Towards a Local Development Plan for Belfast;
A community perspective

Why the future of Belfast must be co-designed

A response to Belfast City Council’s consultation on the Preferred Options Papers for the Local Development Plan, based on a collection of views gathered at the ‘Leave No One Behind’ symposium 29th March 2017 hosted by South Belfast Partnership Board.
Foreword

The Local Development Plan for Belfast provides a genuine opportunity for Belfast City Council to effectively ‘place-make’ our city, deal with its legacy barriers of division to create a truly vibrant, prosperous and healthy city for all.

Meaningful engagement and co-designing the city with its citizens and stakeholders, the vision of the Local Development Plan aligned with the ‘Belfast Agenda’ can become more than a vision – it can become the reality. Using the placemaking principle of ‘the community is the expert, the people who use an area or city regularly also provide the most valuable insights into how it functions. In turn individuals and communities can uncover creative solutions to the difficult challenges present in all communities.

This also presents an effective opportunity for the Belfast Area Partnerships, the citizens of Belfast and the City Council to work together right across the city to deliver real and measurable change.

A special thank you goes to our contributors, Jackie Sadek, CEO of UK Regeneration Dr Satish Kumar, Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), Ciaran Mackel, Ulster University, along with the Young Civic Leaders at QUB, the’ Leave No One Behind’ steering group, and all the participants who attended the ‘Leave No One Behind Symposium 2017’ at QUB.

Michael Graham
Chair, South Belfast Partnership Board
Leave No One Behind

By Colin Hassard

Welcome to Belfast, 2035.
A place where the economy continues to thrive
There are plenty of people and plenty of jobs
You see them in the morning all part of the throng
In their flying cars or upon hover-boards,
But back to the present as we move toward
This city, this agenda, that all sounds great.
When I read the manifesto I just couldn’t wait
To be part of the vision for the Belfast community,
But when I read back through something confused me.

For I found no mention of culture and art
And I just don’t know how we can start
To make this plan work, to make our city better
If we don’t have artists to bring us together.
Coz the arts are essential to economic growth,
If you care for the bread, then the arts is the toast.

All I need to create is paper and a pen
But once the poem is written, what then...?
What if there are no more venues to stand in,
No stages to watch – and no place to see bands in?
In this future city, will the next Van The Man
Be singing to only his kids in the pram?
And in the world that I know of poets and words,
What if the next generation can never be heard?
Who will write of these days that we spend once before?
Like Heaney, Morrissey, Longley and more?
But if you don’t like words – and you’re more into figures,
I’ll share this one and hope that it lingers
For every one-thousand pounds of our GDP
The arts in this country receives... 80p.
That’s despite what’s invested coming back 10-fold,
And regular cuts by those “in the know”.

In fact, arts funding has been cut so many times
That if art was a hairstyle, it’d look like mine

Now I know quoting budgets – what many will say,
It should go to schools or to health and hey,
If it’s a choice between the gift of a free health service,
Or another production of The Importance of Being Earnest,
I’ll take the medical assistance until my very last day,
But the choice ain’t black and white, and I’m pleased to say
That if we speak about health, well, the arts help that too,
They give an outlet to express and to help work things through,
And maybe out there, there’s someone it connects with,
But how do you measure that return on investment?
How can you tell what good the arts have done?
Has it just brightened a wall, or saved the life of someone?
But as well as improving our sense of well-being,
Art also brings jobs and creates social cohesion.

Its painters, and films, and poets, and theatre,
Comedians, musicians, sculptors and makers
And to those not defined by the hours 9 to 5.
I say, “Come with us – leave no one behind.”

To the artists, the students, minorities & homeless,
To the young & the old, you too can own this.
Shared city – and not live to merely survive.
I say, “Join with us – leave no one behind.”

So that’s my two-cents, or rather my 6p,
That the arts are vital to you and to me
An integral part of Belfast, 2035.
A place where the city continues to thrive,
Even Metro-flying-buses are running on time.

(Poem commissioned by South Belfast Partnership Board, 2017)
A Response to Belfast City Council’s consultation on the Preferred Options Paper for the Local Development Plan

Introduction

South Belfast Partnership Board submitted a response to Belfast City Council’s consultation on the Local Development Plan’s Preferred Options Paper based on feedback collected during the Leave No One Behind symposium, 29th March 2017 in Elmwood Hall, QUB. The symposium was organised and hosted by South Belfast Partnership Board with support from the Belfast Area Partnerships, South Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal partnerships and Queen’s University Belfast.

The context of the Local Development Plan, and its themes were addressed through a programme of talks and panel discussions that stimulated thoughts and feedback which are captured and included in this response. Over 150 people attended, with 25 speakers adding their expertise and experience, stimulating a new conversation across community, private and public sectors.

Best practice models of human-centered planning from Sofia and Berlin were presented by international contributors, and a wealth of experience and encouragement were given to the local communities from Jackie Sadek, CEO of UK Regeneration.
The aim of Leave No One Behind is to commence a conversation with Belfast City Council to create the best possible Local Development Plan for our city. We want to turn the tables from top-down planning, open a deeper dialogue and engagement inviting local communities and citizens to shape the future of our city in dialogue with arts & culture, health, education sector, local authorities, and private sector, including SMEs and developers. It focuses on what the Local Development Plan means to the citizens, communities and neighbourhoods.

This paper contains the main points of the response which was submitted to Belfast City Council, presenting views gathered at the 'Leave No One Behind' symposium.
United Nations ‘Habitat III’

Setting the context for a New Urban Agenda for Belfast?

“Habitat III” is shorthand for a major global summit, formally known as the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, held in Quito, Ecuador on 17-20 October 2016. The idea is to bring together key stakeholders and actors to define and action on policies which have key implications for the future.

The New Urban Agenda sets the framework on how cities should be planned and managed to promote sustainable urban development. This 2030 New Urban Agenda- ‘Leaving No One Behind’ is built around the Sustainable Development Goals, aiming to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”.

By 2050 the world urban population is expected to double thereby making urbanisation one of the most transformative trends in human history. The fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goals in this context becomes far more relevant and critical. As of now, the Belfast Local Development Plan remains uniquely silent on the sustainable development goals and promotes a largely investor and developer driven vision of the city.

The New Urban Agenda acknowledges that culture and diversity are sources of enrichment and contributes directly to the sustainable development of cities. Here culture, and by extension heritage matters for cities such as Belfast, which is rapidly being cosmopolitanised beyond the traditional orange and green divide.
Empowering the communities to play a distinct role in helping meet with the sustainable development initiatives is critical in this regard. High on the agenda is also the issue of good urban governance. This includes three principle groups of actors: government, the private sector and civil society.

The New Urban Agenda recognises that decisions are made based on complex relationships between many actors with different priorities. It is the reconciliation of these competing priorities that remain at the heart of New Urban Agenda. Urban governance is inextricably linked to the welfare of the citizenry and provides a platform which will allow citizens to improve their social and economic conditions.
Key Observations on the Local Development Plan’s Preferred Options Paper

1. The Local Development Plan states that it will replace BMAP and yet such a bold statement neglects to advise which of the detailed mapping, conservation areas, areas of townscape character, or urban design guidance documents will be retained, updated etc. BMAP was a huge, though wieldy resource, and a plan to replace it requires substance or a clear agenda in the first instance.

2. There is no plan to suggest what new housing typologies might be developed. There is a worrying trend in some emerging proposals and planning applications that the Private Rented Sector housing is the preferred model by the large developers. Such a model is not appropriate as it does not necessarily include provision for families; the units are sized such that those on housing benefit cannot afford the rent levels. It is an impoverished housing model in a city which has suffered enough from 'experimental' housing in the past.

3. There has been little indication of a plan to involve citizens in a real participatory process. Many of the questions in the Plan are closed questions and have basic good intentions but require critique from those responding. Council really should have helped developed capacity building engagement and participation workshops which could have been facilitated by the Partnership Boards in collaboration with the universities and agencies such as PLACE (an agency of which Council was a founding partner).

4. The Plan and indeed the Belfast Agenda notes Council's strategic partners but it is striking that there is no inclusion of citizen-led or citizen-focused organisations such as the Partnership Boards;
PLACE; Civic Trust, or residents' associations. Indeed, no mention is made of the universities, as institutions or as bodies of active young people. No mention is made of the Department for Communities Ministerial Advice Group and its design review role.

5. The Local Development Plan continues on the track of 'retail-led' regeneration for the city - a plan which in 15 or more years has failed to deliver other than shopping units. In the current emerging retail focused plans for the city it continues to shape the city as only retail counts.

6. Current proposals include large scale demolition of historic fabric and ignore the role of small independent retailers in low-grade relatively cheap accommodation as part of the offer of the city, particularly in mixed-use and cultural quarters. The current proposals also include loss of the public, democratic space of the city to privately managed shopping thoroughfares and parks.
Why we need to rethink the design process

Key observations by Young Civic Leaders, QUB

7. It will be paramount to see if initiatives can fulfil the humanitarian duty of ‘leaving no one behind’ (UN, 2016). The continual transition to privatisation and neoliberal competitiveness focuses the LDP as a top-down approach that due to the political ideology of neoliberal urbanism could reduce the beneficial factors to communities beyond the urban centre.

8. There is an aim for policymaking to be bottom up however the document in its entirety advocates a top down approach. This approach has led to a lack of consideration for multi-public experiences of Belfast and its development, a lack of connectivity between stakeholders, leaving communities in the heart of Belfast feeling disconnected from city benefits and from the planning elites who dictate where and what resilience measures are implemented.

9. Within the LDP only once is the word ‘collaboration’ used, and this reference speaks of city elites collaborating with one another. Meaningful collaboration and trust will strengthen the LDP.

10. Northern Ireland could set a precedent within policy making that is effective in working in continuum with the ongoing ‘peace process’ to stitch up wounds and heal through planning. If Belfast is to attract people back into the city, policies must facilitate local communities and stakeholders to design their own shared future and to engage in self-determination. It is therefore worrying that there is no reference to the Troubles and its legacy.
11. When a major priority within the Local Development Plan is to create additional jobs and housing to facilitate population growth, there is a real danger that this will overshadow the needs and desires of existing local communities, particularly those in more deprived areas. The cooperation of all relevant stakeholders, committed partners, urban actors from all governmental spheres as well as the private sector, are key to achieving sustainable development. It is important therefore, that this broad cooperation empowers those who traditionally have been excluded in urban planning policy. Within the LDP, it cannot simply be a tick box exercise to involve all stakeholders, including local communities.

12. Culture is incredibly important and there are concerns this is being eroded as Belfast is being shaped into another homogenous space. The LDP needs to have a deeper emphasis on a city dreamed of by cultural organisations, encouraging people’s active participation in the public sphere. This attitude would be more successful at fostering the feeling of connectivity and inclusion with Belfast.

13. There is a lack of understanding of ‘multi-publics’ who have many different experiences and pasts. All these are equally valid and none is superior. One of the measures of success within the LDP is
‘everyone in Belfast benefits from a thriving and prosperous economy’. The idea of public benefit lacks clarity and therefore is problematic when examining the effects of policies that have been carried out. It also allows a manipulation of the term to disguise anyone not included. This undermines the idea that the public should benefit and therefore does not promote or value the city as cosmopolitan.

14. The idea of Belfast’s connectivity seems to prioritise investment rather than its local residents within a fragmented city. Successful resilience is born when there is a known desired future and when there is a desire for a shared city identity in that future. If Belfast is ready for this, what must happen now is the mobilisation of self-determination for these communities.

15. While the future goal is positive, there is little emphasis on connectivity and cohesion within communities. The key challenge relating to connectivity is “improving international investment and internal connectivity”, this neoliberal agenda focuses on business and organisations rather than connecting individuals within the city. Belfast is becoming a city of consumption to achieve more visibility and reputation at a loss of heritage and culture.

16. During the Leave No One Behind symposium many problems were raised such as omitting specific areas for example Sandy Row, The Markets, Donegall Pass. These are some of the most fragmented communities, struggling with feeling dislocated from the city. The LDP frustratingly does not specify how these communities which are arguably the vulnerable will be connected. There was also no mention of any historical conflict within Belfast.

17. The challenge Belfast faces as a community, is to reinvent itself constantly without losing itself in the process.
Feedback from Symposium Audience

- Re-use the built heritage we have, modernise it. Look to models of good practice - will save money
- Open up the PROCESS or these matters at the heart of place will never be addressed
- Look at best practice & international examples
- POP is a poor piece of work - No OPTIONS only Y/N questions
- How far are planners and investors willing to go to involve young people and adults in the creative building and investment stage?
- LDP mainly orientates around economy, at the expense of other aspects
- Focus on people here to determine jobs and education we want to create and grow
- People as experts
- How much of an imprint does the feedback/consultation have on the final development plans?
- How do we create a sense of ‘belonging’ for young people/adults which encourages and fosters social cohesion and investment from our youth for a more prosperous future?
Recommendations

The approach chosen by Belfast City Council has been questioned by many of the participants of the Symposium. A collaborative and truly engaging co-design process is the most appropriate model for progressing the Local Development Plan for Belfast.

The city has a wealth of expertise in regeneration, place-making and community development harnessed and refined by its local stakeholders. A collaborative approach could have been - and should be - facilitated by the Belfast Area Partnerships in collaboration with the universities, residents’ groups, community regeneration organisations, youth groups, cultural organisations, and placemaking agencies.

Likewise, these stakeholders have not been included as strategic partners which is a matter of concern. A question arises around who the city is for and why its citizens and stakeholders are not part of designing the city they live in and contribute to on a daily basis? The citizens of Belfast hold great knowledge of this city. Time should be afforded to properly listen to them and incorporate them in the design processes.

The Council is therefore encouraged to re-think the process and immediately start a conversation with these stakeholder groups and citizens. Many examples of a joint top-down and bottom-up approach to co-designing cities exist from across the globe. This is an unmissable opportunity to create a truly livable and vibrant city that is unique in its offer and attraction; a city that harnesses creativity, good design, diversity of neighbourhoods, and most of all, its people.
Why we should co-design the future of our shared city...

A collaborative and co-designing approach creates space for communities to own the solutions. Instead of prescribing solutions to people. When people are able to give creative, critical input and translate them into action, Belfast City Council can better cultivate responsibility and ownership towards the eventual outcomes.

A collaborative and co-designing approach focuses on a community’s strengths rather than its weaknesses, by harnessing each person’s skills, knowledge and resources. When people are aware of their ability to offer something positive to the design process, Belfast City Council can build more confident, resilient communities.

A collaborative and co-designing approach involves open dialogue between various stakeholders of the community. When people are able to understand that there are different and competing positions on an issue, they often develop a more nuanced picture and are therefore more open to exploring new solutions.

A collaborative and co-designing approach creates opportunities for people to meet and work together on a shared vision. This builds new social capital and strengthens existing networks. When people work together towards a common goal, they tend to be more tolerant, trustful, and capable of making change collectively.
“To the artists, the students, minorities & homeless,
To the young & the old, you too can own this.
Shared city – and not live to merely survive.
I say, “Join with us – leave no one behind.”

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