

# BEING BOLD

BELFAST CHAMBER'S RESPONSE TO THE  
'BOLDER VISION FOR BELFAST' CONSULTATION

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# INTRODUCTION

**“Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men’s blood”**

*Daniel Burnham,  
American Architect and Urban Designer*

**As the voice of our city’s business community, Belfast Chamber has been a consistent and enthusiastic supporter of the positive transformation of our city centre. Indeed, many of the improvements so evident in our city’s changed skyline have been delivered by Belfast Chamber members.**

Our desire to see continued change in Belfast city centre is primarily motivated by the fact that central Belfast remains the crucible of our city’s economy and the driver of the entire region’s economy, and it is our desire to see that continue and grow in the future.

Belfast city centre is the location of most of Belfast’s jobs and globally recognised clusters in financial technology and cyber security

It is home to two world class research led universities.

And it is the region’s retail capital, a tourism magnet and a hub for culture, arts and music.

Belfast has come on leaps and bounds in recent times. It is, in many respects, unrecognisable. However, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed the frailties that have afflicted Belfast for years if not decades. Issues like:

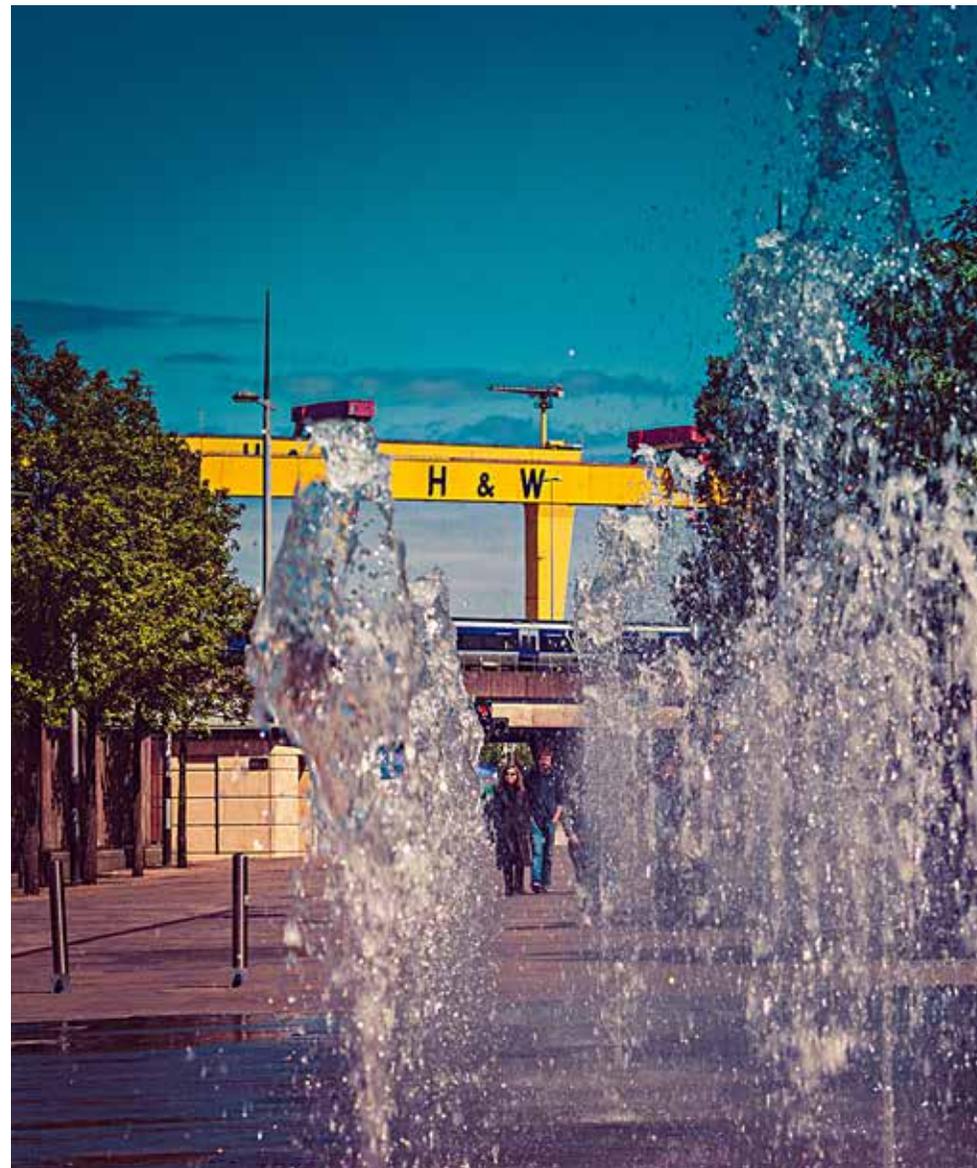
- Central Belfast’s residential population remains low with no prospect of matching, in the short term, the growth in city centre living seen in cities like Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester;
- Our city centre does not have sufficient open and green space for people to enjoy time together;
- Walking and cycling around Belfast city centre is not always as easy or effortless as it ought to be; and
- The city centre sits almost as an island, separated from surrounding communities by roads and the river.

These are weaknesses that Belfast absolutely must address if we are to truly become the people centred northern European city that we aspire to become.

Belfast Chamber welcomes Belfast City Council, the Department for Communities and the Department for Infrastructure's Bolder Vision for Belfast consultation. We firmly believe that a once in a generation opportunity exists to transform our city centre for the better but we equally believe that any and all change must be rooted in achieving the following overarching aims:

- To make Belfast city centre accessible and inclusive to everyone in our city as well as visitors and tourists;
- To encourage the creation of a city centre that enhances citizens health and well-being;
- To build a greener, more sustainable and environmentally friendlier city centre; and, most importantly in our opinion,
- To support the city's businesses by creating a city centre that is a must visit destination where people can enjoy our unique blend of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses and is also an attractive place for talent which, in turn, encourages greater investment and job creation.

For Belfast Chamber, this final aim is crucial. We note that none of the Bolder Vision's Guiding Principles are based on making the city centre more economically vibrant and believe that this aspiration should be front and centre. Many sectors of our city's economy have endured an extremely difficult period. Change in our city centre is much needed but it should not be implemented in a way that does further damage to our economy and must have the aim of increasing footfall and visitor numbers, supporting business and making Belfast an appealing destination for investment at its core.



**Evidence gathered by Belfast Chamber illustrates how our critical change is. Our Next Gen Belfast survey of just under 1,000 young professionals and students shone a spotlight on some of the areas where Belfast needs to change how it looks, feels and moves if it is to continue to attract and retain the all-important talent that has made Belfast a booming location for sectors like fintech and cyber security. For example, Next Gen Belfast found that:**

- 49% felt that Belfast is a congested city;
- Only 28% consider Belfast to be green/environmentally friendly city;
- Nearly 3 in 10 believe that Belfast provides sufficient affordable housing; and
- Almost half do not think that Belfast has good public transport

Therefore, as important as reimagining Belfast is to the health and wellbeing of the city's population and in our fight against climate change, it is equally as important to the ongoing economic success of Belfast.

Belfast is going through an unprecedented period of regeneration. A new university campus, a transport hub, a new tourism destination and other investments are changing our city for the better. Belfast's potential is boundless. These projects are absolutely essential to the future of Belfast but, in order to maximise the benefit for the city, we need to consider the spaces between these developments and prioritise placemaking so that their positive impact is maximised.

In this, Belfast Chamber's response to the Bolder Vision consultation, we set out our vision for reimagining Belfast city centre. We embrace the Bolder Vision's 4 Key Moves and seek to build on them and go even further. Our response draws on best practice in cities around the world, with examples of the type of change we think our city needs. Belfast

Chamber welcomes the Bolder Vision's separation of short and long term interventions believing that 'starting off as we mean to go on' is crucial to catalysing the seismic change we know will take years to realise.

Belfast Chamber believes that the secret to success in our city is changing it from being a place that people feel they have to be to somewhere they want to be whether that is to work, live, visit or enjoy time with others. A destination that draws people to it because of its vibrancy, character and life. It is our firm view that we should seize this unprecedented opportunity, be truly bold and build a post-pandemic, people centred and economically thriving city.



# CREATING A UNIVERSITY PARK



# CREATING A 'UNIVERSITY PARK'

**In keeping with the Bolder Vision's suggested 'Key Move' of 'Creating a Green Spine' through Belfast City Centre, Belfast Chamber wants to knit together two great institutions in our city - Queen's University and Ulster University - in a way that creates a wonderful new destination of international renown. A green, linear park extending almost 2 miles running from the new Ulster University campus at Cathedral Gardens along Royal Avenue and Donegall Place, around City Hall and down Bedford Street, Dublin Road and Botanic Avenue to Botanic Gardens and Queen's University.**

This new 'University Park' would require the reimagining of our city centre with tree lined streets and pockets of green space including small urban gardens at locations like Castle Place and an opened-up City Hall grounds, creating a new urban park in the heart of the city.

Belfast Chamber believes that this part of our city can be transformed into a truly great street which is somewhere for leisure, spending time with friends and family, supporting local retail and hospitality businesses and, above all, a place for people. Through making small adjustments to the existing roadway, we believe that Belfast can create a new 'University Park' with dozens of acres of additional open space but where movement is retained with pedestrians prioritised and dedicated cycle lanes are constructed but with room remaining for essential vehicles like public transport, deliveries and taxis.

Creating a new 'University Park' would be a bold but achievable ambition for Belfast. It has the potential to promote social cohesion as it brings people together, boost wellbeing, contribute to the city's fight against climate change and encourage economic growth. Whilst Belfast city

centre may currently have few large green spaces, the city as a whole has several great parks which are relatively short distances away from the central core. Belfast Chamber believes that the 'University Park' we propose could become not just the 'green spine' that the Bolder Vision for Belfast envisages, but also the place from which 'green spurs' in the form of greenways, green streets and dedicated cycle paths, could better connect the city centre to the likes of Ormeau Park, the Waterworks, Grove Park, Falls Park, Victoria Park, Woodvale Park and Dunville Park, making both the 'University Park' and our excellent existing city parks, accessible resources for our entire community.

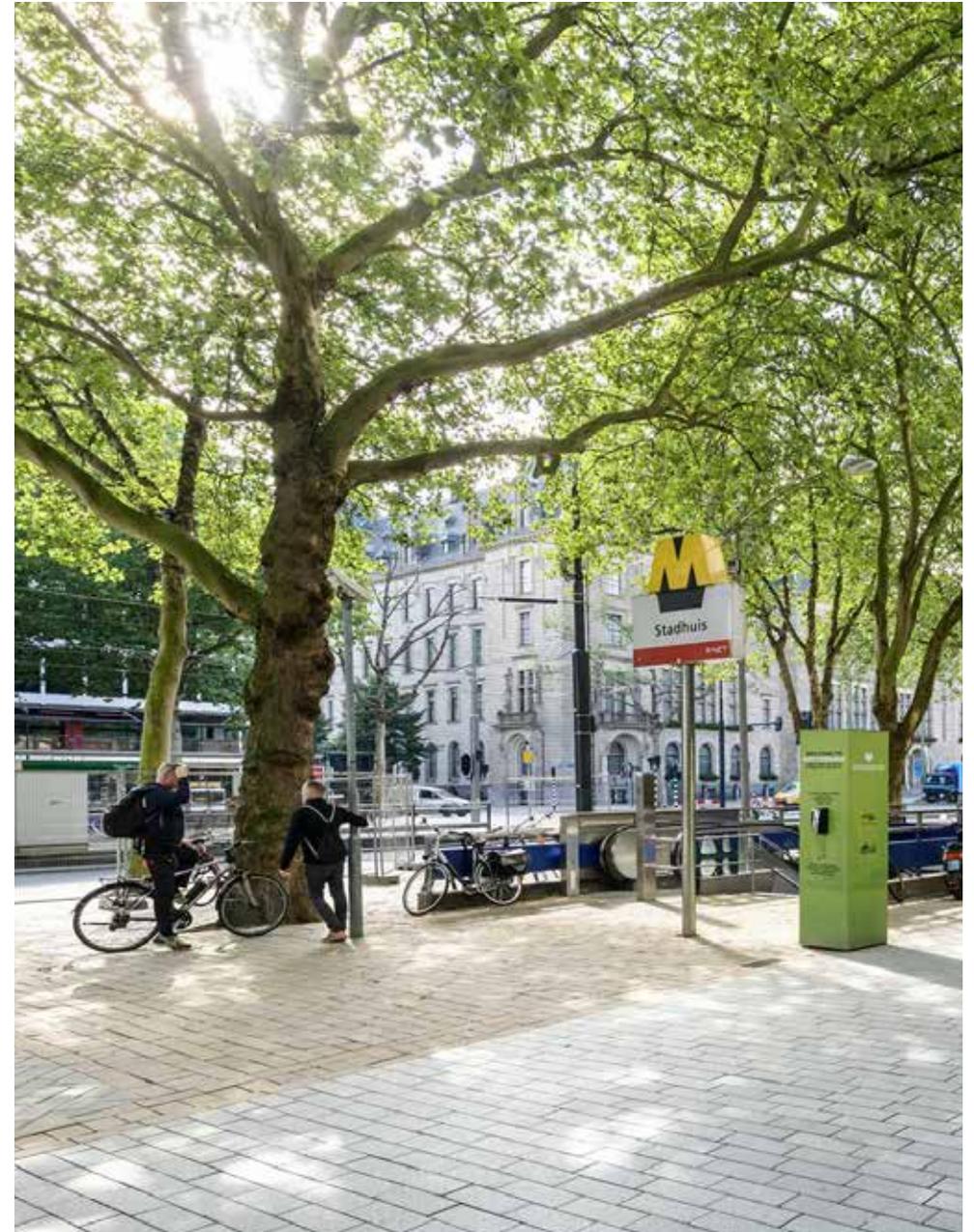
**Belfast Chamber supports the development of a new 'University Park' connecting the Ulster and Queen's campuses with reimagined, traffic calmed, tree lined city streets punctuated by urban gardens and parks as a first, significant step towards an interconnected network of parks and green spaces across Belfast.**



## CASE STUDY 1

# COOLSINGEL, ROTTERDAM

April 2021 saw the conclusion of a nearly €60 million revamp of one of Rotterdam's most prominent avenues – Coolsingel. The transformation saw a redistribution of road space with a reduction from 4 lanes of traffic to 2 and the creation of a public friendly esplanade including a wide pedestrian promenade with seating, feature lighting and art installations, and a two-way cycle path. A central element of the plan was to make Coolsingel a 'green boulevard' which was achieved by planting of 77 new trees and pocket parks. Coolsingel's regeneration is already proving a huge success with the street no longer a barrier but rather a pivot point for the increasing number of citizens and visitors using the street to explore more of Rotterdam's city centre.





## CASE STUDY 2

# MARIAHILFER STRASSE

## VIENNA

Mariahilfer Strasse has long been Vienna's busiest and best known shopping street but an increase in car traffic over 4 decades led to it becoming 'a monofunctional, congested and divided street'. A €22 million investment between 2013 and 2015 has made the 1.6km long Mariahilfer Strasse Europe's longest continuous shared space with 3 zones - a pedestrian zone and two shared zones where local traffic and public transport is permitted but through traffic is prohibited. 'City Lounges', with benches, water features, planters and trees to encourage greater social interaction, are a major element of the new Mariahilfer Strasse. The award winning redevelopment has also proven popular with local businesses who have seen footfall more than double between 2008 and 2016 and Mariahilfer Strasse becoming Europe's 12th busiest high street in 2017.

# BECOMING A BLUE CITY AGAIN



# BECOMING A BLUE CITY AGAIN

Belfast wouldn't be Belfast without its rivers. The Farset gave the city its name and the Connswater, the Blackstaff and, of course, the Lagan were key to the city's industrial success. Investments in the 1980s and 90s made by Laganside Corporation in the Lagan Weir and the Waterfront Hall saw the city turn back towards the river. Ongoing regeneration at City Quays and in Titanic Quarter is reconnecting Belfast more and more with the Lagan but there is still so much more to do.

Belfast Chamber believes that Belfast must finish the job started over three decades ago and properly reconnect with the river and become a 'blue city' once again.

Lots of cities like Oslo, Copenhagen, Chicago and Bilbao have invested heavily in regenerating their waterfronts and are reaping the rewards in terms of more development, more active lifestyles and more economic growth. The huge success of the Titanic Quarter as a place to walk and cycle during the pandemic and the work of the Belfast Maritime Trust in developing a 'Maritime Mile' has proven that, with investment in quality, riverside public realm with family friendly activities, the people of Belfast and beyond will embrace the Lagan and the waterfront.



From top left to right: Allas Seapool, Helsinki; Paris Plages and the Zubizuri Bridge in Bilbao

## Belfast Chamber supports our city embracing the River Lagan and Waterfront by:

- Building a Belfast Riverwalk along both banks of the Lagan connecting the Titanic Quarter with Ormeau Park, Botanic Gardens and beyond to Belvoir Forest and the Lagan Meadows with multi-use public space dotted along its path, building on the huge success of the 'Maritime Mile' concept
- Initiating a 'Bridge Building' Programme - a number of new architecturally stunning pedestrian and cycling bridges across the Lagan and around Belfast's waterfront, learning lessons from cities like Newcastle, Bilbao, Copenhagen and Rotterdam where bridges have improved accessibility and become attractions in themselves
- Installing an 'urban spa' in Belfast Harbour similar to the Allas Seapool in Helsinki
- Developing 'Belfast Beaches' along the Lagan modelled on the successful 'Paris Plages' and Oslo's new beach beside its Munch Museum

A wide-angle photograph of the Chicago Riverwalk. In the foreground, a large, multi-tiered concrete staircase is filled with people sitting and walking. To the left, a yellow ferry boat is docked at the riverbank. A red steel truss bridge spans the river in the middle ground. The background is dominated by a dense city skyline with various skyscrapers under a clear blue sky.

## CASE STUDY 1

# CHICAGO RIVERWALK

## USA

The Chicago Riverwalk was completed during Rahm Emanuel's time as the city's Mayor and stretches for 1¼ miles along the south bank of the Chicago River. The \$100 million pedestrian only public path has firmly established itself as a place where Chicagoans and visitors go to eat, drink, meet, relax and enjoy all manner of recreation activities in the Riverwalk's 6 themed 'rooms' including a marina, a river theatre and a swimming hole. In 2018, the Chicago Tribune reported that in the previous year, spending at Riverwalk businesses totalled almost \$12 million.

# STITCHING THE CITY TOGETHER



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**Canadian urbanist Brent Toderian has stated that “if your downtown still has many wide fast one-way streets, then your priority is to make cars move quickly through the downtown. It’s not to create a vibrant downtown, help downtown retailers, keep people safe, support walkability and accessibility and reduce pollution”.**

Belfast city centre is enveloped by fast, wide, one-way streets which have, for far too long, formed a physical and psychological barrier between central Belfast and its neighbouring communities. Places like Great Victoria Street, Frederick Street, Great Patrick Street and Dunbar Link look and feel much more like urban motorways than the bustling boulevards they could be and, in the case of Great Victoria Street, once were. On the western and northern side of the city centre, the situation is exacerbated even further by the Westlink making many neighbourhoods feel remote and completely separated from central Belfast. With the development of thousands of units of purpose-built student accommodation close to the new Ulster University campus, issues of safety now arise as students navigate busy roads to access local services.

Much like the creation of a green spine/university park through the centre of the city, a redevelopment of Belfast’s inner ring could involve the reallocation of existing roadway to permit the prioritisation of public transport, the inclusion of segregated cycling infrastructure, the widening of footways for pedestrians and the insertion of more amenity space for people as has happened in the streets of Vitoria-Gasteiz. Equally, the construction of platforms over the top of sections of the Westlink – using Cheonggyecheon in Seoul as our inspiration – would create acres of new space for children’s play areas, parkland, greenways and other activities, replacing a canyon which cuts the city centre off from its natural hinterland.

The phrase ‘arterial route’ is often used to describe roads like the Newtownards Road, the Falls Road, the Shankill Road and the Malone Road, yet, in Belfast, the flow from the ‘arteries’ to the heart of the city has been impeded by bad infrastructure decisions. No city can properly function without strong and safe connections between its communities and its centre and this needs to change in Belfast through the construction of continuous bus and cycle lanes along key corridors to make the city more accessible and to increase activity.

Belfast Chamber supports the ‘boulevarding’ of Belfast’s inner ring, the softening of the Westlink and safer and better connections between the city centre and our arterial routes, with the aim of stitching our city centre back together with its surrounding communities and, in the process, use the transformation to create more space for citizens and visitors. Tree lined, pedestrian and cycling friendly, pocket park filled boulevards will be good for people, good for Belfast’s environment and good for the city’s businesses.



## CASE STUDY 1

# VITORIA-GASTEIZ

## SPAIN

The Basque capital of Vitoria-Gasteiz is a city similar in size to Belfast which had been experiencing diminishing pedestrian journeys, increasing traffic volume and 70% of public space reserved for the exclusive use of private car in the early part of the 21st century. As part of the city's Urban Green Infrastructure Strategy, roads like the 2km long Avenida de Gasteiz saw its previously 8 lanes reduced to 4, with the freed-up space given over to tree planting, a grassed tram line, widened footways and two cycle lanes. As a result of these and other efforts, Vitoria-Gasteiz is recognised as one of the world's most sustainable cities, becoming Europe's Green Capital in 2012 and a Global Green City in 2019.



## CASE STUDY 2

# CHEONGGYEcheon

## SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

Prior to 2002, Cheonggyecheon was a 10 lane roadway and 4 lane elevated highway before Seoul Metropolitan Government decided to perform radical reconstructive surgery that had regenerating a declining downtown and reconnecting two parts of the city that the highway divided as explicit goals of the project. The new Cheonggyecheon has much reduced space for vehicles but prioritises public transit, and is now home to a restored stream, public spaces and new habitats for plants and animals which are attracting thousands of residents and is a hive of cultural and business activity. The project has resulted in a 76% increase in pedestrian activity, a 45% drop in vehicle volume and a 10% decrease in air pollution.



# A 24/7 LIVING CITY



# A 24/7 LIVING CITY

**Belfast has one of the least populated city centres in Europe if not the world and increasing Belfast's city centre population has been described as the missing piece in the Belfast's regeneration jigsaw.**

We look enviously at competitor cities like Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester who saw the number of people living in the heart of their cities increase by 181%, 163%, 150% and 149% respectively between 2002 and 2015. In 2020, Deloitte's Regional Crane Survey recorded zero new residential starts in Belfast city centre. With around 5,000 people living in central Belfast, our city centre has approximately 7 times fewer inhabitants than Manchester. We have a long way to go to hit the Belfast Agenda target of making "our city is home to an additional 66,000 people" by 2035.

The benefits of a massively increased city centre population are multiple. As well as being crucial to transforming Belfast into a vibrant 24/7 city and ending the sense that the city goes to sleep at 6pm, increasing the number of residents in central Belfast is equally crucial in tackling climate change as it eliminates or at least considerably minimises the need to commute. The Smart Prosperity Institute has estimated that the annual cost per household to a Canadian city of a suburban dweller (\$3,462) is 2 ½ times that of an urban dweller (\$1,416).

Our case study from Boston also shows how critical quality residential accommodation is to a city's economy too. Belfast Chamber's 'Next Gen Belfast' survey, saw almost 1,000 young professionals and students identify 'more affordable city centre living' as the single most important improvement that Belfast needs. Coupled with that finding, the fact too that only 48% of those surveyed were confident that they would still be living, working or studying in Belfast in 5 years time, underscores just how crucial making Belfast a living city is. Our growing student population also demands greater numbers of purpose built student accommodation to secure our attractiveness as a place to study and continue to create

that pipeline of talent that so many Belfast businesses need. Put simply, without addressing these deficiencies, Belfast runs the risk of losing the race for talent.

Belfast Chamber shares the Bolder Vision ambition to reimagine the city so that it becomes a much more attractive city to live in in terms of the environment in which new residential developments would be located. Building a people centred city is one side of the equation. The other is learning from other cities who have helped stimulate the growth of their city centre residential populations.

**In addition to delivering the other ideas outlined in our response, Belfast Chamber believes that immediate, decisive action is needed to kick start a boom in residential building across Belfast city centre. A proper plan, backed by the Council and the Department for Communities, alongside a partnership with the private sector is long overdue. Any plan should involve the designation of Belfast city centre as a special investment zone for residential development and include initiatives and interventions such as:**

- Rates exemptions for new build residential developments in Belfast city centre similar to those in operation in GB cities;
- The fast-tracking of city centre based residential schemes;
- A reduction in car parking requirements in city centre residential developments to encourage active travel; and
- The development of a housing development fund akin to Greater Manchester's Housing Investment Fund to help stimulate the city's residential market.



## CASE STUDY 1

# BOSTON INNOVATION DISTRICT USA

Established in 2010, InnovationBoston was an attempt by the Massachusetts city to exploit the area's existing knowledge base and world class infrastructure to foster greater levels of innovation and entrepreneurship. The City's Innovation District - located on 1,000 acres on South Boston's waterfront - is a model of place-based innovation with the encouragement of collaboration through the provision of public space at its heart. As part of the District's 'Work, Live, Play' strategy, new models of flexible housing were a key component of the Innovation District vision with 12,000 new residential units in the District, 15% of which were affordable housing with a further 15% being "micro-units" designed to offer the affordability and convenience attractive to Innovation District workers.

# DELIVERING OUR SHARED AMBITION FOR BELFAST



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**A bold vision for Belfast is nothing without the ability to delivery it. Belfast Chamber does not doubt that our city partners share our ambition for Belfast. What we are worried about is our city's capacity to deliver such a big, bold plan and to do so in a timely manner.**

Belfast Chamber's Empowering Belfast report identified a significant difference between Belfast and other UK competitor cities in terms of infrastructure and regeneration powers. Whereas most of the power to realise a vision like the one we hope the Bolder Vision for Belfast will ultimately contain resides in the hands of Councils or Combined Metropolitan Authorities in GB, in Northern Ireland, the power is divided across Belfast City Council, the Department for Communities and the Department for Infrastructure.

The partnership between the Council and the two Departments begun during this Bolder Vision process must continue into and throughout the implementation phase or else there is a danger that delivery on the scale we need simply doesn't happen.

Speed of implementation of the Bolder Vision is also of the essence. Many aspects of the Belfast economy have taken a battering because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the evidence of our 'Next Gen Belfast' survey shows, a reimagined city centre is key to attracting and retaining talent. Winning the race for talent involves a city like Belfast succeeding at many things, but making Belfast as attractive a city as we can with great housing, good transport and an excellent quality of life are non-negotiables. We do not have the luxury of taking our time in implementing a Bolder Vision. Belfast Chamber's clear and unequivocal message to the Council, the Department for Communities and Department for Infrastructure is "get on with it".

**In order to deliver an ambitious Bolder Vision for Belfast, Belfast Chamber believes that the following must happen:**

- All statutory partners who are necessary to the delivery of the Bolder Vision for Belfast collectively commit at the highest levels to its delivery and make it their priority;
- A suitable structure is created to ensure that the delivery of the Bolder Vision is coordinated across the different departments and agencies responsible for it. Belfast Chamber would encourage the examination of the Urban Regeneration Company model used in English cities like Liverpool, Sheffield and Manchester in the early part of this century to pool budgets, expertise and capacity to deliver large scale city centre redevelopment like that envisaged in the Bolder Vision;
- The development of a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan given the extensive impact that many of the suggested projects contained within the Bolder Vision will have upon the flow of vehicles in and around the city centre;
- Streamlined processes – including planning – for all Bolder Vision projects and those which deliver on its ambitions; and
- Wide ranging consultation with all stakeholders including businesses and local communities to ensure the maximum buy in to the *Bolder Vision*.



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