

A Response to the consultation document -

Draft North West Quarter Masterplan
Public Consultation
Department for Social Development

May 2005

**Patricia Haren
Director
Women's Support Network
Floor 2
109 – 113 Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1FF
Email: co-ord@womenssupportnetwork.org**

Introduction

The Women's Support Network (WSN), established in 1989, is an umbrella organisation for more than 40 community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups. The WSN aims to achieve social, political and economic justice through the promotion of the autonomous organisation of women. The Network also aims to strengthen the collective voice for women's groups, to promote and develop networking to enable collective action and to influence policy and decision making processes. The WSN is an important vehicle for taking forward the common agenda of community-based women's organisations, many of which are based in the most disadvantaged areas of the city and which have experienced the worst effects of the political conflict.

The WSN offices are located on the second floor of Cathedral Buildings, at the junction of North Street and the top of Royal Avenue. These are high specification, fully serviced offices in a building renovated to the highest standard. Previously, the WSN shared the 'Downtown Women's Building' in 30 Donegall Street. Despite the less suitable nature of these premises, they had possessed the advantage of ground floor access, allowing for greater visibility for the work of the women's sector, which encouraged women to 'drop in' on a more casual basis than is the case now.

As an organisation, which has existed in this section of the city centre for fifteen years, the WSN staff have a great attachment to its future and welcome the opportunity to make some response to the consultation on the draft north west quarter masterplan.

WSN is a supporter of the 'let's get it right' campaign which promotes an alternative vision for Cathedral Quarter based on the following principles:

- ▶ People not cars
- ▶ Shop windows not back doors
- ▶ City centre living
- ▶ Revitalized historic buildings
- ▶ Life after six

Question 1 - Development Principles

Character

The WSN, conscious of the rich historical heritage of the area, welcomes the commitment to preserve and reinforce the distinctive nature of the area, maintaining historic buildings and facades. We believe, however, it is important to ensure that historical buildings are re-used and not just their facades preserved.

Urban structure

We welcome the commitment to reinforce spatial variety and networks. We would like to emphasise our conviction that retail cannot be the overwhelming driver in regeneration, and that the retail mix must include a large percentage of small, independent outlets, some with specialised appeal, and providing opportunities for local entrepreneurs. There must be city centre living, which includes 'living over the shops', as well as the creation of new apartments.

Public realm

The creation of high quality streetscapes, including the replacement of the existing patchy and inferior paving will do much to enhance the visual aspect of the area, which currently looks extremely shabby. We welcome the commitment to the creation of public squares, enabling greater access to cultural activities.

We would recommend that attention be given to the provision of dedicated facilities for young people, in particular a state of the art skateboarding area that is supervised and preferably free of charge.

Ease of movement

As an organisation representing women, we are very conscious of the need to create a 'safe, 24 hour environment that is easily navigable' and one that provides for pedestrian priority. In terms of choice of routes, we would add that the provision of dedicated cycle lanes should be a priority. Cycle stands in well lit, safe areas are also essential.

If car parks are to be provided then we would call for consideration of underground parking, as is common in many European cities, with enhanced safety aspects to ensure that women on their own feel comfortable. However, as a principle, we believe that there should be no car park in the heart of the city. They not only blight the urban structure but they prevent greater movement of pedestrians throughout the area. Limited on-street parking should be sufficient to allow for collection of heavy objects, deliveries and disabled access.

Market change

We welcome the recognition that large-scale shopping malls are inappropriate for a city centre location and look forward to building structures that will not subject the area to wholesale redevelopment. The importance of ground floor use is vital in contributing to a vibrant and lively atmosphere and also in contributing to a greater feeling of safety for those walking in the streets.

Mixed-use

We agree that mixed-use is essential. We hope to see more living accommodation provided, not just high-specification apartments but affordable housing for local people and living space in upper floors above shops. The local artists, small shops and social economy enterprises that currently exist must be

encouraged and the area developed in such a way to assist in the continued generation of a variety of users within the area.

Add value

It is vital to create value in the social and environmental sense if we are to have an area that people will want to spend time in. This includes the use of 'green' principles in building design and construction.

Inclusion

The WSN welcomes the commitment to create a 'thriving inclusive city'. We do not believe that retail can be the only driver in this development. The re-creation of housing and encouragement of culture and outdoor recreation are also important development principles. Success in creating vibrant city centre living and activities will make the streets safer at night for locals and visitors alike.

Question 2 – Land Uses and Boundary

The WSN has some reservations concerning the mix and scale of uses for the land as outlined in the Draft Masterplan. We would draw attention to the following:

- The construction of the proposed car park adjacent to Writers' Square would blight the surrounding area.
- The importance of recreational open spaces and the provision of some green space within this area of the city.
- The development of small courts for both commercial and residential use, as seen in Temple Bar and in many European cities.

- A commitment to the development of ecological 'green' buildings, for both residential and retail purposes could further help to provide the area with a definable character.
- The need for recreational provision for young people.
- More pedestrian-only streets with a diverting of buses from the centre of the city.
- Dedicated cycling lanes with ample parking provision.
- A consideration of culture rather than retail as an economic driver for the area, with one of the heritage sites housing a cultural centre that would include an art gallery with local focus, a retail outlet for crafts and a high quality café. This could link up with social economy projects and provide an outlet for sales.

Question 3 – Concept Plan

While we welcome the concept of developing a new quarter of the city, which will recreate its historic grain and provide a new city square at its heart, we question the central focus on retail-led development, particularly if that becomes overly dependent on acquiring a departmental store as anchor for the area.

We would prefer to see the emphasis being placed on the development of the arts potential of the area and with a commitment to restore city centre living so that the area will remain alive after 6.

We would draw attention to the importance of the restoration of North Street Arcade and its preservation as an outlet for 'alternative' culture, particularly in the arts and in fashion and as a low-cost café and meeting venue. With our café culture becoming increasingly costly, it is important that affordable eating/meeting places are supported, that can cater for young people and provide an alternative to our pub culture.

The present day Smithfield Market bears no resemblance to the historical market. Its building is not in keeping with the character of the area and the WSN would support the suggestion that Smithfield Market as it currently exists is removed, with full support given to the independent traders to access alternative accommodation. In its place there could be a vibrant open space, including a green area, with the encouragement of open-air entertainment.

More apartments on upper floors and a commitment to ensure that dead frontage will be greatly reduced.

More links and interesting spaces, using European examples.

Question 4 – Developer Selection

The WSN queries the rationale for giving Westfield Shoppingtowns Ltd, owners of Castlecourt, the first opportunity to respond to the future development brief for the North West Quarter. It has been acknowledged that Castlecourt is an inappropriate development for a city centre. We would urge that a tender that emphasises the cultural nature of the development project is prepared and widely distributed.

Question 5 – Equality Issues

Affordable rents must be retained, with a ceiling on rents from not for profit concerns and with subsidies for those whose chief source of income is derived from their own artistic endeavours.

We would urge that a full EQIA be carried out.

Appendix 1

WSN Member groups

Al-Nisa Women's Group
Ardoyne Women's Group
Ashton Centre
ATLAS (Lisburn)
Ballybeen Women's Centre
Ballymurphy Women's Centre
Belfast Travellers Education & Development Group
Brook (Belfast)
Citywide Women's Consortium
Derry Women's Centre
East Belfast Community Education Centre & Walkway Women's Group
Falls Women's Centre
Footprints Women's Centre
Greenway Women's Centre
Lenadoon Women's Group
Lesbian Advocacy Service Initiative
Northern Ireland Women's European Platform
Parenting Forum NI

Shankill Women's Centre
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP)
Strabane & Lifford Women's Group
Windsor Women's Centre
Women's Information Group
Women into Politics
Women's News
Women's Resource Development Agency
Women's Tec