

# **Screening Report**

## **Strategic Environmental Assessment Determination**

### **Inner North West Masterplan 2017**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

This document constitutes Belfast City Council's Screening Report for a determination as to whether its draft Inner North West Masterplan 2017 should be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2004.

#### **2.0 Strategic Environmental Assessment**

The European Council's Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive (2001/42/EC) requires an environmental assessment to be carried out for certain plans and programmes which are likely to have significant effects on the environment. The SEA Directive was transposed into Northern Ireland legislation via the aforementioned Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2004 (hereafter referred to as the 2004 Regulations).

Screening is a process for deciding whether a particular plan or programme, other than those for which SEA is mandatory, would be likely to have significant effects on the environment, thereby requiring SEA and the preparation of an Environmental Report.

The criteria for determining whether a particular plan or programme is likely to have significant environmental effects are outlined in Annex II of the SEA Directive. These criteria are reproduced in Schedule 1 of the 2004 Regulations.

Schedule 1 of the 2004 Regulations identifies two main sets of criteria for determining whether a plan or programme is likely to have significant effects on the environment. These include:

- (i) the characteristics of the plan and programmes; and
- (ii) the characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected.

Both these sets of criteria are listed and responded to in section 3.0 below in respect of the Inner North West Masterplan.

### 3.0 Screening Assessment Criteria

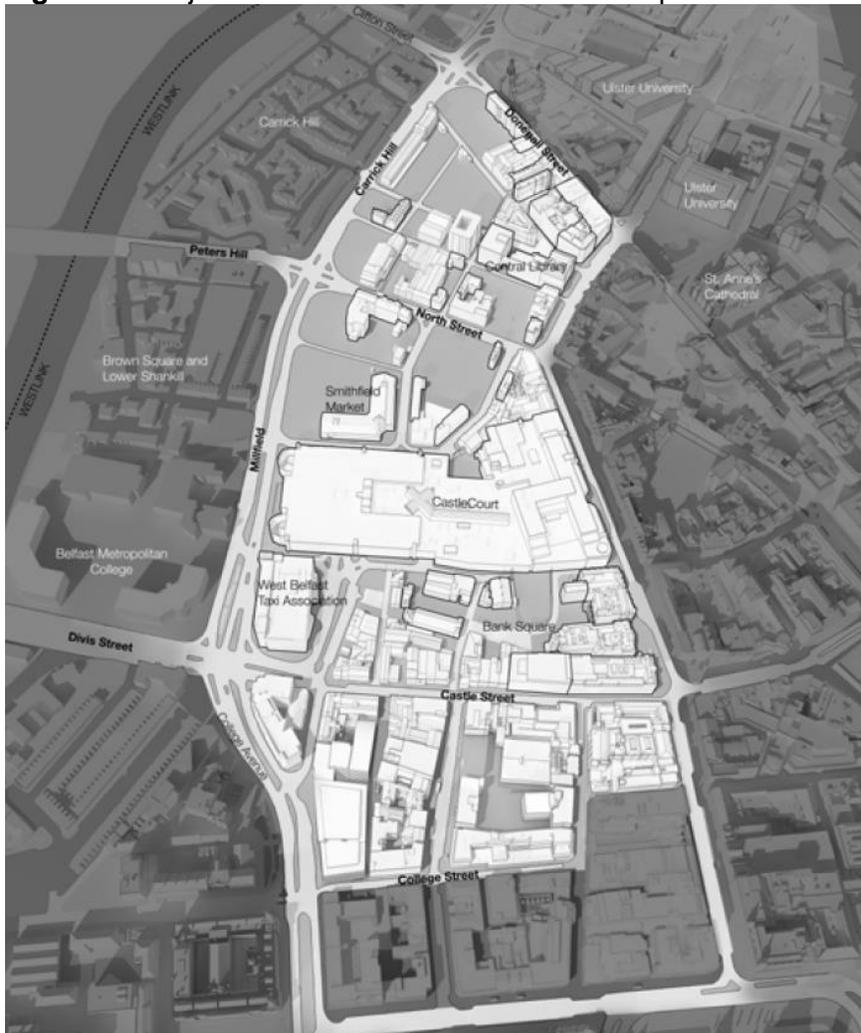
#### 1. The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular, to –

a) The degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources.

The Inner North West Masterplan is not a statutory plan or programme. Its preparation is not a legislative requirement of government and it is not subject to a formal adoption process. Accordingly, it is debateable whether it falls within the scope of Article 2 of the EU Directive 2001/42/EC and Regulation 2 of the 2004 Regulations.

The above notwithstanding, however, the ultimate aim of the Inner North West Masterplan, as stated on page 3 of document, “...is to help encourage, inform, influence and direct the activity of both the public and private sectors in the Inner North West’. It aspires to transform this part of the City Centre (Figure 1) through the creation of better connected mixed use neighbourhoods.

**Figure 1:** Subject area of Inner North West Masterplan



It seeks to do this by having regard to a number of overarching objectives and to design guidance for identified Character Areas. The objectives for the Inner North West area are outlined below:

1. To reuse and integrate the existing heritage
2. To deliver a variety of residential accommodation or tenures
3. To provide high quality and distinctive work and employment spaces
4. To support city centre retail activity
5. To improve and support the existing offer and create links to new and existing creative and cultural activity
6. To provide a high quality public realm to create green, walkable and cyclable spaces
7. To promote sustainable communities, quality urban design and help create a welcoming and attractive place for everyone
8. To upgrade and manage the transport and parking facilities and promote active and sustainable transport

The Inner North West area has been the focus of major development in recent times, including student accommodation and development linked to the new Ulster University campus. Against this background the Council is keen to ensure that the Masterplan has material weight in guiding future development in the area. From a town planning perspective this is aimed at encouraging orderly and consistent development, and protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development.

**b) The degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes, including those in a hierarchy.**

In many respects the Masterplan occupies the lowest level of the plan hierarchy, in that it is positioned below the Development Plan (draft BMAP and emerging LDP) and is an offshoot of the City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy 2015. It is aimed at influencing the outcome of projects rather than the remit of plans or programmes. Having stated this, aspects of the Masterplan may be considered for incorporation within the new LDP for Belfast.

**c) The relevance of the plan programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development**

As listed in response to criterion (a) above, approximately half of the 8 Masterplan objectives are relevant to the promotion of sustainable development, notably (1), (6), (7) and (8).

**d) environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme**

A key environmental problem in this area is the amount of vacant and derelict sites that exist, some of which operate as surface car parks. As a consequence, the desire for regeneration and major development means that pressure is placed on the historic fabric of this area, especially its listed and historic buildings.

**e) the relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of Community legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection)**

By seeking to accommodate substantial residential and mixed use development the Masterplan is relevant to the Water Framework Directive insofar as there is a requirement to establish if sufficient wastewater treatment capacity exists for the additional load.

**2. Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to –**

**a) the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects**

The Inner North West Masterplan provides design guidance for 10 Character Areas and Streets. In the main this advice relates to the scale and massing of buildings and the public spaces in between. Significant development is envisaged for the area and this means that certain likely effects on the environment will be long term, constant and generally irreversible. One departure from this opinion relates to “meanwhile” uses that may be inserted on plots of land on a temporary basis.

**b) the cumulative nature of the effects**

The cumulative nature of the effects of this Masterplan stems from its overarching drive to provide for City Centre living and working. As development gathers apace there will be a concomitant increase in the following: demands on wastewater treatment facilities and storm drainage network; requirement for parking provision; levels of traffic; and pressure on the historic environment from redevelopment.

**c) the transboundary nature of the effects**

Due to the location of the Inner North West area, together with the location of the European designated sites (SPAs and SACs) likely to require consideration (see response to (g) later) there is no transboundary dimension to potential effects.

**d) the risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents)**

This area contains no proposals associated with certain Schedule 1 EIA development that could pose a risk for human health or the environment. As part of the City Centre, proposals for this location are essentially for mixed use development, namely residential, retail, leisure and office use.

**e) the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected)**

As a reflection of its City Centre location and preponderance of development opportunity sites, the Inner North West area contains approximately 350 housing units totalling less than a 1,000 people. This approximates to 0.3% of the Council population. There are also neighbouring residential areas at Carrickhill and the Lower Shankill.

The Masterplan area covers approximately 19 hectares, which is roughly 6% of City Centre area (circa 3 square kilometres in extent). The spatial extent of the Masterplan area is illustrated in the attached Map 1.

- f) the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to –**
- i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage;**
  - ii) exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; or**
  - iii) intensive land-use;**

This part of the City Centre lies within An Area of Archaeological Potential (AAP). It contains a number of important listed buildings and historic buildings, plus features of Industrial heritage.

The Inner North West forms part of the City Centre and has a typically intensive land use profile as exemplified by the presence of Castlecourt Shopping Centre. Proposals to facilitate similar intensive development under this Masterplan should be appreciated in this context.

The Inner North West is not recorded as a location where air quality standards are exceeded though it does comprise the following: the busy Millfield route; appreciable bus activity on Royal Avenue; central stretches of 3 arterial routes (Castle Street, North Street and Donegall Street); and car parks throughout.

Within the context of the above, the scale of mixed use development proposed, including provision for internalized parking implies that there will be an increase in emissions in the area above existing levels.

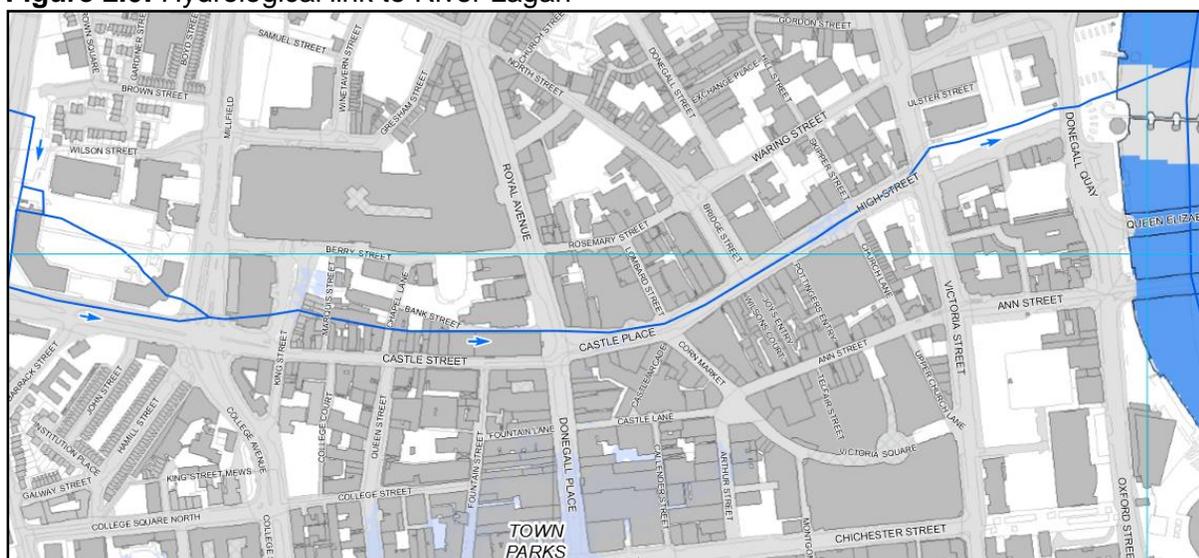
**g) the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international Protection status.**

Part of the Inner North West from Berry Street to College Street lies within Belfast City Centre Conservation Area. Outside of this designation, the Inner North West area does not specifically include any protected areas or landscapes of national, European or international importance. However, by virtue of a culverted watercourse to the rear of properties on Castle Street (Figure 2) it does have a hydrological connection to the River Lagan and onwards to the following:

- Inner Belfast Lough Area of Special Scientific Interest;
- Belfast Lough Special Protection Area (SPA)/Ramsar site;
- Belfast Lough Open Water SPA;
- East Coast Marine pSPA;
- North Channel cSAC; and
- The Maidens SAC

Its location in relation to the first three nearest designations is shown in Map 2 attached.

**Figure 2.0:** Hydrological link to River Lagan



Source: Rivers Agency website

The Inner North West area is separated from Belfast Lough SPA by a distance of over 4kms and from the River Lagan by nearly 500m. It is not therefore anticipated that bird and marine life in the protected parts of the lough will be affected by noise and disturbance during the construction and operational stages of development linked to this Masterplan. This assertion is supported by the findings of the 2015 Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) carried out for the creation of a containment bund for contaminated material in Musgrave Channel in the Belfast Harbour Estate. When granting planning permission in January 2016 (Ref: LA04/2015/0190/F) it was generally accepted that there would be little threat to the bird population from noise emanating from this development, the location of which is considerably closer to the SPA than the Inner NW.

The main environmental effects on these designated areas are likely to be associated with the risk to the degradation of the aquatic environment posed by increased wastewater and storm drainage discharge from an increasing population.

## 4.0 Conclusion

Having regard to the screening assessment criteria above the following conclusions can be stated:

- It would appear that the majority of responses to criteria relating to the characteristics of the Masterplan (1a-e above) are affirmative in determining the need for SEA. Moreover, by highlighting how development of individual sites can take place within the context of a wider vision for the area, the Masterplan aims to have material weight in guiding the general layout and density of development in this area.
- The responses to criteria relating to characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected (2a-g) are more mixed in terms of their definitiveness. Nonetheless, likely significant effects on the environment will include: the impact of high density development on the historic environment; the capacity of the waste water treatment

system and drainage network to accommodate the scale of population envisaged; the implications for air pollution due to increased traffic volumes, etc.

Taking into account the foregoing therefore it would appear that the Inner North West Masterplan is, on balance, likely to have significant effects on the environment and should therefore be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Accordingly, the NIEA, as the consultation body, is respectfully requested to confirm if it agrees or disagrees with this determination.



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