

IPH Submission: Belfast City Centre Northside Urban Village Regeneration Framework - June 2008

04 Jul 2008

Below is the IPH submission to the Department for Social Development (NI) consultation on the Draft Regeneration Framework for the North West Quarter Part 2 area of Belfast City Centre, the Northside Urban Village. The Framework outlines the vision for the redevelopment of an inner city area of Belfast.

Institute of Public Health in Ireland

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) is an all-island body which aims to improve health in Ireland by working to combat health inequalities and influence public policy in favour of health. IPH promotes co-operation in research, training, information and policy in order to contribute to policies which tackle inequalities in health.

Northside Urban Village

IPH welcome the opportunity to comment on the Department for Social Development, Draft Regeneration Framework for the North West Quarter Part 2 area of Belfast City Centre, the 'Northside Urban Village'. The Framework outlines the vision for the redevelopment of an inner city area of Belfast.

It is recognized that a number of social, economic and environmental factors influence health. Urban regeneration has major implications for health as it includes not only physical redevelopment but also issues such as education, employment, environmental conditions, housing, welfare and healthcare. Urban regeneration can also help to address health inequalities at a local level, as the areas where regeneration is undertaken are usually marked by poor economic and social conditions. The North West Quarter Part 2 area of Belfast is a historic part of the city. The identified area is one of the most socio-economically deprived areas of not only Belfast but Northern Ireland. The area is characterised by the large number of people who receive income and housing benefits, have low levels of educational qualifications, high rates of long-term illnesses and it is also an area of high long-term unemployment.

IPH conducted a rapid Health Impact Assessment (HIA) on the proposed draft Northside Urban Village Framework. HIA is a decision support tool which seeks to inform the decision making process by identifying the potential health impacts of a proposal. For the purposes of this HIA, this included reviewing the proposal and related documents, collecting relevant statistics on the population and desk based research. IPH has summarized the identified health impacts and developed a series of recommendations.

Potential health impacts

Four areas were considered in detail for their potential impacts on health. These were; Connectivity and walkability; Economy; Housing and Public spaces. Recommendations have been developed for each of these areas which related to aspects of the Northside Urban Village Framework.

Connectivity and walkability

Evidence from the literature shows:

- Accessible developments and the provision of safe attractive routes for walking and cycling facilitates people in choosing active means of transport which leads to increased levels of physical activity and improved health.
- The provision of additional pedestrian crossings would greatly enhance safety for pedestrians and cyclists. This will encourage more people to use these routes.
- Providing a more aesthetically pleasing environment will present further encouragement for people to walk in the area.
- Increased pedestrian presence can reduce crime rates.
- Tree planting can improve air quality with subsequent benefits to cardiac and respiratory health.
- Creation of a new urban area has the potential to create more opportunities for physical activity and social interaction with subsequent benefits to health.
- Proximity to services is an important determinant in choosing active means of transport but other issues including attractiveness, safety and perceived safety (from crime and from road traffic accidents), topography and street layout all contribute to the 'walkability' of a neighbourhood.
- Walkable neighbourhoods enhance social capital which impact positively on mental and physical health.

Taking these health impacts into account we recommend:

- Pedestrians and cyclists should be given the highest priority when developing or maintaining streets and roads. This can be achieved by introducing measures such as widening pavements and introducing cycle lanes.
- The improvement of streets through the use of vegetation which will assist to contribute to improved air quality.
- Incorporating principles of urban design which are known to improve safety and reduce fear of crime.
- Giving full consideration to the current character of the Northside Urban Village to create a more sustainable community to enhance social interaction and create a pleasant environment.
- Ensuring the walkable neighbourhood concept is fully utilised for the benefit of health, by considering the street layout, design and safety features to enhance physical activity and social capital.

Economy

Evidence from the literature shows:

- Employment opportunities can increase household incomes and enhance individual mental and social health.
- Employment opportunities in the retail/ leisure/ catering industries are more likely to be low paid, and insecure than in other areas of employment.

Taking these health impacts into account we recommend:

- The mixed-use development is used to provide opportunities to ensure local people can avail of local employment opportunities.
- That the creation of employment opportunities through the redevelopment of the area needs to be considered alongside a range of factors such as the type of employment available and the skills match. Every effort must be made to match the skills to the local pool of resources.
- Specific attention be given to the needs of various groups, such as long-term unemployed and lone parents, as job creation does not mean job opportunities.

Housing

Evidence from the literature shows:

- New housing developments for both private and public tenure can create social divisions which can be detrimental to social capital.

Taking these health impacts into account we recommend:

- New developments should be designed to complement the current housing developments and character of the area. Additional support services such as residents associations need to be considered to ensure community integration.

Public spaces

Evidence from the literature shows:

- Providing a public space can improve social networks in residential areas.
- Improving the public realm can contribute to social inclusion

Taking these health impacts into account we recommend:

- The development of quality public space to enhance physical and mental health and wellbeing for residents and broader community. This will also create an opportunity for increased social interaction.

Recommendations for future action

We request that DSD consider these recommendations in the development of the Northside Urban Village Regeneration Framework final plan and welcome the opportunity to discuss in further detail.

We recommend a comprehensive HIA is conducted on the final plan. This is in keeping with the request from Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Ministerial Group for Public Health for all government departments to identify strategies which HIA should be conducted on. IPH would welcome the opportunity to work with DSD to conduct a comprehensive HIA on this proposal. The comprehensive HIA would entail developing a fuller community profile to provide more information, a more comprehensive literature review and greater engagement with the community and stakeholders.

Details of the HIA process and the rapid HIA referred to above which was conducted on the Northside Urban Village Regeneration Framework will be available at www.publichealth.ie/hia

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