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Date: January 2007

**Issue: Belfast City Centre North West Quarter Part Two  
GVA Grimley Baseline Regeneration issues report to DSD**

Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate around how the North West Quarter should be further developed. Council is keen to see how the plan joins up with the aims and objectives of A Shared Future, the government priority launched in 2005 which wants to achieve *'the establishment over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence'*<sup>1</sup>. This goal has become a cross cutting theme of government policies over recent years, and its rhetoric is used widely.

The Community Relations Council is interested in how government departments, Department of Social Development (DSD) in this instance, will deliver this commitment - in particular how this proposed regeneration scheme will contribute to building and promoting good relations between individuals and families who live in the North West Quarter area; how it will have a positive impact on their lives in terms of employment, services, community facilities, education and living arrangements. It was pointed out from the outset of ASF that achieving the final goal would be a challenge; therefore we do not expect this proposal to have all the answers, particularly considering the area it covers. It has been widely documented that this area suffered greatly during the conflict; according to Morrissey & Gaffikin 'there was a spatial concentration of deaths (60%) of local residents in the North & West of the City.....this spatial concentration of political violence was reflected at the interfaces between residentially segregated communities'<sup>2</sup>. The area remains largely segregated today. However this emphasizes the need to develop a strategy for this area that will take into consideration local issues, and try and define a way forward.

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<sup>1</sup> ASF, P9

<sup>2</sup> Morrissey & Gaffikin, Planning for Peace in Contested Space, p10, 2006.

Over the last number of years Belfast City Centre has transformed and continues to do so at a fast pace - increased tourism, job opportunities, international investment and residential developments. However, on the other hand we have city residents who want to live in a safer city. The city that is experiencing increased incidents of hate crime, therefore it needs to be acknowledged that despite the fact we are identified as a post-conflict society, Belfast is in many regards still a city of intolerance reflected in the segregated make up of the community - ongoing sectarianism and racism needs to be challenged. Despite the positive changes for many residents and workers 'the peaceline communities are still waiting for their share of an ill-divided cake'<sup>3</sup>

The North West Quarter is a depressed economic area and has been targeted within 'Renewing Communities' and 'Renewing the Routes' strategies. It is important that new opportunities are created for this part of the city to complement other re-development and regeneration schemes e.g. Crumlin Road Gaol, Girdwood Barracks and the Titanic Quarter. This means delivering tangible gains that filter down to residents of the city collectively.

Overall Council is supportive of the proposals particularly the wish to deliver physical regeneration, increase opportunities for businesses, and attract investment which would ultimately result in jobs, improve access to educational facilities, and ultimately link the North West Quarter with the hub of the city centre activity. These proposals would not only benefit the local community but also those who use the city centre as it opens up spaces that have recently been unused by the wider city population.

How can this be done successfully? There are different approaches to planning. Although planners have long planned in the context of a divided society, some would argue that they have planned around the divisions and at times added to segregation. It is only too easy to find statistics as to show the continued polarization. In the light of the A Shared Future, DSD must also take into account indicators that reveal society wants to find new ways of interacting with each other. The most recent Life and Times Survey and the Young Peoples Life and Times Survey reveals a desire to learn together, to live beside one another and to generally increase occasions where people can meet and relate with one another. Moreover, government has recently endorsed the recommendations from the Independent Strategic Review of Education (ISRE) and intends to implement the recommendations immediately - they include promoting and devising ways in which different school sectors can increase sharing, collaboration and partnership. This will have a huge impact on how our children learn together.

Already the report has acknowledged that the Northwest Quarter is a contested space, and that the reality on the ground for local residents is one of

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Shirlow, Belfast Telegraph, Jan 2002.

apprehension as to what the development will mean in terms of their safety. This is also acknowledged within a Report from the Belfast Interface Project (2004) that 'people in its (Belfast) most sensitive (and vulnerable) spaces remain suspicious and fearful of the 'other' side'<sup>4</sup>. Council understands that there are difficult issues, but opportunities do exist. Morrissey and Gaffikin's 'Planning for Peace in Contested Spaces: inclusion through engagement and sanction'. (Appendix A) describes 4 models for planning in a contested space: neutral, partisan, equity and resolver<sup>5</sup>. Some of these models offer opportunities to move forward but perhaps one of the fundamental issues when deciding to transform a contested space is to 'emphasis the role of communication and collaboration in creating a more consensual and cohesive socio-spatial outcome'.<sup>6</sup>

This approach is very important when it comes to addressing some of the more contentious issues i.e. housing. Living space is a central issue for the local community in the Peter's Hill and Carrick Hill area of the North West Quarter – both in terms of who needs housing and the type of housing required to meet those needs i.e. a basic need for more housing, increased family accommodation and suitable housing for older residents. However due to the segregated nature of the area the planners seem to have reached a stumbling block on the way forward, as they feel options for integrated housing or social housing could further polarize the community. It appears that serious consideration is being given (within the document) to building apartment-based buffer zones.

CRC notes the angry reaction from some local residents in late 2006 that this apartment option will not meet their needs for adequate, affordable housing in the area. Dialogue is thus crucial for this aspect of the development phase, that 'this interaction among equals can help uncover previously hidden common interest'.<sup>7</sup> CRC would highly recommend that DSD organise a number of community meetings, both within each of the particular areas and then jointly. It is crucial to have these conversations at local level to examine what options might be favourable for the different parts of this area, and if any agreement could be reached on a collective basis. This dialogue should occur on a number of levels, and should be viewed as a process rather than a one off event. It is important to make reference to the important work undertaken by the Suffolk Lenadon Interface Group which enabled similar discussions to take place around the issue of shared services and shared spaces. This involved an enormous amount of trust building work and sensitive consultation over an extended period of time. Similar dialogue should happen with the North West Quarter residents. The consultation document highlights the involvement of key stakeholders in the area

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<sup>4</sup> Belfast Interface Project, 2004 Report.

<sup>5</sup> Range from ignoring the issue of conflict, favouring one section, tackling issues in terms of equality or a radical effort to redress the conflict. Morrissey & Gaffikin Planning for Peace in Contested Space, p7, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Morrissey & Gaffikin Planning for Peace in Contested Space p8, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Morrissey & Gaffikin Planning for Peace in Contested Space p8, 2006.

e.g. Central Library, BIFHE and the Belfast Telegraph and the key role they have in the regeneration of the area; CRC supports this approach.

The outcome remains open. Again with reference to Suffolk Lenadoon, the main discussions and advancements have occurred around shared services and regeneration issues. Shared Housing is not on their medium term agenda but the other developments are recognised a major achievements. Similarly the housing discussions within the NW Quarter may not provide a resolution but may 'create a platform for subsequent success in future negotiation'.<sup>8</sup>

Housing is only one of the issues, and discussions would also prove useful to determine the way forward on other issues i.e. shared spaces, economic activity etc. In light of ASF recommendations, CRC would urge that public spaces should be welcoming to all and kept free from territorial markings.

Council would welcome an opportunity to discuss this option further with the Department as to who could drive these discussions forward e.g. the role of facilitator and mediator. The Department should also consider site visits to models of good practice to help realise the potential for this area.

CRC would also like to underscore the need to ensure that routes in and out of the North West Quarter are welcoming and that shared spaces are open and approachable. This follows the ideas put forward for a 'public city' i.e. a planning and policy framework that proactively advances the opportunities for adversaries to meet as 'friendly enemies' or even as 'opposed friends. Varshney (2002) believes 'these kinds of bridging relationships may be crucial in moderating inter-community violence'.<sup>9</sup> Another option for shared spaces and the development of economic ventures is the development of social economy networks. Best practice should be promoted from the rest of the city. Again the Stewartstown Road Regeneration (Suffolk/Lenadoon Interface Group) have developed community and commercial facilities, and created new job opportunities. This network successfully operates on a cross community basis - it did not happen overnight and requires a long term vision with commitment from both sides of the community. Another example is the Skegoneil/Glandore social economy project; this is at a very early stage and much investment is needed in developing the relationships for physical regeneration. These programmes require dialogue and discussion and support from the local community - again this is where joined up thinking is required from DSD. They should engage with local community leaders and explore options for similar project within the North West Quarter.

There is also the opportunity for developing a cultural quarter within this area which could match other zones of the city. The North West Quarter is a natural area for celebrating diversity and has residents from the Indian and Jewish Community, and also is host to Clifton House, which has a rich history including

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<sup>8</sup> Morrissey & Gaffikin Planning for Peace in Contested Space p21, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Morrissey & Gaffikin Planning for Peace in Contested Space p21, 2006.

links to revolutionaries such as Henry Joy McCracken. The area has a unique opportunity to expand and attract residents and visitors to a largely untapped resource.

CRC urges the planners and DSD to approach these issues sensitively, but also pro-actively. It is not constructive for our society that areas, because of the difficulties of the past, are left to experience the status quo or not allowed to experience a positive transformation. It is imperative that the NW Quarter is not left as 'old' non-shared Belfast sandwiched between the city centre and the Crumlin Road development project.

Challenges have been set for each government department within Triennial Action Plan as well as society in general, and CRC is optimistic that once the window of dialogue has opened possibilities will be realised. Success will not be immediate but through CRC's experience on the ground, once communities have the opportunity to talk to each other, they are eager to build on these small steps.

This development plan should not end up as a short-term initiative, aimed at managing the contested space, but should proactively challenge the status quo and really deliver change for the communities of the North West Quarter and for the residents of the city.