

Draft

COMBER TOWN MASTERPLAN



URS



MARCH 2015





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Arial view of Comber

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Department for Social Development in conjunction with Ards Borough Council appointed URS in March 2014 to prepare a masterplan for Comber Town Centre. The masterplan process required continuous engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. This document is the culmination of that process and set outs an exciting range of short, medium and long term proposals and actions which will enhance Comber and its communities.

This masterplan is a non-statutory document therefore it is not required by law, but has been brought forward to help guide the future regeneration of Comber for the next 10-15 years. The document can be used to help guide the community planning process and be used by a range of stakeholders to help draw down funding for particular projects. Generally the delivery of this masterplan will not fall to one group or organisation but will require a concerted effort from a range of stakeholders, however the reward will be great.

The masterplan has been facilitated by a team led by URS (now trading as Aecom). URS worked very closely with the Project Steering Group which consisted of Local Councillors, Council Officers, DSD and representatives of the community / voluntary sector. URS facilitated the masterplan process however the projects and proposals identified were developed through detailed engagement with a range of stakeholders and this document brings together the many visionary and exciting project identified throughout the process.



2.0 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

What is a Town Masterplan?

The Town Masterplan is an evidence-based document that sets out the strategic vision for Comber over the next 15 years. The Masterplan aims to promote projects that have the potential to create a vibrant, high quality and fully integrated settlement. The Masterplan should not be confused with the current public realm scheme (also designed by URS). The public realm scheme once completed will greatly enhance the aesthetics of the Town Centre. It is an integral piece of the jigsaw whereas the Masterplan strives to provide an overarching framework within which the crucial elements of a vibrant town centre will evolve.

Where does the Masterplan cover?

Town Masterplans typically focus on projects within the town centre boundary as identified by the local Area Plan (Ards and Down Area Plan 2015). Comber's town centre boundary includes the following streets: Castle Street, Bridge Street, part of High Street and Mill Street. In recognition that several of Comber's key assets are outside this boundary a more holistic approach is being taken. The Masterplan is being developed on the basis that the revitalisation of its surrounding assets will directly impact on the future success of the town centre.

How has the masterplan been produced?

This masterplan has been prepared through four distinct stages as follows:

- Preparation, information gathering, town centre health checks and analysis;
- Visioning and Strategic Planning
- Design
- Implementation

The appendices to this masterplan are set out in a separate document and include a range of information and reports which was gathered and informed the preparation of this masterplan.

The following elements are included:

- Retail and Commercial Leisure Capacity Study
- Town Centre Health Check
- Chapters addressing retail, commercial / office, tourism, residential, evening economy, hospital and leisure sectors traffic/parking.

A brief history of Comber

During the influx of Scots in the early 1600s during the Plantation of Ulster, a settlement grew up at Comber, although it was focused about a mile further south than at present, in the townland of Cattogs. By the 1700s, however, the focus of the town had moved to the area of the present main Square and Comber became established as an industrial centre with several mills.

The Andrews family made Comber a centre of both linen production and grain processing by the second half of the 1700s. Whiskey distilling was a prominent industry by the mid-1800s, the most prominent of the distillers being John Miller. The Cooperage is the last remaining building of the Old Comber Distillery. It was first dedicated in 1872.

One member of the Andrews family, Thomas, rose to fame as designer of the ill-fated RMS Titanic, although he tragically lost his life when the ship sank in 1912. By 1841 the town had 1,400 inhabitants. The 20th century saw Comber lose much of its industry but re-establish itself as a commuter town for the Belfast urban area, swelling in population from 4,000 in 1961 to 8,933 according to the 2001 Census.



The development of Comber

For centuries, the settlement of Comber has developed around a healthy production and milling industry due to the nearby availability of materials and the natural environment required for the industrial processes. This heritage has led Comber to become a famous producer of Comber Whiskey and linen products. Although today, these industries have become redundant, the remnants of the physical infrastructure remain. This can be illustrated by the footprint of the former railway line, the mill ponds and mill buildings. The range of maps aims to illustrate the physical changes from 1904 – 1957.



Comber 1904 – The town centred around the Square and developed in a linear fashion outwards from this point along the major arterial routes of Castle Street, High Street, Bridge Street and Killinchy Street. The map indicated the major role the railway had at this time.



Comber 1932 – Further industrial buildings have begun to form around this period. This is evident from the new mill on High Street and the distillery off Killinchy Street. A new mill complex also opened on the opposite side to the distillery. To accommodate growth, additional residential properties have started to develop along Railway Street.



Comber 1957 - The town continues to grow around its industrial heritage with further increases in the residential provision. The core of the town based around the Square has remained intact even to the present day.

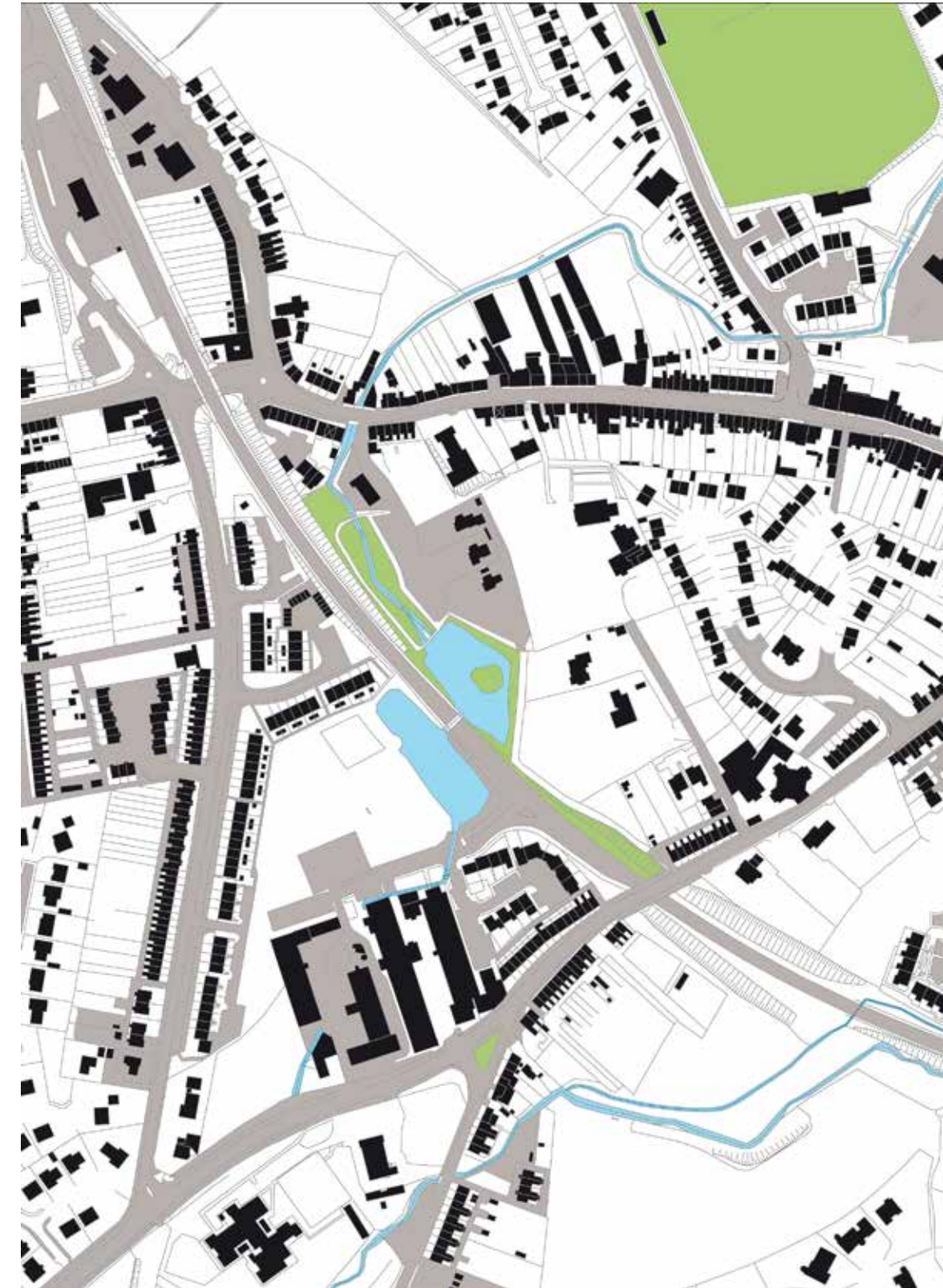
The current physical structure

Combers' physical structure remains largely similar to what existed over the past two centuries. The footprint of the former railway line to Donaghadee and Newcastle has now been converted to a vehicular by-pass which underlines how the preferred mode of transportation has changed since this period.

The civic core of the town is still based around the Square, with the primary retail offering on the neighbouring streets. Residential developments have continued to grow and expand the population on the periphery of the settlement.

Fortunately, Comber has managed to retain a large proportion of its green space, in particular the Comber/Enler River walkways. Some of the buildings associated with the industrial renaissance period still remain and have been gentrified to become residential apartments.

Others buildings such as the distillery have been demolished to make way for new build residential apartments to facilitate the rise in demand as Comber has been established as a primary commuter town supporting Belfast.





The quality of the town centre environment within Comber is generally in good condition. The proposed public realm scheme will replace the existing fatigued scheme with a high quality environment for pedestrians and visitors to the town. A new suite of street furniture and street lighting will help create a more legible and accessible environment for people of all ages. The Square is the centrepiece of Comber and the proposed scheme will reinforce this principle by attracting an increased footfall to the town centre.

The built environment consists of some great examples of historic architecture, however on the main retail streets such as Castle Street; this has been blighted by neighbouring vacancy and dereliction of key buildings.

Large volumes of traffic coupled with narrow streetscapes have resulted in movement issues along certain streets.

Previous Studies Comber Town Strategy (GVA Grimley, 2005)

GVA Grimley was commissioned by Comber Regeneration Ltd in 2005 to prepare a town centre strategy for Comber.

Following a comprehensive overview of the consultation and SWOT analysis the strategy identified 6 priority opportunities to be taken forward for physical implementation. These are listed below:

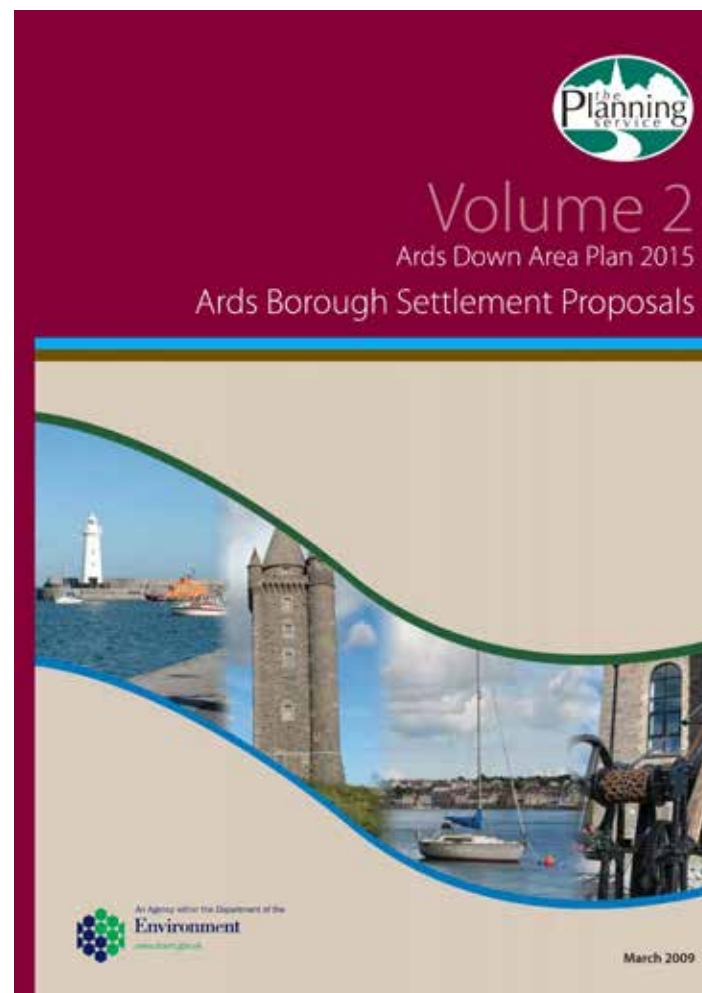
1. Movement and Infrastructure
2. Development at The Square
3. Development of the public realm
4. Development sites
5. Other key opportunity sites
6. Potential land use changes

Generally there has been some success with implementing the opportunities identified. Probably the greatest success is the implementation of the public realm scheme which is currently under construction. Most of the opportunity sites identified have also been developed.

Planning and Environmental Context

Comber has a wealth of built heritage assets including listed buildings, the listed harbour and historic monuments including the Moat. All of these designated sites will need to be considered in the context of the masterplan and their protection emphasised where necessary. Obviously all projects and proposals identified in the Masterplan will require the necessary statutory consents, however it will be important for projects and proposals to consider their impact on built heritage at an early stage and indicate risks where necessary.

There are no natural heritage designations within the town centre. Strangford Lough however has multiple designations such as ASSI, Ramsar, SPA and SAC; but these are outside the settlement limit.



Public Realm Improvements

Ards Borough Council has received major funding support from the Department for Social Development for a Public Realm scheme in Comber Town Centre which is currently under construction at the time of writing. The Public Realm scheme includes Castle Street, Bridge Street Link, Bridge Street, The Square and Killinchy Street.

The design proposals seek to complement Comber's townscape character, rich history and listed features with a high quality public realm scheme which will include:

- New natural stone paving to footpaths to provide a more appropriate setting for the town's historic buildings;
- Providing a complimentary setting for The Square;
- Street furniture;
- Street lighting;
- Improving accessibility by removing channels in the footway where possible; and
- Semi-Mature tree planting.



Traffic and Movement

Issues with traffic and movement have been consistently raised during the preparation of the masterplan. Indeed these are problems which have been present for a considerable period of time with no easy solution available.

In January 2013 Ards Borough Council commissioned a study of traffic management in Comber. This report summarised the historic review of the traffic in and around the Square. It was noted that DRD Roads Service were at that time of the view that a one-way system within Comber was no longer required. Primarily this was due to a reduction on traffic flows as a result of the recession.

Revisiting the nature of the traffic flow in and around Comber it is noted that the Bypass has resulted in a significant reduction in traffic flow through the Square. Traffic from the east and Newtownards bound for Belfast uses the A21 bypass and extends on towards the City. Traffic for Downpatrick, Saintfield and South Down can also use the bypass and no longer needs to travel through the Square.

The Square is dominated by the traffic signal controlled junction between Castle Street / Bridge Street / High Street and Killinchy Street. The signals have localised widening to create turning lanes from High Street into Castle Street. Castle Street itself has only one lane on the approach to the traffic signals meaning that it has an extended green time to allow traffic to exit Mill Street and castle Street.



“Comar, meeting place of the waters, that was the name given by the ancients to a settlement at the northwest corner of Strangford Lough at the confluence of the Enler and Glen Rivers. Today we call it Comber, famous for its spuds.”

(Comber Historical Society - website)



It is noted that the High Street / Killinchy Street traffic signal controlled junction is not under as much pressure as it was prior to the construction of the bypass. However the reduction in capacity has not resolved issues that currently exist along Castle Street and in particular along the stretch of road from Bridge Street Link to the Square. Along this route the footpath is of a substandard width and has insufficient width for a large pram to pass a pedestrian. The narrow width of Castle Street makes it difficult for two large vehicles to pass along this stretch of road.

When servicing takes place to the shop fronts it is common for heavy goods vehicles to straddle the footway and the nearside traffic lane. This results in blocking both the footway and the traffic lane stopping traffic travelling to or from the square. Figure 4 highlights the poor road width available on the approach to the traffic lights when a service vehicle is driving along the road.

The January 2013 Traffic Management Report, which utilised previous work carried out by DRD Roads Service identified several options for a one-way system to be implemented, however no agreement could be reached as to the best solution. It is important to also consider the potential future growth in traffic and footfall in Comber generated by the implementation of the masterplan, current public realm improvements and the increasing population from large scale residential developments in the vicinity of Comber.



Castle Street



Service Vehicle on Castle Street, source Chronicle.

Tourism and Recreation

Few tourism destinations operate in isolation. Rather, visitors often utilise certain known sites as a base from which to explore an area, or series of areas, that are easily accessible. Comber is positioned toward the northern end of Strangford Lough. Although the town itself is set back slightly from Strangford Lough, it is physically connected through the Comber River which passes through the town.

The environmental and historic importance of the landscape of Strangford Lough and Lecale is illustrated by its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Furthermore, the area's biodiversity importance is reflected in the host of both national and international conservation designations. Each of these conservation designations reflect the national and international importance being placed on the lough as a wetland habitat, particularly in terms of the numbers of wintering and breeding birds, basking sharks, grey seals it supports.

Comber itself falls outside of both the AONB and these other environmental designations. However, there is a strong interrelationship between landscape designations and the outlying towns and villages. Important services, particularly those supporting visitors, are often located within these centres. This includes catering, retail and accommodation.

There has been no train linkage between Belfast and Comber since 1951 when the Belfast & County Down Railway ceased operating. The route of the line remains however, and in 2008 it was officially opened as the Comber Greenway supporting walkers and cyclists. The greenway runs from Dee Street to the Old Belfast Road just outside Comber. In Belfast, the route passes by the Odyssey, the River Lagan, and the Titanic Quarter. The Comber Greenway is a major asset for Comber however unfortunately is an underutilise asset as it terminates short of Comber Town Centre. Linking the Greenway to the town centre and beyond is a crucial element to this masterplan.

Built and Natural Heritage Attractions



Strangford Lough and Lecale AONB



WWT1 Castle Espie Wetland Centre (south of Comber) – a tranquil centre featuring hides and nature walks to observe wild and endangered birds from around the world.



Mount Stewart House and Gardens (Newtownards) – a National Trust house and estate, with guided tours of the house and leisure walks of the grounds. A shop and plant shop are also available.

Town Centre Attractions



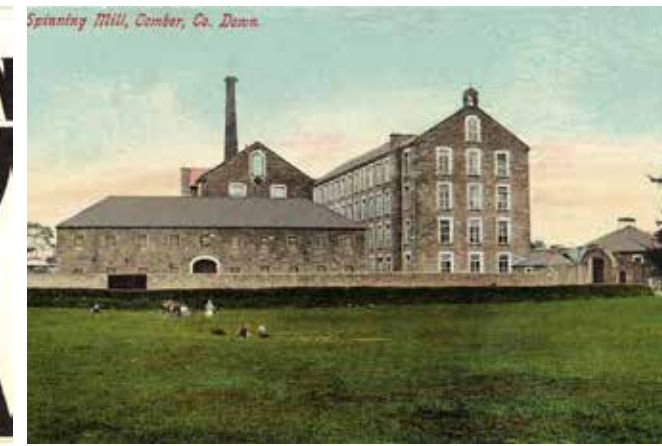
Georgian House - 400 year old building that has been tannery and an outlet for the automotive combustion industry and more recently, a coffee shop and bistro.



The Town Square – with its statue of the Major General Robert “Rollo” Gillespie, hero of the Himalayas, the town square is meeting point for townspeople, a landmark for visitors and a haven for pedestrians.



The Cooperage - last remaining building of the Old Comber Distillery.



Andrew's Spinning Mill – former textiles operations, owned by John Andrews.

Retail, Commerce and Residential Sectors Retail Capacity

Our view is that the outcome is more likely to be closer to the low estimate. The forecast would support minor additions to the comparison retail offer in Comber, but more especially, improvements in quality. The opportunities are shaped by the market, rather than by estimates of expenditure capacity.

- Vacant and derelict properties in Comber need to be assessed as to whether they have anything to contribute towards accommodating improvements to the retail offer. Most likely, many will now be redundant for retailing purposes, especially those in the peripheral areas. Those in the core of the town centre should remain as opportunities for retailing and non-retail services. More on this issue is contained in the Comber Town Centre Health Check.

Town Centre Health Check

A town centre health check was prepared by URS and Roderick McLean Associates. The Health Check was informed by the various surveys carried out including householder surveys, retailer surveys and footfall counts. The Health Check provides broad guidance which assisted with shaping this Masterplan. It did not suggest any major change in the role and function of Comber. Thus, the analysis suggests that environmental improvements and other issues should be the priority focus for the Masterplan. The main threats facing the town centre can be broadly divided into those which can be overcome by actions to improve the centre, and those which simply impact on it; meaning economic and wider market trends.



Commercial and Office Space

Comber has a relatively compact town centre focussed around the Square with residential developments concentrically growing outwards from the town centre as development has occurred. The commercial and office sector is primarily based on the streets around the Square such as High Street, Killinchy Street, Bridge Street, Castle Street and Mill Street.

Non-domestic property in Northern Ireland is assessed on the basis of its rental value known as the Net Annual Value (NAV). Generally this is calculated by multiplying the rate by the area of the unit. Therefore examining the NAV of non-domestic properties within the town centre will give an indication of the size of units within the town centre.

Through examining the NAV rates for each street the following outcomes have been established:

- The retail area with the highest rateable NAVs are situated on The Square and Castle Street. This coincides with these two streets consisting of the bulk of the retailing properties in Comber.
- Buildings with a large floor space are found in key areas such as Supervalu and the hardware stores on Castle Street. Units on The Square tend to be larger in area due to the historic built form.



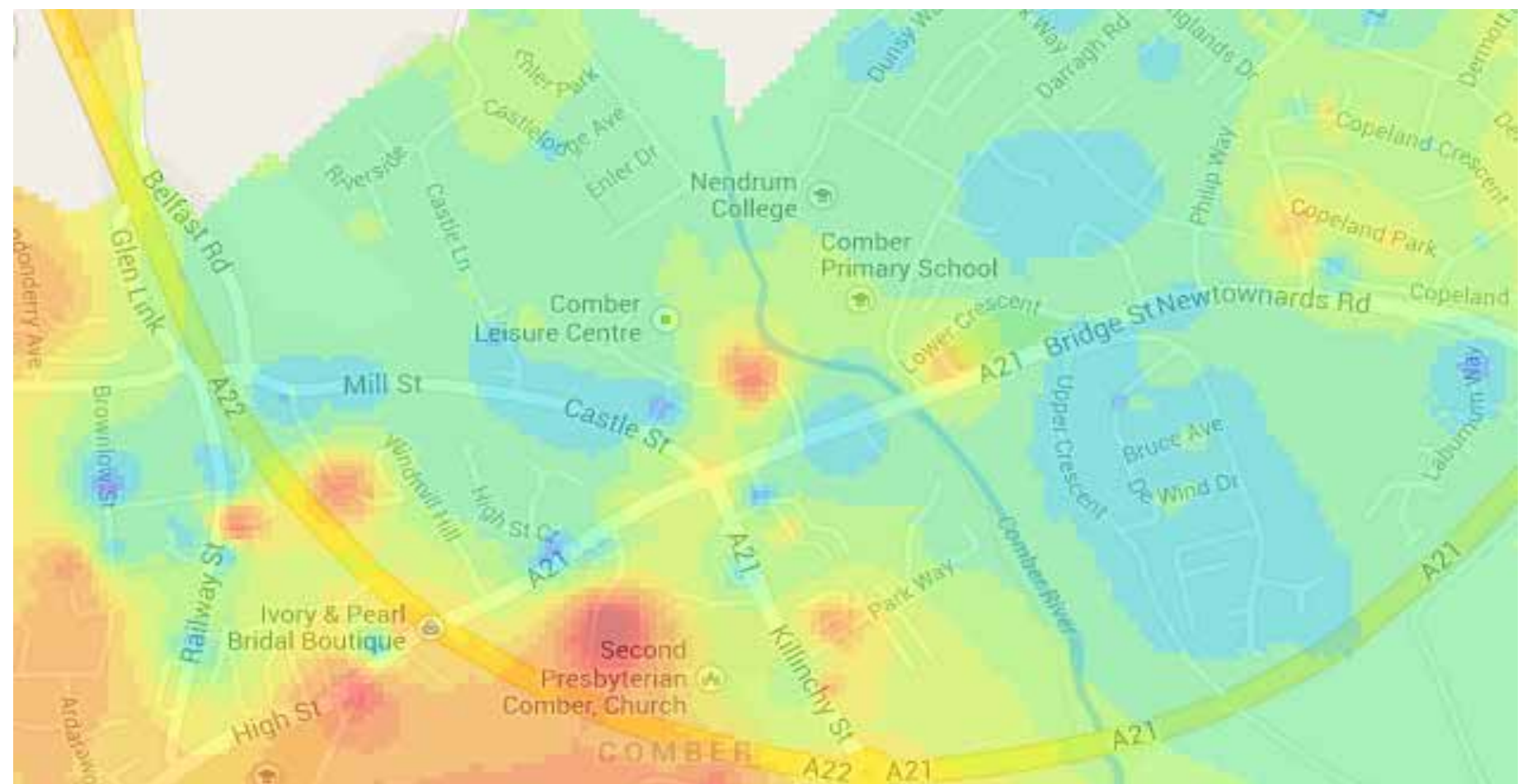
Residential

The Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 suggest that over the lifetime of the document, Comber requires approximately 1700 residential dwellings to fulfil its strategic role in supporting the expansion of the Belfast Metropolitan Area. The plan indicated two small portions of town centre lands as protected housing – the nursing home on Bridge Street and The Mews development on Killinchy Street. CR 03 (8) on Castle Street is the only designated residential site within the plan, however the site has almost entirely been developed since inception of the plan. One of the major sites expected to meet the housing demand is the 37.5 hectare site at Riverside. This could have an impact on the provision of services within Comber and should be considered within the masterplan. During the consultation process, several important points were raised by key stakeholders:

- Comber is an area of high demand for social housing. An additional 225 units of social housing are required in the town up until March 2018. The provision of affordable housing also should also be considered
- Housing within town centres can play an important role in regeneration.

Comber has a broad range of areas containing different average house prices. This is indicated by the heat map (www.geopii.com). The areas of high average value are indicated in red and include the suburban areas to the south and west of the settlement. The large blue areas indicating low value along Castle Street and south of Newtownards Road are explained as this is an area of lower quality properties which may include social housing.

There is demand for growth if the correct sites can be identified. Developments should attempt to consist of mixed tenure and affordability. The masterplan aims to encourage and promote sites for mixed use development, including social and affordable housing.



Heat Map Comber Average House Prices

3.0 MASTERPLAN CONSULTATION

The Comber Town Masterplan was prepared by a team of specialists led by URS. The current Comber Regeneration Steering Group assisted in leading the Masterplan through the various stages of the project. The Steering Group consisted of elected representatives, Ards Borough Council Officers, representatives from various community partnerships and the URS team. Consultation with the community and key stakeholders was a key element of the preparation of the Masterplan and took place at the following periods:

Stage 1 – Information Gathering and Analysis

Information gathering workshops were held to understand the problems and future requirements of Comber. URS also undertook a site walkabout with members of the steering group to discuss certain issues. A consultation fact sheet and questionnaire was dispatched to a broad range of stakeholders compiled by the Council and the Steering Group which successfully enabled us to model the existing environment. A random telephone household survey was also conducted at this stage. These components formed the solid statistical and evidence foundations on which the Masterplan was developed.



Visioning Workshop



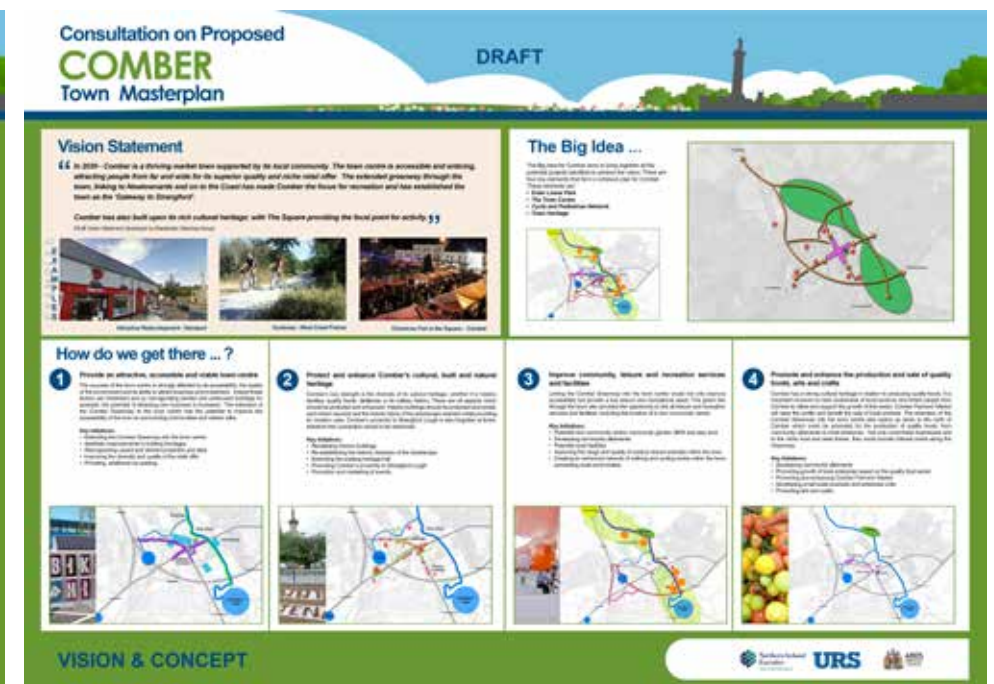
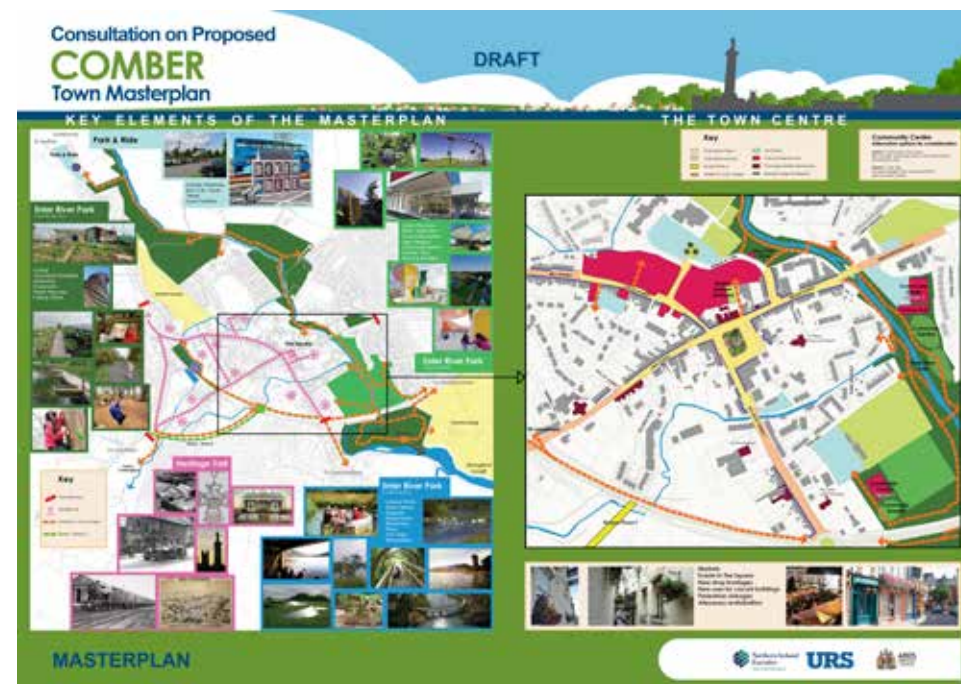
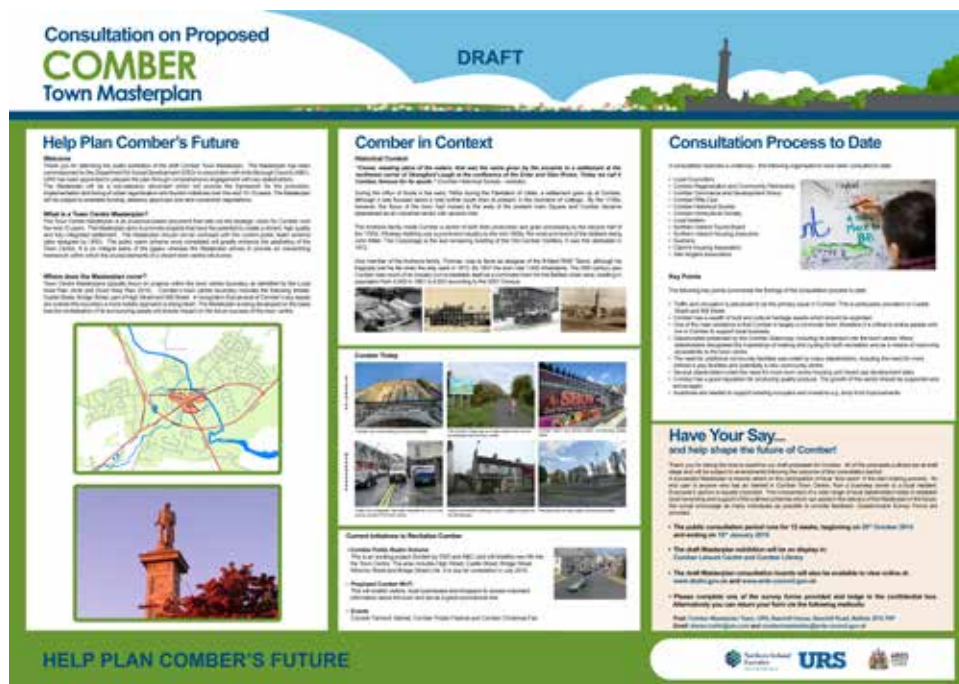
Masterplan Launch

Stage 2 – Visioning and Design

Visioning and design workshops were held with the steering group to discuss and agree on the vision and objectives for the masterplan.

Stage 3 – Public Consultation

Public consultation ran for a 12 week period between the 20th October 2014 and the 16th January 2015. Draft project boards were on display at Comber Leisure Centre and Library for the duration of this period. URS also held a publicity event at the Comber Christmas Market where many members of the public had the opportunity to



Consultation Boards



Strengths		Weaknesses	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic location, providing a convenient commuter base 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Majority perception of below average <i>range and choice</i> of shops- limited retail offer 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional small town with spacious square/ attractive setting/ planting. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dereliction and too many vacant units 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong local customer base 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor street surfacing 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong community feel 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little for people to do in the town centre/ places to wander about enjoyably 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convenience store multiple retailer representation 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of visitor and tourist facilities 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived <i>quality</i> of shops - fair 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many people do not visit the town centre in the evenings 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey indication that traders may invest following improvements 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High levels of retail expenditure leakage to larger centres 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived locally as a nice place to visit (but see weaknesses) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minor criticisms of parking facilities 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Street lighting 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comber Regeneration and Community Partnership set up a new farmers market in July 2014 which is doing well and has added to the retail offer. 			
Opportunities		Threats	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the level of vacant units. Aim to reduce through flexible planning 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation of the economic climate, causing reduced spending and investment 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the level of dereliction, including buildings and poor facades 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retail market trends, with increasing market focus on larger centres, plus internet 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in street paving and other public realm improvements 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible further cuts in public sector funding support for town centre improvements 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the scope for improved visitor facilities 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failure to improve the town centre environment- making Comber less attractive as a place to live, compared to other choices 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review opportunities for introducing a small supermarket-(Retail Study) 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage continuing community engagement with improvements 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve the quality of retailing further 			

To Belfast

To Saintfield

To Downpatrick

To Newtownards



4.0 VISION AND REGENERATION OBJECTIVES

Vision Statement

“In 2030 - Comber is a thriving market town supported by its local community. The town centre is accessible and enticing, attracting people from far and wide for its superior quality and niche retail offer. The extended greenway through the town, linking to Newtownards and on to the Coast has made Comber the focus for recreation and has established the town as the ‘Gateway to Strangford’.

Comber has also built upon its rich cultural heritage: with The Square providing the focal point for activity. ”

(Masterplan Steering Group)

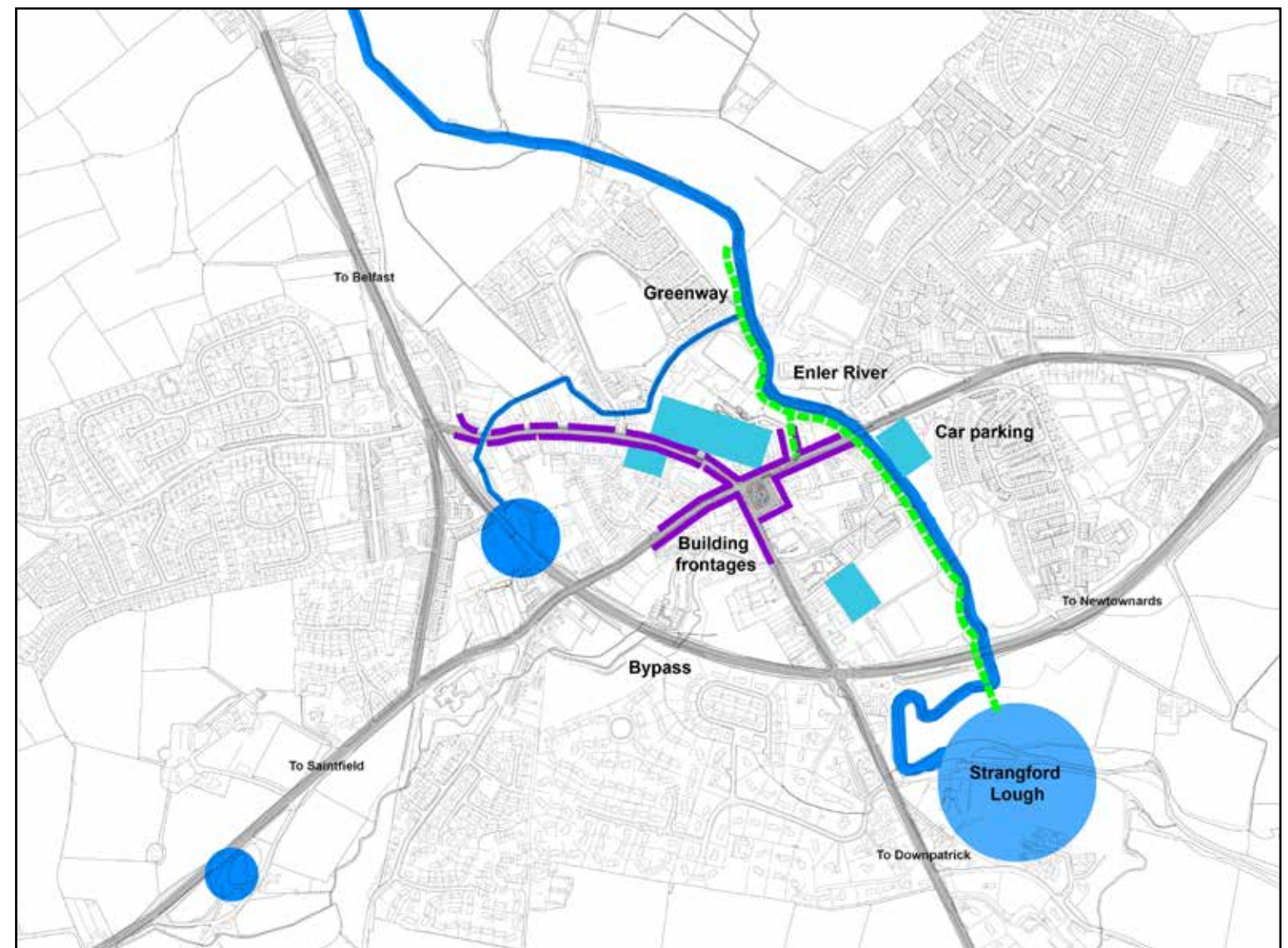
How do we get there....?

1. *Provide an attractive, accessible and viable town centre*

The success of the town centre is strongly affected by its accessibility, the quality of the environment and its ability to attract business and investment. Indeed these factors are interlinked and by reinvigorating derelict and underused buildings for example, the potential of attracting new business is increased. The extension of the Comber Greenway to the town centre has the potential to improve the accessibility of the town to surrounding communities and visitors alike.

Key Initiatives:

- *Extending the Comber Greenway into the town centre*
- *Aesthetic improvements to building frontages*
- *Reinvigorating vacant and derelict properties and sites*
- *Improving the diversity and quality of the retail offer*
- *Providing additional car parking.*

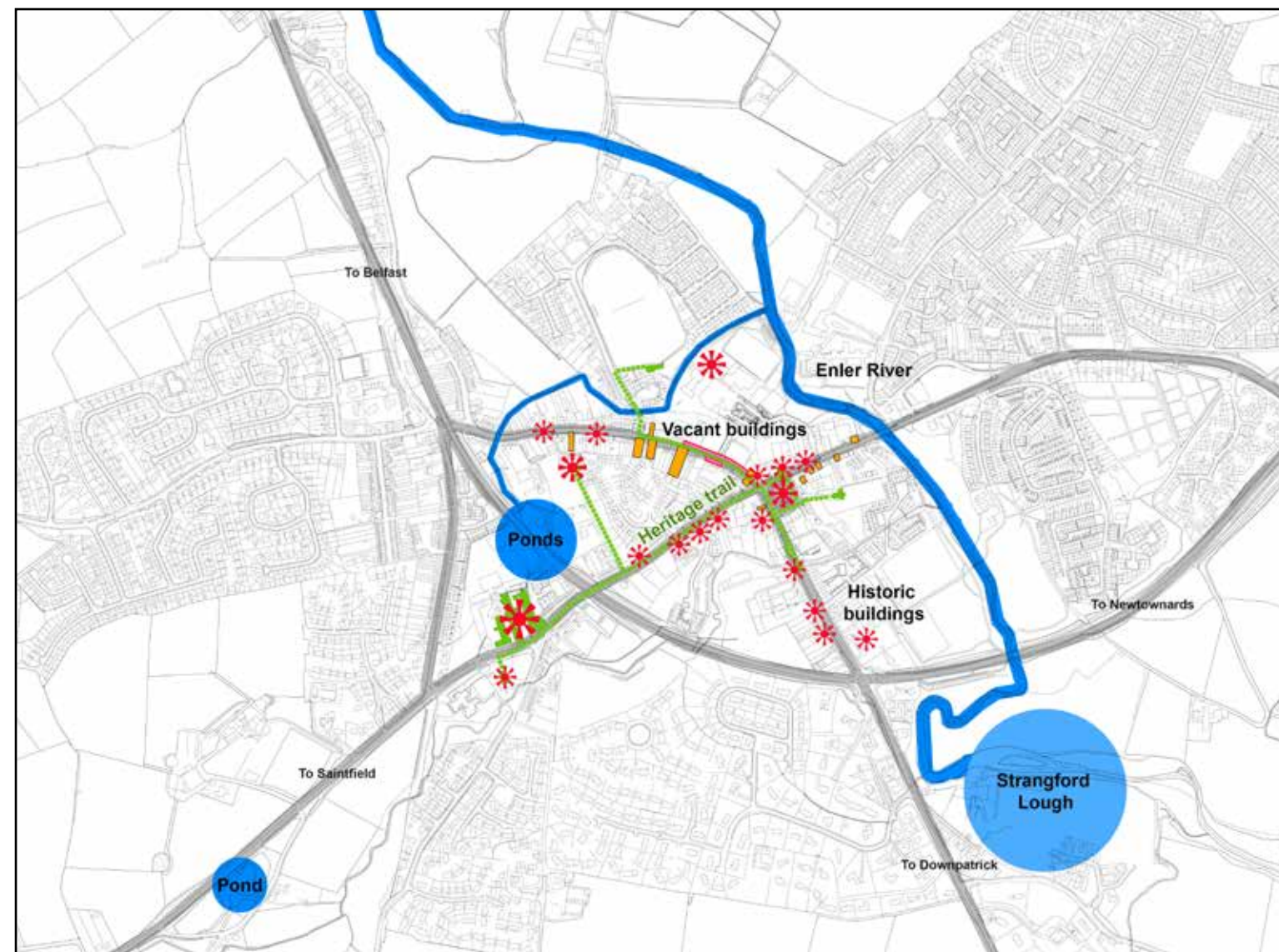


2. *Protect and enhance Comber's cultural, built and natural Heritage*

Comber's key strength is the diversity of its cultural heritage, whether it is historic families, quality foods, distilleries or its military history. These are all aspects which should be protected and enhanced. Historic buildings should be protected and revitalised where required and the historic fabric of the streetscape retained whilst providing for modern uses. Comber's proximity to Strangford Lough is also forgotten at times, therefore this connection needs to be reinforced.

Key Initiatives:

- *Revitalising historic buildings*
- *Re-establishing the historic character of the streetscape*
- *Extending the existing heritage trail*
- *Promoting Comber's proximity to Strangford Lough*
- *Promotion and marketing of events.*

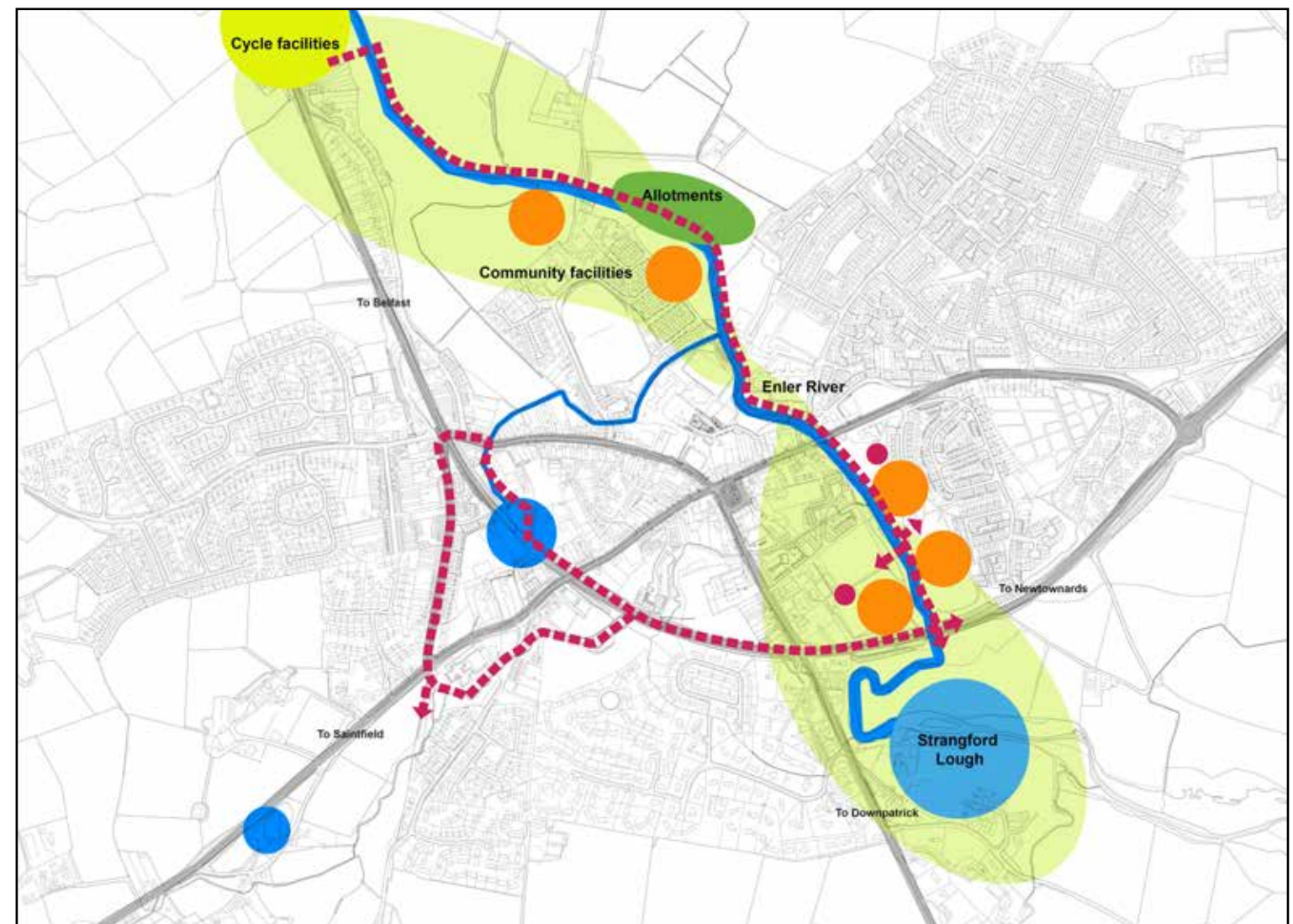


3. Improve community, leisure and recreation services and facilities

Linking the Comber Greenway into the town centre would not only improve accessibility but provide a key leisure and recreational asset. This green link through the town also provides the opportunity to link all leisure and recreation services and facilities, including the location of a new community centre.

Key Initiatives:

- *Potential new community centre, community garden, BMX and play area*
- *Developing community allotments*
- *Potential cycle facilities*
- *Improving the range and quality of outdoor leisure activities within the town*
- *Creating an enhanced network of walking and cycling routes within the town, connecting local communities.*

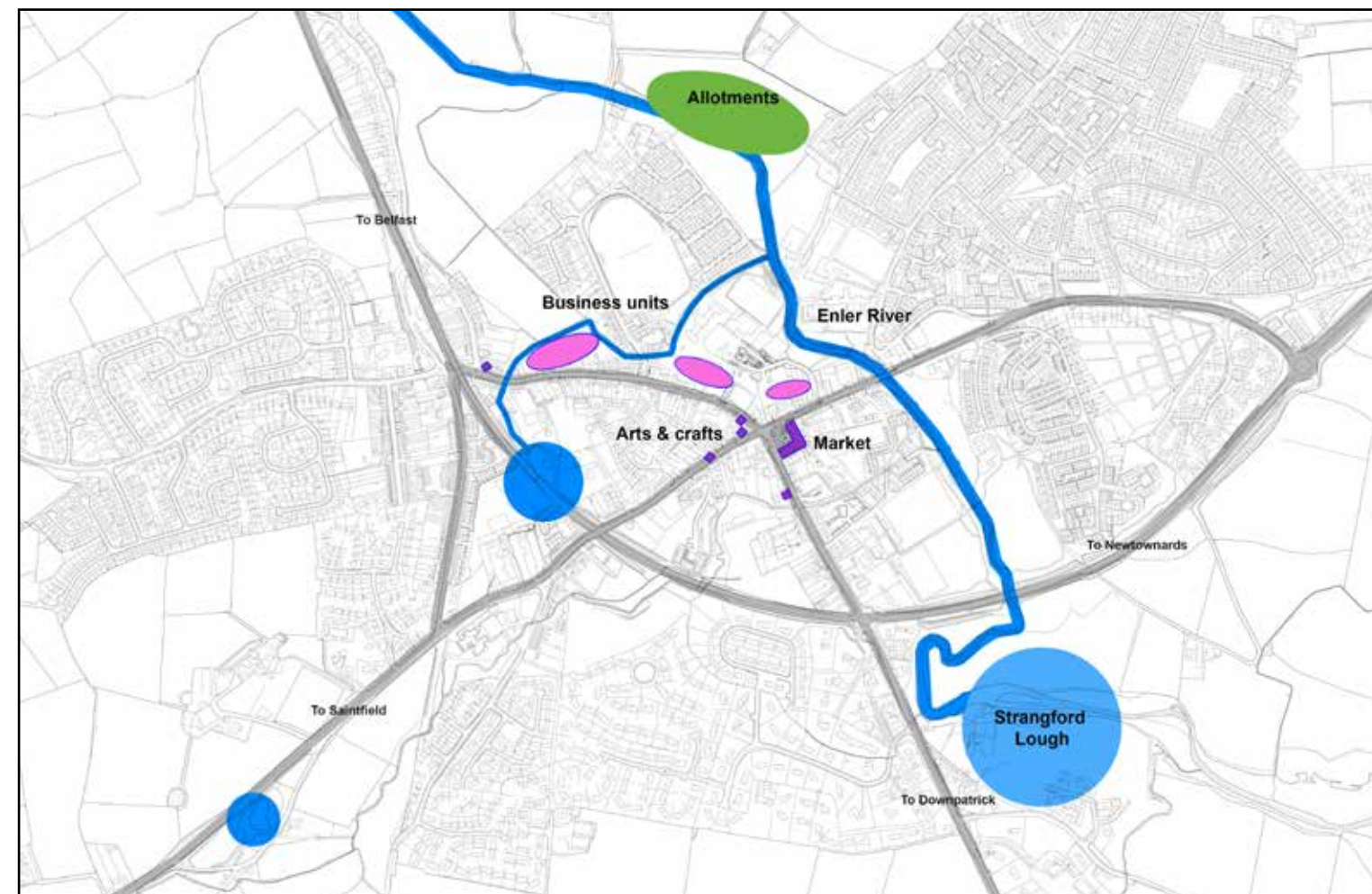


4. Promote and enhance the production and sale of quality foods, arts and crafts

Comber has a strong cultural heritage in relation to producing quality foods. It is important however to raise awareness of local produce and entice people from Comber to utilise and support the growth of this sector. Comber Farmers' Market will raise the profile and benefit the sale of local produce. The extension of the Comber Greenway into the town centre also opens up lands to the north of Comber which could be promoted for the production of quality foods, from community allotments to small enterprise. Not only could these businesses add to the niche food and retail theme, they could provide interest points along the Greenway.

Key Initiatives:

- Developing community allotments
- Promoting growth of local enterprise based on the quality food sector
- Promoting and enhancing Comber Farmers' Market
- Developing small scale business and enterprise units
- Promoting arts and crafts.



Cycle facilities

Allotments

Community facilities

Greenway

To Belfast

Business units

Enler River

Vacant buildings

Car parking

Arts & crafts

Market

Ponds

Heritage trail
Building frontages

Historic buildings

To Newtownards

Bypass

To Saintfield

Pond

To Downpatrick

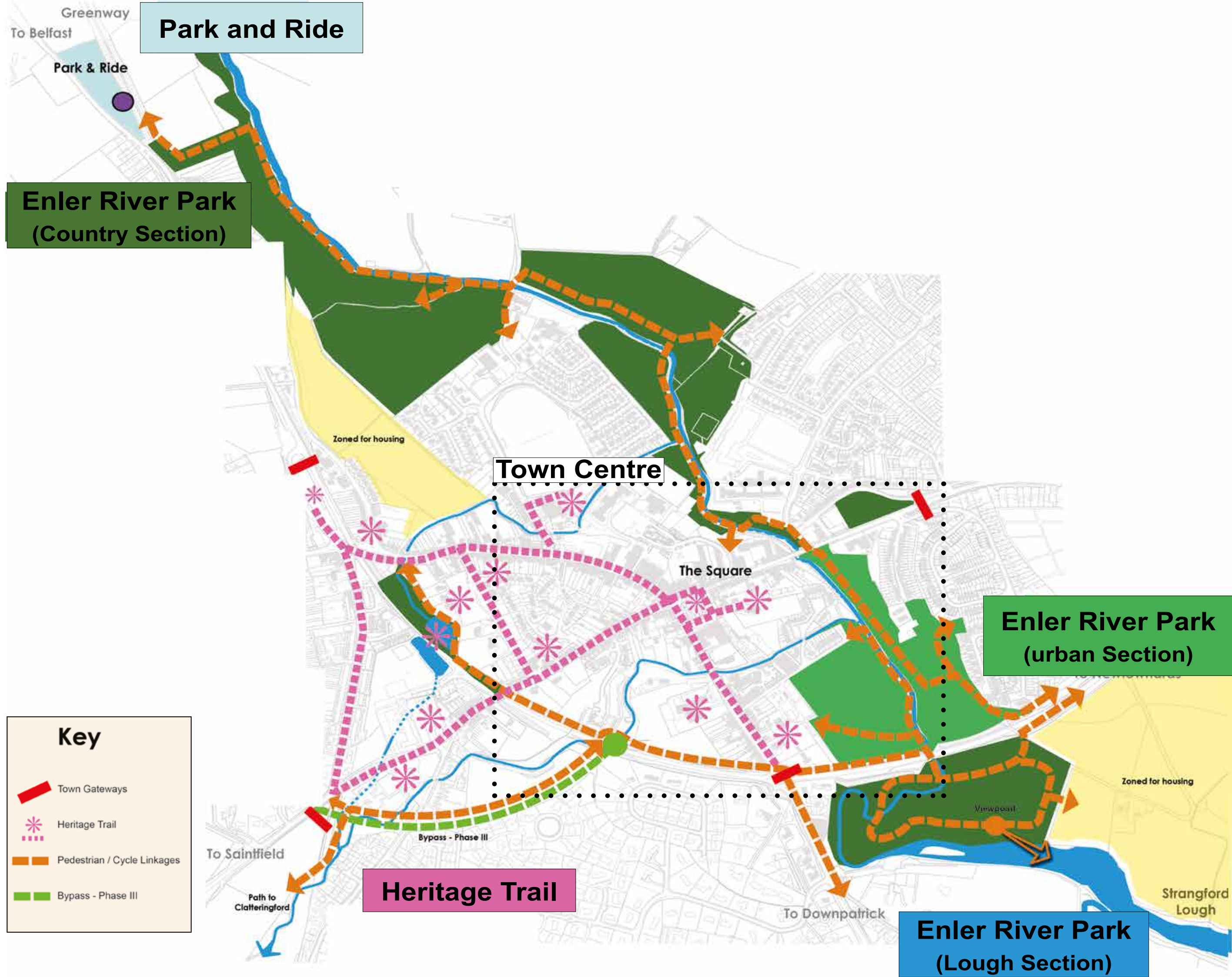
Strangford Lough

5.0 MASTERPLAN CONCEPT

The Masterplan Concept aims to bring together all the potential projects identified to meet the regeneration objectives and synthesises them into four key zones linked together to form a cohesive plan for the Town.

These zones are:

- The Town Centre
- Enler Linear Park
- Town Heritage



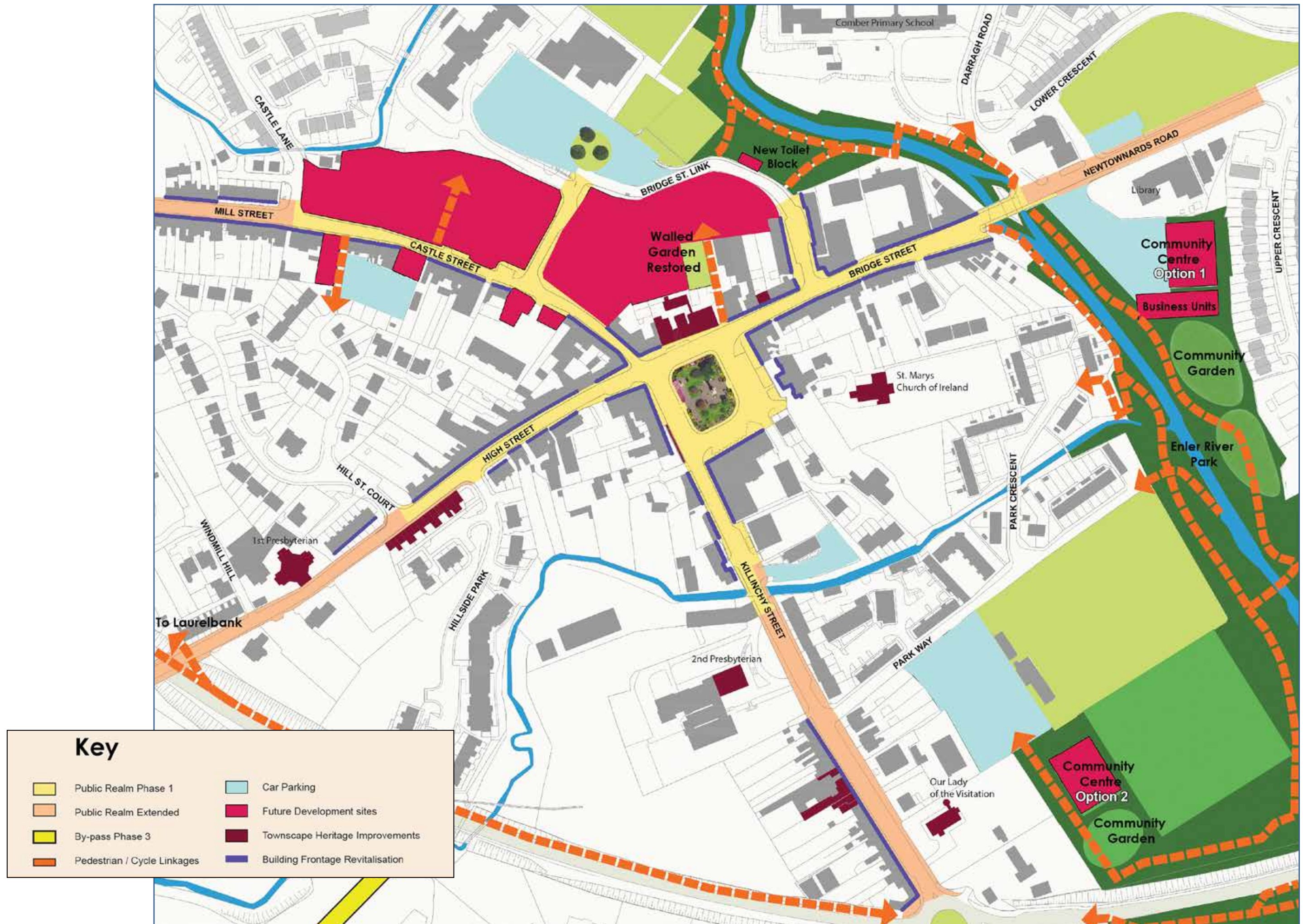
6.0 MASTERPLAN PROPOSALS

The Big Idea!

The big idea for Comber brings together all the potential projects identified to achieve the vision. There are five key elements that form a cohesive plan for Comber.

These elements are:

- The Town Centre
- Enler River Park Country Section
- Enler River Park Urban Section
- Enler River Park Lough Section
- Heritage Trail



TOWN CENTRE

The Town Centre is the heart and soul of Comber. The primary aim is to create a Town Centre that is visually attractive to locals and visitors whilst also improving the overall accessibility to everyone. A consolidation of the Town Centre's existing positive elements with the range of measures presented in the masterplan should create an environment of successful retailers, busy cafes and a sense of heritage and character which is unique to Comber considering its historical context.

Key Elements:

- Town Centre traffic management strategy – Traffic management was a key issue identified throughout the masterplanning process. A further dedicated study will be required to develop a strategy which rationalises traffic flow through the Town Centre, particularly at Castle Street and The Square.
- Shop/building frontage revitalisation scheme. This shall improve the physical appearance of fatigued buildings along the main routes. Also THI scheme to help improve aesthetics of historic buildings.
- Development of backlands sites. We would encourage development to take place on Castle Street to further utilise the waste ground to the rear of the frontages. This could result in frontage realignments, creating more space for pedestrians and traffic at this section. There is also space between Bridge Street Link and The Square which could be better utilised.
- Increased car parking provision by supplying new land in backlands sites (Castle Street) and also at major development site to the east of the river. Pedestrian connections and signage to/from the car parks will also be addressed in a strategy to rationalise existing and new car parking throughout the Town Centre.
- Implementation of the Comber by-pass Phase 3. This will reduce the need for traffic to enter the Town Centre when travelling from the Saintfield/Carryduff area through to Newtownards, reducing congestion in the Town Centre.
- Community Centre Option 1 – A New Community Centre with associated business start-up units and a community garden on the site to the rear of the current library. This would create the radical reuse of a development site which has lay vacant in Comber for decades whilst providing a hub in a central location for all citizens of Comber.
- Laurelbanks/ Comber Dams to be restored in order to create a high quality local recreational space with links to the historic industrial heritage of Comber.
- Restoration of the walled garden to the rear of The Square.
- Phase 2 of the public realm scheme to act as a regeneration catalyst and enhancement to key routes.

ENLER RIVER LINEAR PARK

Country Section

One of the key concepts for Comber is the creation of a liner park which would traverse the town along the route of the River Enler. The first stage of this project is the connection from the successful Comber Greenway to the Town Centre, known as the Country Section due to the idyllic countryside views along the Enler River. The aim of this section is to rationalise the cycling connection to the Town Centre whilst also creating a natural walking opportunity.

Key Elements:

- An extension to the Comber Greenway from its current terminus through to the Town Centre. Early engagement with landowners and a feasibility study have been conducted with regards to a provisional route. The suggestion is to stick closely to the banks of the River Enler. The pathway would be designed for safe shared use by pedestrians, cyclists and anglers. The next action is to continue negotiations with landowners and delivery agencies/funders.
- Construction of a park and ride facility at the current entrance to the Greenway. This facility would negate the problem caused by commuters parking in the Town Centre, freeing car parking capacity for shopper and visitors. This new facility would double as a car park for vehicular visitors to the Greenway and also WC and cycle parking provision. Early discussions with DRD and key stakeholders is advised.
- Implementation of a landscaping strategy for the wider Enler River Park Country Section. The following components could be incorporated within the area: community woodlands, allotments, Polytunnels, rustic play areas and fishing stands.



Urban Section

The urban section of the Enler River Park runs directly through the Town Centre to the rear of the Leisure Centre and through the Parkway area. Although there is an existing established path network here, the aim is to reinforce this and also make use of the large areas of vacant lands within close proximity to the route. The opportunity to create a landscaped linear park through the Town Centre is an opportunity unique to Comber and could provide excellent recreational and amenity benefits to the town.

Key Elements:

- Community Centre Option 2 – This option is based in the lands where the existing Comber Learning Centre is based. This is quite a small facility and could be subsumed into a much larger community hub for the all citizens of Comber, although the components of the centre would be subject to agreement and conformance with Council policies. There would be scope to upgrade the existing adjacent sports facilities to a 3G complex.
- A range of activities for young people is important for the community in Comber. The implementation of a BMX and skate park on a large area of space to the west of the River Enler would provide an incredible recreational facility for children, teenagers and adults. Due to the uniqueness of the opportunity, it has the potential to attract users from other areas.
- Implementation of a landscaping strategy for the wider Enler River Park Urban Section. The following components could be incorporated within the area: community garden, outdoor gym and running facilities.



Lough Section

The final section of the Enler River Park has the potential to provide a high-class interaction with Strangford Lough and also the land zoned for the expansion of Comber. It is important to enable this area to be accessible to the Town Centre to ensure a sense of segregation does not occur. The provision of this section should ensure that is not an issue due to the high quality pedestrian, cycling and landscaping options presented.

Key Elements:

- Inclusion of a small harbour to enable boats to interact with Strangford Lough – possibly nature or tourism related.
- Implementation of a landscaping strategy for the wider Enler River Park Lough Section. The following components could be incorporated within the area: connections to the new development, lookout points, sculptures, nature areas, boardwalks, picnic areas, trim trails and interpretation panels.



HERITAGE TRAIL / GATEWAY STRATEGY

Considering Comber's rich history, a heritage trail dedicated to telling the story of Comber is proposed to build upon the existing walking trail. This would involve the inclusion of interpretation panels and historic imagery throughout the route.

A strategy should also be implemented to improve the sense of arrival in Comber through inclusion of improved entrance/welcome signage.



7.0 IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

The Masterplan sets out a comprehensive programme of proposals and improvements that will transform the prospects for Comber over the next ten to fifteen years. Private sector investment needs to be encouraged and it is essential that statutory bodies and the Council play their part by seeking the right mix of development and by securing the high quality development expected by the masterplan.

A wide range of initiatives are outlined in the masterplan and accompanying Action Plan and together they have the potential to increase the attractiveness of Comber Town Centre, make it much more accessible and built on its strong cultural and natural heritage

Management

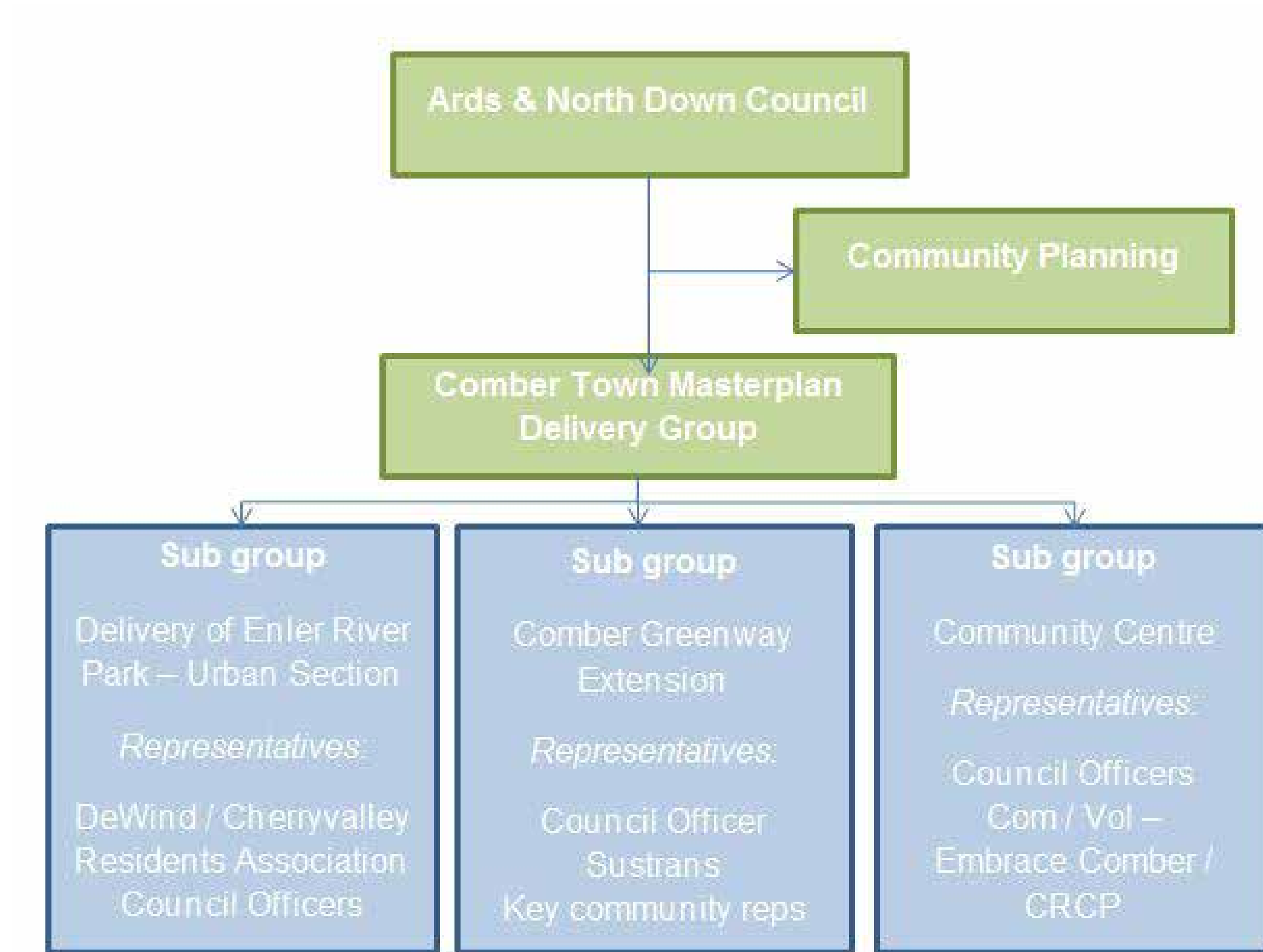
The key to the regeneration of Comber is the management of the masterplan delivery process - this will require input from a number of public sector organisations. The delivery of the masterplan will require a co-ordinated yet flexible approach to ensure individual projects and aspirations can be achieved. Ards and North Down Council will be responsible for establishing the Comber Masterplan Delivery Team, who will manage the delivery of the masterplan. This team should consist of council, statutory representatives, business community and key representatives from the community and voluntary sector.

This masterplan is being published during a unique period of transition for Local Government in Northern Ireland. The new Council will have much wider powers including that for regeneration, community and spatial planning and off street parking which establishes the Council as the key delivery agent for the vast majority of projects. However, the Council will need assistance from other statutory bodies and also the community and voluntary sector. Each of the agencies must support the regeneration objectives for Comber and work together to see them delivered. There has to be an emphasis on public services and resources being focussed and prioritised in a co-ordinated way on improving the physical, social and economic well-being of the community. Therefore, all bodies should be working in partnership towards achieving an overarching regeneration agenda set by the Council with reference to the masterplan.

Key Stakeholders

The Comber Town Masterplan Delivery Team led by the Council will take ownership of the masterplan, acting as the driving force.

- Ards and North Down Council will play a key role in the delivery of the Masterplan, particularly after the LGR when the role of urban regeneration and community development will pass to local government.
- DRD Transport NI is the sole road authority in Northern Ireland. A function of Roads Service is to ensure that the public road network is managed, maintained and developed. There are significant enhancements to the public road network within this Masterplan; DRD Roads Service must be fully supportive of this Masterplan and help with its implementation.
- The business Community will be important partners in both the delivery and success of the masterplan, it is important that the Council and all government bodies work closely with them.
- Community and Voluntary Sector: Comber has several community and voluntary organisations including the Comber Regeneration Community Partnership who provide an umbrella group which has representatives from other more focused groups. Other voluntary groups such as Embrace Comber provided input to the masterplan and expressed their interest in
- Other specialist agencies – Sustrans for example could fall into this group of stakeholders as their interest is very specific to walking and cycling. They could play a key role in the delivery of the Comber Greenway extension and would be better suited to be involved at the sub-group level for the delivery of this specific project.
- Private Developers / Landowners will be key partners in the delivery of many of the proposals within the masterplan. The Council and all government bodies will continue to work closely with private developers to ensure the implementation of the Masterplan.



Overleft is an indicative structure which could be utilised to ensure that the key actors are being utilised on the ground to deliver the various elements of the masterplan.

Funding

It is recognised that public resources are limited. Rather than spreading those limited resources thinly, Comber Town Masterplan Delivery Team should prioritise actions that will have the most significant impact. This prioritisation should be based upon the ability of the interventions/ projects to help attract .

Action Plan and Timeframes

The overall timescale to develop the ‘vision’, encapsulated within the Masterplan, will extend over a number of years. Some elements of the Plan will be more suited to meet short and medium term goals, while other areas may be more appropriate for development in the longer term. Indeed, in addition to the specific proposals contained within the Masterplan, a number of areas are identified as having longer term development potential.

The detailed phasing of the development proposals needs to be examined further as there will, for example, be issues relating to disturbance of existing occupiers, temporary arrangements during the construction phase, access to existing properties, parking provision, traffic flow etc, as well as provision of construction compounds.

The action plan within the next chapter sets out the key projects and proposals identified through the masterplan process, followed by the priority level and timescales for delivery. These actions will provide a baseline by which the delivery of the masterplan can be monitored. The action plan is a working document and should be updated on a regular basis to reflect progress and developments within the town centre.

HORTICULTURAL Comber & District SOCIETY



SHOW

www.comberdist.co.uk

2nd Saturday in September from 1.30pm



8.0 ACTION PLAN

Key Projects and Proposals		Priority Level	Timeframe for Delivery	Key Stakeholders and delivery agents (lead delivery agent in bold)
1	THE TOWN CENTRE	High Medium Low	Short Medium Long	
1a	• Traffic Management Strategy	High	Short	DRD and Council
1b	• Backlands redevelopment sites	Medium	Short – Long	Priv ,
1c	• Increased car parking provision	High	Short	Council , Priv
1d	• New business units	Medium	Short	Council , com/vol
1e	• Extended public realm scheme	Medium	Medium / Long	Council , Priv, DRD, DOE
1f	• Improved cycling and pedestrian links	High	Short	Council , Sustrans, com/vol, DRD
1g	• Extending and improving the heritage trails to exploit the abundance of build and natural heritage	High	Short – Long	Council , NIEA, NITB, com/vol
1h	• Townscape Heritage Improvements	High	Short	Council, DOE, Priv
1i	• Building frontage revitalisation scheme	High	Short	Council, Priv ,
1j	• Restoration of walled garden	Medium	Medium/Long	Council, Priv , NIEA
1k	• Comber By-Pass Phase 3	High	Long	DRD

Key Projects and Proposals		Priority Level	Timeframe for Delivery	Key Stakeholders and delivery agents (lead delivery agent in bold)
2	THE ENLER RIVER PARK (COUNTRY)			
2a	• Comber Greenway extension to town centre	High	Short	Council , Sustrans, com/vol, DRD
2b	• Community woodland	Medium	Medium	Council , com/vol, Priv
2c	• Allotments and poly tunnels	Medium	Medium	Council , com/vol, Priv
2d	• Rustic play areas and fishing stands	Medium	Medium	Council , com/vol, Priv
3	THE ENLER RIVER PARK (URBAN)			
3a	• New urban play areas (BMX/skate)	High	Short	Council , com/vol, NIHE
3b	• Options for new and improved community centre and garden	High	Short	Council , com/vol, NIHE
3c	• New outdoor fitness facilities and walking / cycle trails	High	Short	Council , com/vol, NIHE
4	THE ENLER RIVER PARK (LOUGH)			
4a	• Installation of small harbour	Medium	Short / Medium	Council , DOE, com/vol

Key Projects and Proposals		Priority Level	Timeframe for Delivery	Key Stakeholders and delivery agents (lead delivery agent in bold)
4b	• Look out points and interpretation	Medium	Short / Medium	Council , DOE, com/vol
4c	• Boardwalks and Trim Trails	Medium	Short / Medium	Council , DOE, com/vol
5	PARK & RIDE			
5a	• New park and ride facility	Medium	Medium	DRD , Council, Sustrans
5b	• Links to Comber Greenway	Medium	Medium	DRD , Council, Sustrans
5c	• Toilets and cycling facilities	Medium	Medium	DRD , Council, Sustrans

