

## Response to Belfast Planning Service Statement of Community Involvement

**November 2015**

Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the draft Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to provide further evidence on any of the points below, should that be helpful.

### Introduction

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation seeking to improve health and wellbeing, by identifying ways to tackle inequalities in health and create healthy urban environments. The organisation's key role is to fulfil the requirements of Belfast as a World Health Organization Healthy City, and to act as the link between Belfast and WHO Europe. Within the city, the key roles for Belfast Healthy Cities are to facilitate intersectoral collaboration, and to work with partners to share evidence, build capacity and test new concepts and ways of working. Belfast City Council is a key partner within the partnership. Key partners also include Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, DHSSPS, DOE, DSD, NIHE, Public Health Agency, QUB and UU.

### Context of response

The Healthy Cities approach is based on the social model of health, which emphasises that health is the outcome of wider social and physical living conditions. Healthy urban environments is a long standing core theme of the programme, which has contributed to increasing understanding locally of how planning shapes public health and health outcomes. The aim of the HUE programme is to identify ways of developing urban environments that support physical, mental and social health, and includes working with partners to identify, explore and test how a joined up approach and investing in supportive environments can help deliver healthier people and communities. The comments on the draft SCI are made in this context.

### ***Consultation event with community sector***

On 19 November, Belfast Healthy Cities hosted a seminar on planning and health, which also acted as a consultation event on the draft SCI and was aimed in particular at community level professionals. Belfast City Council provided an overview of the new planning system at the event, and the speaker Dermot O'Kane also contributed to the consultation event. The report from the event is attached as an appendix, and the views shared at the event have also informed this response.

Overall, Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the draft SCI as a helpful starting point for engaging communities in planning. Ensuring ongoing dialogue and using creative methods will be important to achieve a successful process and developing good working relationships with stakeholders across sectors, in particular communities.

### General comments: Helpful overview of process and stages for involvement

- **Clear process:** The draft SCI provides a very helpful overview of the new planning system and the processes of both development control and the Local Development Plan. The process is explained succinctly and gives clear information to stakeholders. This gives clarity in a way that has not previously been available, and enables stakeholders to develop an understanding of the process. This is likely to support in particular those stakeholders with some experience of engaging with planning.
- The steps and approaches to involvement are also clearly laid out, which again provides important clarity for stakeholders.
- **Clear system:** It is positive that the draft SCI indicates how stakeholders can become involved in the process. Setting out the points and timescales is helpful for stakeholders' planning, and also contributes to an understanding of the overall process
- **Identifying stakeholders:** It is also very positive that the draft SCI highlights community and voluntary sector agencies as key stakeholders. Many organisations in these sectors have considerable expertise on key topics, which can help inform and support both the LDP and development control processes. Community and residents' groups will also have evidence on the assets as well as issues of local communities, which can inform the process and help ensure planning does not inadvertently introduce disadvantage or inequalities.
- **Building relationships:** Overall, the draft SCI provides a good basis for developing engagement between Belfast Planning Service and local stakeholders. Ongoing dialogue and transparency will be key to ensuring a successful process, particularly for community groups as communities may not be familiar with the long term nature of planning. The new process offers an important opportunity to build new relationships; it would be helpful to set out in some detail how an ongoing dialogue can be maintained for mutual benefit and trust.
- **Strengthening understanding of planning:** In sections 4.21-4.22, the draft SCI provides a helpful explanation of material considerations and the overall approach to determining planning applications. It would be very helpful if this section could be included in an earlier section and expanded to give a more detailed outline, with eg. links to relevant policies. A significant proportion of potential consultees, particularly individual residents and the community sector, may not have a strong understanding of this, and a clear overview would significantly help build capacity. It would also help ensure that representations made are relevant, which would improve efficiency as well as relationships with local residents and communities.

### Supporting engagement: opportunities to strengthen

- **Proactive engagement:** While a helpful overview of the planning process, the draft SCI provides limited detail on how it is proposed to engage different population groups. It appears that the onus is very much on interested stakeholders to take initiative, and the document does not clarify whether Belfast Planning Service will either arrange or participate in direct meetings with stakeholders. It would be very helpful to clarify this and identify opportunities for proactive direct engagement with stakeholders. In particular, it would be very helpful if Belfast Planning Service would establish a practice of face to face meetings with stakeholders, on an annual or six monthly basis, and outline this in the final SCI. This would be particularly helpful for building relationships with local communities and the groups that represent them, as well as developing effective information sharing mechanisms with voluntary sector organisations.
- **Engaging hard to reach groups:** The draft SCI is particularly limited in identifying approaches and options to engaging more hard to reach groups, for example children and young people, older people, people with disabilities or people in disadvantaged areas. However, engagement of these groups is important, as their lives tend to be more affected by the local environment than others, in particular because they tend to be more place based than other groups. It would be helpful to give a clear outline of the approaches that will be made to engage hard to reach groups, in line with good consultation practice. This would not only strengthen confidence in the planning process, but could help open up the process and over time prevent commonly raised local problems, eg. anti social behaviour. In addition, taking account of the needs of the most vulnerable groups can significantly tackle the disadvantage and inequalities faced by these groups, eg. in relation to physical access to jobs. This, in turn, can help reduce demand on other public services, including welfare, and contribute to economic and social prosperity.
- **Creative engagement:** The methods for involvement outlined in the draft SCI focus on written communication and public meetings. These are established approaches and yield valuable, often well articulated evidence. However, these methods can feel intimidating for many, in particular communities and groups not experienced in public speaking, children and older people, and people with disabilities. It would be very helpful to include alternative methods that offer more informal opportunities to share views, and in return yield more comprehensive evidence across the Section 75 groups. Examples might include community/family fun events, arts based methods (eg. drawings, photos, essays, poems on key issues in the built environment or identifying a good environment), or local level planning exercises. Belfast Healthy Cities has developed a number of flexible consultation approaches, and would be pleased to share further information on these:

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- the KidsSpace model that combines consultation with a pop up child friendly/play space, which has proven successful in engaging people of all ages and backgrounds
  - Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children, a model for engaging children in discussing their environment in a way that aligns with the Northern Ireland curriculum, which now is piloted as a teaching resource and also provides the basis for work on a strategic city wide child friendly action plan, and
  - a Walkability Assessment for Healthy Ageing tool, which focuses on engaging older people in assessing their environment and provides qualitative evidence on this.
  - Through the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, Belfast Healthy Cities also has access to models of good practice from cities across Europe
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- **Language:** A comment raised a number of times at the Planning Healthy Communities event on 19 November referred to the language used in the draft SCI. It is clear that it must use legally appropriate and precise language, but it would be helpful to explore options for providing a 'plain English' version for stakeholders with limited technical knowledge. For example, a summary leaflet or guide would significantly support these groups, who nevertheless have valuable evidence and expertise to contribute.
  
  - **Structural reform:** As a minor comment, it is noted that the draft SCI throughout refers to DOE and the existing central government structure. It would be helpful to clarify whether the SCI will be revised once the new structure is in place, or whether it might be possible to incorporate changes at this stage.

## Appendix 1. Workshop report

### Planning for Healthy Communities – engaging local expertise

#### Capacity building seminar and consultation event on draft Belfast Planning Service Statement of Community Involvement

Thursday 19 November 2015, Duncairn Centre for Culture and the Arts, Belfast

### Workshop report

How our neighbourhoods are planned plays a major role for people's everyday lives, and through that their health and wellbeing. Local communities have first hand experience and expertise of how the built environment shapes their health, which can inform and support the development of planning policy and practice. The new planning system offers new opportunities to maximise use of this evidence. Planning authorities are required to engage the community in developing the new Local Development Plans. Drawing up a Statement of Community Involvement is the first step in this process, which offers an opportunity to integrate local level evidence into the development plan.

This event was designed for community sector professionals and offered an opportunity to explore how planning influences health; explore the role of the community sector in influencing healthy urban environments, and contribute views on the draft Belfast Planning Service Statement of Community Involvement, which is currently out for consultation.

The event was arranged by Belfast Healthy Cities in collaboration with North Belfast Partnership, who chaired the event. All Belfast Area Partnerships provided support to the event by circulating the invitation.

### Programme

The event programme included a capacity building session with three presentations. The first presentation, by Jonna Monaghan, Health and Wellbeing Manager with Belfast Healthy Cities, provided an outline of how planning influences health, and an overview of the historical links between planning and public health. The presentation emphasised the need to take a people centred approach to planning in order to create healthy and prosperous cities.

Wilson Lambe MBE, Chair of Ballysillan & Upper Ardoyne Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership, presented a case study of how the Greater Ballysillan Masterplan was developed and how the masterplan is delivering change for local residents, eg. through investment in facilities for young people. The presentation highlighted the

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importance of engaging children and young people, working in partnership across sectors, and delivering results. The core element highlighted was listening to the community, enabling the community to take ownership of the process and demonstrating how views are being translated into action.

Dermot O’Kane, Principal Planner with Belfast City Council, gave an overview of the new planning system and the approach to developing the Local Development Plan and outlined the key ways in which planning can contribute to health and wellbeing. Community involvement was underlined as a key element of the new planning system, and it was emphasised that health and wellbeing is now a principle of planning, through the new Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS).

The discussion following the presentations focused on how a bottom up approach can be integrated into strategic implementation, how specific health considerations can be taken into account, and on how harder to reach groups can be engaged in the process. There was also discussion on how challenges of the new system, in particular effective collaboration between the two tier spatial planning system and central government led transport planning system, can be overcome.

### **Workshop – consultation on the draft Statement of Community Involvement**

The second part of the event was an opportunity to comment on the draft Belfast Planning Service Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The workshop was conducted as an open discussion with the panel of speakers, chaired by John McCorry, Chief Executive of North Belfast Partnership.

Key points made during the discussion were:

- How can people and communities be kept involved and interested throughout the Local Development Plan process; people feel overconsulted and frustrated with lack of visible results? How can other sectors effectively support the process?
  - More information needs to be shared more regularly
  - It was noted that planning officers can benefit from engaging more with communities; this builds experience, trust and relationships, and helps planners analyse and make sense of local information
  - Visioning is important, and engaging communities in visioning essential
  - It was noted the process to date has been very complex; Planning Appeals Commission effectively adds a third tier
  - Other sectors, including community and voluntary sector, may be able to support communities eg. by developing temporary and pop up uses of space, exploring meanwhile use of vacant sites and other options that do not require planning permission or intervention
- How can the expertise and evidence available in communities and within community sector agencies be utilised more effectively?

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- Ways of dealing with information overload were explored
- Mechanisms for effectively channelling grassroots evidence into the decision making process were also discussed
- What resources are available for new approaches?
  - It was noted many people and organisations feel pressure of reduced resources and are finding it difficult to maintain optimism
  - More collaborative approach was highlighted as a way of building trust and potentially identifying new, more efficient approaches
  - Planning gain, or mechanisms for ensuring some of the benefit of development is shared with society at large, was explored as one avenue
  - The use of consultants, cost effectiveness and alternatives were discussed; it was highlighted that communities already have information which can be tapped directly, and noted that overreliance on consultants reduces skills in the statutory sector
- How can the core principles of good consultation be reflected in community involvement?
  - Transparency and inclusiveness were highlighted as core principles, along with ensuring delivery to demonstrate results to consultees
  - Creative consultation mechanisms are important; traditional focus groups do not suit everyone
- A number of comments on the draft SCI consultation document were also made, focusing on the importance of 'plain English', a user friendly design and identifying communities and community sector agencies as key stakeholders with evidence that can support the process
- In conclusion, it was noted that planning plays an important role in creating healthy and prosperous cities, and that local stakeholders play an essential role in developing approaches that ensure Belfast is a welcoming, attractive, healthy and liveable city
- It was clarified that the workshop discussion will inform Belfast Healthy Cities' response to the draft SCI, and will also be shared with participants

## Appendix 2. Event agenda

### Agenda

**9.30 Registration – tea and coffee**

**10.00 Welcome**

*Event chair: John McCorry, North Belfast Partnership*

**10.10 How planning shapes health and wellbeing**

*Jonna Monaghan, Belfast Healthy Cities*

**10.30 Influencing planning – creating liveable neighbourhoods**

*Wilson Lambe, MBE, Ballysillan & Upper Ardoyne Neighbourhood  
Renewal Partnership*

**10.50 Local Development Plans – an overview of the new planning system**

*Dermot O’Kane, Belfast City Council*

**11.10 Questions and discussion**

**11.30 Workshop – views on the Statement of Community Involvement**

**12.15 Feedback**

**12.30 Close and lunch**