in silos, place making policy and investment needs to break silos and use social innovation to disrupt the "business as usual" approach to doing what we do. It should aim to unlock the parts of the system that do not work and contribute to the intransigent issues that we face which create division and a lack of cohesion within our City, particularly those communities in interface areas. We need to build on what connects people and use our assets - human, social and physical capital – that make areas tick, with a focus on the positive rather than the deficits of a community.

With ongoing austerity, there are growing challenges to the continued duplication of service delivery. The Belfast Agenda recognises the importance of integrated planning and that when it comes to service delivery, one size does not fit all. It also acknowledges the interdependence between Good Relations and cohesion, land use planning and service delivery. Good Relations is everyone's business and the Belfast Agenda and LDP offer the opportunity to join the dots more creatively than before, to break the status quo and start to work with local communities alongside infrastructure planners and providers and other public service delivery agents to co-design and co-create new solutions to hard issues.

In addition, it is recognized that contact changes attitudes toward others, therefore, the placement of new housing is even more critical in terms of how a shared city is promoted and acts in a way which does not reinforce division but rather encourages cohesion. 32,000 new homes is a significant number – that of a small town. Account should also be taken of how Belfast is demographically changing this is on a number of fronts – age, gender, cultural diversity and religious and political backgrounds. How will this drive what areas are regenerated and developed in the city centre alongside those which areas which surround it?

Perhaps we need to define what we mean by shared. Do we mean that the population of that particular community is shared or do we mean that an area feels welcoming to anyone even if cultural symbols of a particular community are on display? Shared does not necessarily mean neutral. One of the Executive's GR outcomes is that people feel their culture is valued and respected. Part of the work to be undertaken is to remove fear and to encourage acceptance of the culture of others in the context of feeling safe. This requires not just careful physical design but also enablers that promote readiness.

While the use of iconic buildings or public art installations can be helpful in assisting shared space, it should be noted that shared space depends on the cultural context; it is rare that only the physical dimensions make a place shared. How people perceive and use these spaces determine

their value. The energy and commitment required to sustain such usage should not be underestimated nor the requirement to plan in advance for challenges and set interventions in place.

Therefore, we need to encourage the use and development of shared spaces and services through different mechanisms and will be cognizant of the need for accompanying programming support. We will support projects that build the capacity of organisations and individuals to be able to confidently access services across the City. Through our programmes and events, we should be promoting new learning, stimulate debate and challenge thinking, with shared space outcomes as a key driver.

In addition, development of new businesses etc. will have an impact on job creation and the ability of people to possess the skills required to fill these posts. Care will need to be taken to ensure that the rate of development keeps pace with the skills all of our citizens have or aim to have to ensure inclusive growth, leaving no one behind. This will require proactive programming from an economic development perspective and this has been undertaken on previous occasions around hospitality and other skills.

There is an opportunity to link with new developments eg university campus and to provide specialist advice around good relations and equality implications to ensure an integrated approach from the Council and other partners. This advice is already provided through community services around community engagement.

Community infrastructure is crucial to promote shared access to space and services by provide connectivity through transport etc which means we do not create a city centre with outlying neighbourhoods feeling disconnection with the city.

We also acknowledge that this Plan would only be one component of delivering on the community and land use agenda. It is not a panacea. However, it is an opportunity to further promote a shared city.

5. **Proposals**

Council has a statutory duty to promote equality and must have due regard for good relations implications.

1. This is the policy context in which decisions are made. In relation to the applications to the Planning Committee, can conditions be legitimately placed on applicants around the

promotion of a shared city, further to the principles outlined in Policy CGR1 – community cohesion and good relations? For example, within the context of the agreed Government Strategy; Together: Building a United Community, there are several Headline Actions, around Shared Housing, Shared Education and removal of Peace Walls. Could there be an alignment between the LDP and T:BUC whereby the LDP contributes to the achievement of outcomes already agreed and set by Central Government?

2. Can there be a mechanism identified where outcomes set in the Belfast Agenda and Good Relations Strategy interconnect with the LDP and where responsibility for this lies? This would also assist in determining where programming needs to be strategically placed and resourced to ensure the appropriate conditions can be created to support the development and investment.
3. Good Relations outcomes should be fully included in the design and delivery of all future capital projects, planning decisions, environmental improvement schemes, public realm schemes, housing projects etc. being delivered and developed by council and others across the City. The Good Relations Strategy defines shared city outcomes. Specialist advice around the area of good relations and equality should be made available to ensure these are considered at the appropriate time.

6. **Conclusion**

The Shared City Partnership sees the LDP process as an opportunity to realise the visions laid down in the Belfast Agenda, the LDP and the Good Relations Strategy documents but would like to see more of an emphasis on the concept of a shared city. While recognizing this is a significant challenge and one which cannot be addressed by planning alone as outlined throughout this paper, the LDP can help to move people around the city in different ways and to disrupt normal patterns.

The Partnership is happy to discuss the contents of this paper further and to act as one of the avenues through which the LDP and its outworkings can be studied through the lens of good relations.