

A Response to the consultation document -

Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area
Plan 2005

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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 works to take 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 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.

We welcome the opportunity to raise issues of specific concern to our members through our comments on the issues raised in the consultation on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. As women in our society have primary responsibility for the home and for care of dependents, are less likely to be car owners and more dependent on public transport for multiple short journeys, we hope that we will be seen as important stakeholders in the consultation process around the future lives of everyone living in the Belfast Metropolitan Area.

Housing

As a women's organisation, we have a particular concern for the future plans regarding housing development. There is enormous unmet demand for social housing in the Belfast and BMAP provides an opportunity to address this situation.

We support the principle of land being zoned for social housing, however, we would argue that at least 10% of the total housing land being zoned should be for social housing stock.

We object to the limitation that private housing developments will provide social housing in areas of *identified* need. We believe that need can be hidden and we also believe that this policy will confine social housing to certain parts of the city rather than creating residential neighbourhoods with a mixture of housing.

The WSN would support a policy that promoted a mixture of social housing within all new developments. In addition, we strongly believe that there must be a mandatory obligation on all developers of new housing developments to make provision for play facilities catering for a wide range of ages, from pre-school to older teenagers, and to include seating arrangements that will enable residents, particularly senior citizens and mothers of young children, to socialise. We object to any developments that do not include this as an intrinsic part of their plans.

Brownfield Developments

We believe that a policy of building on brownfield sites is vital to regenerate the city and to create sustainable development in close proximity to amenities, which is less reliant on the use of private cars. We would urge planners to consider the importance of car-free areas that would enable children to play safely on the streets, thereby helping to develop and maintain community cohesion.

We strongly support the plan to build 70% of dwellings on brownfield sites.

Houses in Multiple Occupation and Student Accommodation

We are concerned that there is no policy concerning restrictions on HMO areas and believe that BMAP should contain HMO ceilings for areas that are already under pressure for student accommodation. These areas have seen the large-scale exodus of families and an erosion of the mixture of social groups that makes for healthy and sustainable neighbourhoods.

We object to BMAP's lack of HMO restriction areas and we call on BMAP to set HMP ceilings for areas already under pressure for student accommodation and to set ceilings for areas that may come under pressure in the future, such as Lower Lisburn Road, Ballynafeigh and Lower Ormeau.

Areas of Townscape Character

The WSN, representing women's centres located within inner-city Belfast, has great reservations concerning the implications of including areas such as the Village within 'Areas of Townscape Character' (ATC), given the poor state of housing in the area. We believe that Policy UE3 regarding permissible developments in ATCs is too restrictive. We see no reason why, for example, attractive looking terraced housing could not be developed in such areas, which would be more affordable to many. If developers are restricted in the housing that can be built, then social housing is unlikely to be built in ATCs. We are disappointed that no consideration has been given to the provision of extra green space to areas currently lacking such provision. We believe that it is vital that community facilities and amenities continue to be provided and that the policy is flexible enough to enable this.

The WSN objects to the undue restriction in the types of dwellings allowed for in Policy UE3.

We would support a policy that would enable community facilities and amenities to be provided if social and economic needs are identified.

We would support a policy to create green space areas in inner city areas currently lacking any such space.

Transportation

Inner Ring Road

The WSN believes that much of the BMAP provides the foundation for a regenerated city that brings people back into its heart. However, we believe that this will be jeopardised if the proposed inner ring road is constructed. The environmental considerations in providing a route that will attract even more car users are immense and it will be to the detriment of the health and well being of many local communities, particularly those in the Markets, Donegall Pass and part of the Ormeau Road.

We object to the proposed inner ring road and call for the scheme to be abandoned and the areas currently blighted to be regenerated as a matter of urgency.

We would support a ring road built *underground*, as is the case in many cities. In addition, we would urge the construction of underground car parks, which again is common throughout Europe.

Areas of Parking Restraint and Rapid Transit Schemes

The WSN, representing women who live in areas of multiple deprivation, fully support measures to limit parking and to encourage commuters on to the proposed rapid transit schemes.

We would also support measures that would enable non-car users to access services and amenities without having first to travel to the city centre. We support the introduction of small neighbourhood buses that would circle the city, as an addition to the main bus service that emanates from the city centre.

The WSN also supports the scrapping of the three-mile rule regarding bus passes for school children. This would make a major contribution to the reduction in car usage.

Interface Areas

Many of the women's groups affiliated to the WSN are situated in interface areas or areas directly affected by the communal violence of the past decades. We are disappointed that within BMAP there is no recognition of the multitude of problems this has created for communities and no proposals that would be in support of the Regional Development Strategy to help to foster better community relations, recognise cultural diversity or to reduce socio-economic differentials. The WSN supports development that will help to foster community cohesion and we believe that the creation of 'shared places' is an essential aspect of such a strategy. A 'city farm' in reclaimed land in an interface area would be a positive step forward and we believe that the zoning policy for New TSN areas must be extended to include interface and integration issues.

The WSN objects to the lack of proposals in BMAP that would address community separation and issues specific to interface areas.

Travellers

The WSN is disappointed that a more inclusive approach to the issue of Traveller accommodation has not been adopted by BMAP.

We support a policy that would include Travellers within the social housing provision of developments.

The WSN supports the provision of Traveller accommodation in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area.

Green Belt

The WSN supports the expansion of the BMA Green Belt and the protection that this will give to the countryside surrounding Belfast.

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