

Bolder Vision for Belfast

Consultation Response



Introduction

RSUA welcomes this important initiative to reimagine Belfast city centre in terms of connectivity, sustainability, and accessibility. It has the potential to set the future direction development in the City.

Given the ambitions laid out in the Bolder Vision which either complement or refer to proposals that are planned as part of other initiatives, the organisation believes it is important to manage public and business expectations to ensure this vision is not perceived to be a false dawn.

The recent consultation on the future of the high street to inform the work of the High Street Task Force incorporates a number of themes such as city centre living and should be viewed alongside the Bolder Vision to ensure there is no duplication of effort or resources.

It is also positive to see the partnership between the Council and the Departments of Infrastructure and Communities on this project.

Ambitions

In assessing this consultation, RSUA reviewed a number of previous plans which incorporate some key strands of the Bolder Vision. Detailed proposals such as Streets Ahead phase 2 released in 2012 (<https://www.op-en.co.uk/projects/belfast-streets-ahead-bsa-phase-2>) and a proposal for transforming the Inner City Ring Road (<http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/roads/transforminnerring.html>) were not implemented.

This leads the organisation to determine that whilst the Bolder Vision is a new step in seeking to realise plans to address individual challenges for the city centre of Belfast, it is not ambitious enough. Many elements of the vision lack definition.

Whilst we agree wholeheartedly with the thrust of the vision and warmly welcome its publication, we believe it is important that the greatest focus is placed on learning lessons from the past where delivery has been the problem.

In order to address a number of challenges for the city and to align with some key issues identified in the Bolder Vision, RSUA propose a number of suggestions to bolster this vision. The organisation:

- seeks a clear plan for year-on-year growth of pedestrianised areas and areas which combine access for walking and wheeling and public transport but which are very limited to private cars.
- seeks a clear vision of where housing is going to be situated, the standards it will meet, the plan for affordability
- seeks a clear vision of how the city centre will be powered and heated by 2035 and how it will not contribute to climate change (or be close to not contributing)
- seek a clear vision of how people will be attracted to live and visit the city centre because it will have the most attractive architecture in the region
- seek clear commitments to never be further than a prescribed distance from a public space to sit, rest and socialise throughout city centre

- seek a clear commitment to never be further than a prescribed distance from a place for children to play
- seeks a clear plan for clean and healthy air
- seeks a clear plan to identify and provide, within close proximity, the public and private services required by 2035 to support a growing city centre population

Speed

RSUA is concerned that bringing the vision to fruition will be too slow for the needs of the city. The overall Bolder Vision was completed in August 2019 and published in December 2019.

We are now entering 2022 and there are many elements still inadequately defined. There is a danger that this approach will further delay tangible progress.

Public engagement

RSUA has observed the Bolder Vision key elements with the assistance of city maps, but it is clear that for most readers to understand what is being proposed in each key move, there needs to be ability to see what is being proposed in more detail – to zoom in and determine the implications of what is being proposed spatially.

Key Move 1: Create a Civic Spine with a Focus on People

Positive elements

RSUA welcome the ‘people first’ approach taken by Bolder Vision but is cognisant of the need to ensure that communities living in close proximity to the city centre are properly engaged.

In particular, it is important to ensure that area plans drawn up by the community are seen as part of this effort to integrate communities into Bolder Vision, especially those who promote accessible transport to the city centre.

The organisation welcomes the short and long-term interventions.

Concerns

RSUA is aware of the need for investment in infrastructure in the city centre such as increased sewerage capacity which can facilitate further growth within the civic spine environs.

It is important to note that the civic spine as outlined in the consultation follows the route of major inner-city roads, and RSUA believes this doesn’t go far enough in terms of addressing car dominance.

RSUA suggestions

The organisation believes an uninterrupted protected cycle path could be provided between the two Universities. This should be built into any further strategy.

In relation to the depiction of the civic spine, RSUA believes that this should begin at University Street, highlighting the importance of Queen’s University to tourism.

The spine includes areas and assets of key interest within the cityscape, and RSUA would like to a mix of fully pedestrianised areas and areas where current walking provision will be doubled.

RSUA would like to see specific use of greenery to delineate between roads and walkways along the spine.

There should be a strategy to make the air quality along the civic spine the best in Belfast. Things to be considered include excluding industrial vehicles along the spine with a timeframe in place to make the area exclusive to electric cars.

Finally, RSUA believes the vision needs to include a spatial plan. The architecture along the civic spine will be critically important in defining it. A masterplan for the architecture along the spine should be developed.

Key Move 2: Reimagine the Inner Ring Road and end Car Dominance

Positive elements

RSUA welcomes plans for an orbital cycle greenway in the inner city. This ambitious plan will require significant investment in order to upgrade what is a poor network in and around the centre of the city as many cycle routes are as yet situated along the river and in less built-up areas. The vision should aim to create an environment where most places in the city centre are accessible by walking or wheeling.

Concerns

RSUA is conscious that phrases such as 'inner ring road' are regular parlance amongst architects and similar individuals.

It will not be a regularly used term for the public and so this should be reviewed to ensure the public are aware which geographic areas are referred to – this would be improved via better maps and graphics within the vision documents.

RSUA suggestions

In ending car dominance in the city centre, the organisation believes that Belfast City Council and its partners should review the number of public and private car parks situated right across the inner city and as far to the East as Middlepath Street. These could be transformed into green spaces that will complement access to the Titanic Quarter.

Reducing vehicle traffic into the city centre is clearly required in order to realise not only the aim of reducing car dominance, but to address climate change.

This could be addressed by increasing parking charges in the form of a non-sustainable transport levy for parking in the city centre.

RSUA believes its also important that in terms of public transport that BRT vehicles should not be treated apart from other similar transport providers.

Key Move 3: Promote City Centre Living

Positive elements

RSUA believes that inner city living can be an opportunity for a number of areas in the city centre that currently operate simply as retail anchors or office space. The organisation

believes that the future of the modern high street must be multi-functional, responsive to concerns about the environment and bring people back into its physical spaces to live and play, not just work.

In line with the vision outlined in the High Street Task Force consultation, RSUA is supportive of encouraging above-shop living and dedicated plans to ensure a sustainable mix of residential and non-residential use of buildings throughout the city centre which will contribute to their long-term sustainability.

RSUA suggestions

Bolder Vision should consider pedestrianising areas in conjunction with communities who want to see a reduction of cars in residential areas.

The vision should establish clear minimum standards for residential developments in the city centre. Minimum space standards for all new dwellings based on our existing standards for social housing should be adopted alongside provision for access to a reasonable, minimum external amenity space near to dwellings which promotes mental and physical health.

External amenity space can be provided as private, communal or public space. The external amenity space should include provision of a suitable area for children's play. It should also include provision for bicycle parking and storage.

RSUA believes Belfast City Council should map out the provision of essential services within walking/cycling distance of residential developments.

The water infrastructure of the city will require significant capacity upgrades to cater for new developments.

Key Move 4: Embrace the River Lagan and Riverfront

Positive elements

A focus on the Lagan and riverfront is welcome in highlighting one of Belfast's natural assets.

RSUA believes that in order to embrace the River Lagan and the riverfront, there must be a concerted effort to ensure a mix of residential and non-residential buildings along its route.

Currently, there are large areas of riverfront that are either vacant or are largely home to commercial buildings. Bringing families and communities closer to the riverfront has the potential to encourage future use of the river itself for recreation and transport.

RSUA also welcome proposals to create a number of bridges.

Concerns

The organisation is unsure of the nature of 'pop up' parks in the Lagan and is concerned how these might be situated.

RSUA suggestions

Investment in water infrastructure is needed to manage capacity to ensure a clean and inviting watercourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, RSUA can see the benefit of the four key moves and their contribution to the future of a vibrant and sustainable Belfast. There are significant infrastructural, social and environmental considerations in the Bolder Vision which will require investment both financially, in terms of planning and dialogue with communities.

The organisation does have some concern around the ability of the vision to reduce car dominance in the city and how key moves one and two can be realised in full, and the vague nature of some of the proposals.

The organisation will look forward to assessing the implementation and delivery plans for the Bolder Vision and how it will integrate with other relevant public service efforts to reinvigorate high streets, provide sustainable transport and provide a cleaner environment.