



## **Response to the Issues Paper to inform the development of a Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland**

**June 2014**

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Department of Regional Development's Cycling Unit. Engaging with stakeholders at this early stage of the process is particularly positive.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation working to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Belfast and beyond. The organisation acts as the link to the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network on behalf of Belfast as a WHO Healthy City, and currently holds the WHO secretariat for the Network. Alongside the Department of Regional Development Belfast Healthy Cities' key partners include Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Bryson Group, DHSSPS, DSD, NIHE, Public Health Agency, QUB and UU.

The role of Belfast Healthy Cities is to bring organisations and sectors together to consider how their work contributes to health and wellbeing; to share evidence and build capacity, and to introduce and pilot new concepts linked to core themes identified by the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. Developing the concept of Healthy Urban Environments has been a long term theme for the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. Raising awareness and building capacity of active travel options is important, especially in highlighting the broad connections between people's life outcomes and their living conditions.

The comments below are made within this broad context.

### Vision:

Belfast Healthy Cities is particularly pleased to see that the overall ethos of the Issues paper focuses on the Bicycle Strategy as a part of designing cities and regions for people. Active travel is an essential part of this and it would be helpful if this was clearly stated in the vision. Recognising the wish to re-establish a culture of cycling in Northern Ireland is an endeavour that will appeal to all ages; the vision should clearly state the desire to contribute to a sustainable and more liveable Northern Ireland. We particularly support the recognition that increasing cycling is about infrastructure as well as behaviour change; while this is mentioned later in the Issues paper, it may be helpful for the vision to explicitly reflect this intention to make cycling more accessible. The three pillar approach linking infrastructure, behaviour change support and marketing is also welcomed. The vision for this developing cycling community should also mirror the desire to have an equitable society, where people of all ages and backgrounds are able to and routinely choose to cycle everyday journeys and feel safe doing so.

Belfast Healthy Cities strongly welcomes the focus on health in the paper. Active travel benefits physical and mental health and evidence also shows that more life on the street will make people feel safer and provide opportunities for better social networks, as active travel offers natural opportunities for informal and chance encounters that also help develop cohesive and safe communities. This, in turn, can over time improve community safety and reduce the need for expenditure associated with this. Regeneration is a welcome inclusion in the Issues paper, although may need a more comprehensive explanation for those not familiar with the concept. Building links between spatial and transport planners are key to establishing cycling across Northern Ireland.

#### Funds available:

Funds available should be used for investment in infrastructure to develop continuous routes which enable end to end journeys to be taken via cycling, in rural areas, town and city centres as well as neighbourhoods that surround cities. Investment needs to be based on travel needs analysis and mapping current routes to identify gaps, while also demonstrating best value for money. The WHO Health Economic Assessment Tool (HEAT) is specifically designed to help conduct an economic assessment of the health benefits of walking or cycling by estimating the value of reduced mortality that results from specified amounts of walking or cycling. There should be a prioritising exercise to focus the work of the strategy. Funds should be invested in a comprehensive way improving access to cycling and contributing to behavioural change initiatives such as cycling proficiency training within an entire neighbourhood rather than geographically limited projects such as the Belfast bike hire scheme, funding should also build on existing plans such as the Active Travel demonstration project. Ongoing work such as the Active Schools programme could be used to identify areas for wider targeted intervention, in order to maximise the return on investment. As this programme supports and encourages children to cycle to school, building intervention around this would be a helpful incentive and support for children to take up cycling and would in particular support families take up cycling for leisure or indeed everyday travel.

#### Taking the right approach:

Marketing of cycling is an important way to increase use by all of the population, and update users of the benefit of cycling for all of society. Giving priority to cycling as a mode of transport will increase use, as demonstrated in other European cities, most notably Copenhagen, strong political backing is needed to ensure this. A means of direct communication between the Cycling Unit and potential as well as existing cyclists to enable concerns about safety, practicality and cost of bikes to be addressed is essential to ensure continuous engagement with users and enable action to be taken. There must be provision to ensure the bicycle can be considered a viable mode of transport, this includes convenient, sufficient and safe parking. Cycling must be offered as an integrated mode of transport; therefore the bicycle must be incorporated with other modes of transport. The interchange between modes allows the opportunity for greater number of people to travel by bike. Provision of changing facilities in or close to workplaces, travel hubs at park and ride sites as well increased provision for transporting bicycles on buses, trains and taxis are all important elements that need to be addressed as part of the strategy.

Planning in cycling is essential to ensure key destinations are accessible by bike, town centres are good examples of potentially effective transport hubs, strengthening connections from more deprived areas to service hubs is needed as well as strengthening existing corridors. Collaboration on land use planning across sectors will be a key element to ensuring the bicycle is given the political support it needs. Ideally the inclusion of provision for the bicycle in the regional planning policy by Councils as the new planning authorities to ensure they write this into forthcoming Local Development Plans and policies associated with these.

#### Designing for the bicycle:

Provision of dedicated cycle routes in areas of deprivation is essential to promote this relatively low cost mode of transport and also help tackle inequalities and the social gradient of health. This will extend widespread use and ensure it is not viewed as a middle class activity. Bicycle routes need to be end to end, increasing connectivity of an area and linking people to where they want to go. By ensuring this is a convenient mode of transport it will increase the ease of use for people across Northern Ireland. Local cycle route provision is important in order to facilitate everyday cycling as not everyone will be focusing on commuting into town centre. Engagement with local people should be undertaken to fully understand people's potential priorities, as well as barriers, currently there seems to be limited understanding of how, where, when and why people might cycle. The City of Copenhagen's Bicycle Strategy demonstrates clear and continued communication with people using the bicycle. Earlier in the year a representative from Copenhagen was a keynote speaker at the Belfast Healthy Cities Active Travel seminar, discussing the development of cycling in the city through the years. We would be happy to support the development of links with Copenhagen to discuss ways of engaging people and developing cycling in Belfast. When designing Northern Ireland for the bicycle guides such as the Designing Streets, A Policy Statement for Scotland provides useful information. Belfast Healthy Cities could also identify evidence and good practice through the Healthy Cities Network.

#### Connecting all modes of transport:

Strengthening public transport, linked to improved cycle parking at stops would help make cycling more attractive. Safety at junctions is an essential part of developing the bicycle as viable mode of transport, as most cycle trips will likely be local and short trips either to the shops or park. Evidence from our engagement with children through the Shaping Healthier Neighbourhoods for Children project highlights that safe junctions, in the desired locations, are key to support road safety for children, affording a degree of independent mobility for older children and teenagers. Cycling as an accessible and independent mode of transport for children and young people could be incorporated as a key objective as habits are set early in life and young people can affect choices of families. The introduction of 20mph pilots are a great way to improve road safety and could also be introduced in areas of deprivation as children here are at greatest risk and this would significantly help tackle inequalities.

As part of work carried out through the Regeneration and Healthy Urban Environment Group a walkability pilot programme was conducted to assess the built environment. Since all journeys start and end with walking this is an important

consideration in terms of complete journeys. Belfast has recently received accreditation as a member of the WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities. By ensuring accessibility to transport and the built environment for this vulnerable group it will ensure accessibility for all.

Learning from elsewhere:

Belfast Healthy Cities has confirmed a representative from Gehl architects and Gabriel Scally, Director of the World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Healthy Urban Environments, University of the West of England to speak at a forthcoming Healthy Urban Environments conference in November and we are happy to facilitate meetings with both keynote speakers.

Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to support this area of work. Through acting as the link between Belfast as a WHO Healthy City and the WHO European Healthy Cities Network, Belfast Healthy Cities has access to evidence, expertise and experience from WHO and 100 WHO Healthy Cities across Europe. This expertise includes examples of concrete initiatives relevant to active travel, as well as development of measurement frameworks such as the WHO Health Economic Assessment (HEAT) Tool.