

Living in the city

Planning, design and services for urban spaces

Event notes



Living in the city

CIH Northern Ireland's event – Living in the city – shared the strategies of public bodies in promoting city centre living and the quality use of urban spaces, and some of the housing typologies that could be suitable for inner-urban developments. The speakers at the event were:

- Phil Williams, director of planning and place at Belfast City Council
- Mark O'Donnell, director of Belfast regeneration at the Department for Communities
- Robin Hawe, head of place shaping for Belfast at the Housing Executive
- Greg Lloyd, emeritus professor at Ulster University
- Helen Harrison, director of Juno Planning
- Dougal Sheridan, principal of LiD Architecture
- Ciarán Fox, director of the Royal Society of Ulster Architects
- Sam Tyler, partner at Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios, and
- Amberlea Neely, manager of PLACE.

These event notes are drawn from some of the presentations, which are [available to view](#). The event was chaired by Diana Fitzsimons, chair of Radius Housing.

City centre living to create a vibrant economy

Belfast City Council's preferred options paper (POP), launched in January, seeks to increase new residential development in the city centre. The POP is the document that outlines the council's strategy to address the important issues for the city. This includes its low residential population which, for example, results in less vitality in the city centre and increased pressure on arterial roads, with more people commuting.

The paper forms part of the council's ongoing consultation process to inform its new local development plan. The plan will set out a vision of the future of Belfast to 2035, and guide investment by setting out specific policies for the use and development of land.

There are four strategic aims of the POP (right), one of which is creating a vibrant economy by strengthening Belfast to act as the regional economic driver. Ensuring that the city centre is an effective and dynamic place will make an important contribution to this aim, and this can be partly achieved by increasing the residential accommodation. The council's proposed approach will include:

- increased densities
- the re-use of existing buildings, particularly where these make a positive contribution to local character, and bringing vacant space back into use
- the inclusion of residential accommodation as part of mixed-use development schemes, and
- a mix of types and tenures.



The POP acknowledges the need for goals around the potential for the residential population, to make sure there are sufficient and appropriate services for people. It also acknowledges the built heritage of the city which provides opportunities for re-use, like vacant buildings over shops.

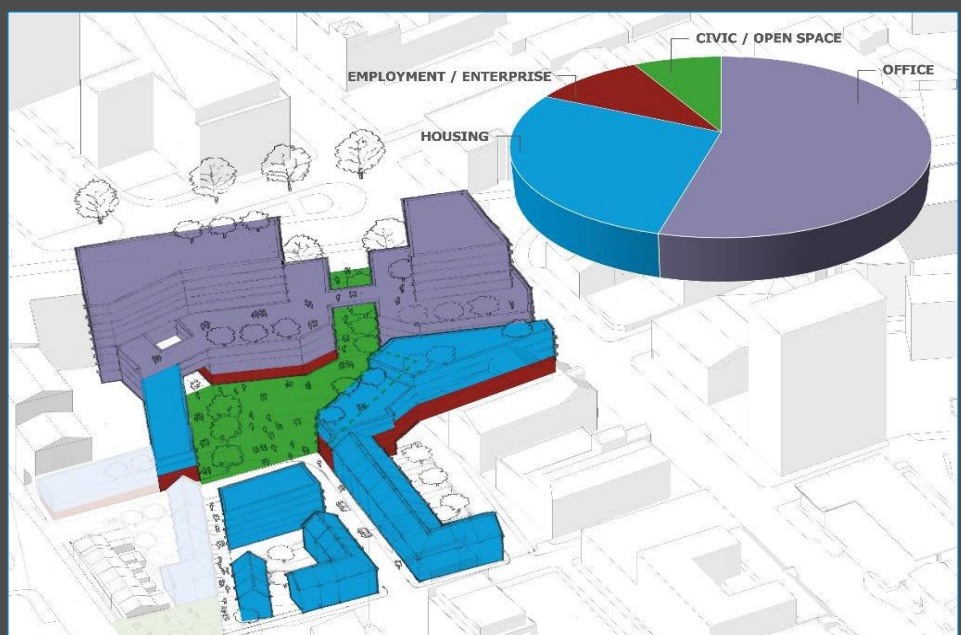
Housing regeneration policy will need to work in tandem with infrastructure, education and finance policies to ensure quality design is realised and the needs and demands of these new city centre households are met.

Role of social and affordable housing in city centre regeneration

In order to be socially sustainable, city-centre regeneration should create areas that are accessible for a broad range of people. Tenure mix will be important – social and affordable housing will play a vital role in ensuring that the city centre is accessible to people living on different incomes, and that the high level of unmet need for social housing in Belfast is addressed.

Shared society principles should underpin housing schemes – shared social housing is an obvious choice, since existing social housing continues to be segregated on ethno-religious grounds.

The Housing Executive's plans for the development of Hope Street (below) is an example of housing led regeneration in the city centre. It is also community led, with local communities having their say on the future regeneration plan.



Addressing the challenges of city centre living

Securing land for social and affordable housing in Belfast is increasingly difficult. A requirement in Belfast City Council's local development plan for a percentage of homes in a development to be social and affordable housing would help to secure its provision in the city, as well as contributing towards the desired outcome of a tenure mix.

The waiting list for social housing is very segregated on religious grounds at the common landlord area (CLA) level, where people are allocated their homes. Piloting a new Belfast city centre CLA, or a shared housing waiting list for the city centre, would support development opportunities in the city while helping to ensure city centre living is an option for everyone.

Community involvement in planning takes time and costs money. However, planning for meaningful engagement makes a difference – people are more likely to consent to developments if they are included in the decision-making process. This is particularly important in the regeneration or transformation of existing residential areas, which can take many years. For example, below is an architectural impression of the transformation of the Markets area with integration into the Belfast street grid, which would take approximately 20 years.

