

IMPROVEMENT OF CASTLE STREET

COMBER



A REPORT BY COMBER REGENERATION LTD

NOVEMBER 2009

1. Introduction

- a) This report prepared by Directors of Comber Regeneration Ltd (CRL) arises directly from discussions which took place during November 2008 between CRL and with senior officers of Department of Social Development (DSD), Department of Regional Development (DRD) and Ards Borough Council (ABC). More recently contact has also been made with local MLA's and Councillors.
- b) The problems existing in Castle Street : acute traffic congestion and urban decay, have long been recognised as significant issues detracting from the environment of Comber and seriously prejudicing its role as a local shopping centre.
- c) The purpose of these discussions was to press for action to address these worsening problems and to enquire about the possibility of obtaining grant aid in support of a public realm improvement scheme. This report will also touch on some issues of Government policy which have resulted in the removal of incentives for local traders and property owners to refurbish commercial property in Castle Street.
- d) DSD advised that there was a possibility that grant aid may be available up to £300,000 subject to a properly costed scheme being submitted for approval. A necessary precursor to this involved DRD Roads Service carrying out a traffic study looking at options for movement of traffic in and around Castle Street. This study : "Comber One-Way System" dated August 2009, has only recently been released to ABC. CRL will comment later in this report on the Roads Service preferred option as recommended in their Study.
- e) It should be stated from the outset that it is not within the resources or expertise of CRL to prepare a fully costed public realm scheme for grant aid. This would need to be done with the help of ABC and/or private Consultants. All CRL can do at this stage is to highlight the issues and make the case for giving some priority to deal with the consequences of congestion, decay and neglect in Castle Street, Comber.

2. Background Policy Context

North Down Area Plan 1984-95

Ards and North Down Area Plan 2015

- a) In relation to Comber a stated objective of the old Area Plan was to encourage the development of a prosperous and attractive town centre particularly along the retail frontages of Castle Street, Bridge Street and the Square.
- b) It was recognised in the current Area Plan that the main shopping streets within Comber Town Centre continue to be Castle Street and Bridge Street. It was also recognised that Comber suffers from acute traffic congestion and vehicle/pedestrian conflict which detracts from its environment and adversely affects its role as a local retail centre.
- c) In the Regional Policy context Comber is identified as one of seven small towns in the Belfast Metropolitan Area hinterland with potential for significant planned expansion to meet housing needs. The Plan clearly indicates that to successfully integrate any such expansion it is essential to protect the identity, character and setting of these towns.
- d) In the context of both the Area Plans the strategic case for improvement of Castle Street is therefore well founded.

Comber Town Strategy – May 2005

- e) In February 2005 CRL appointed GVA Grimley to prepare a Comber Town Strategy. This strategy was realised with the assistance of the European Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme run by the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, and the SEED Group of Councils, which includes Ards Borough Council. Although a non-statutory document it was produced with the intention of identifying opportunities for regeneration and for actively promoting a more integrated approach to development.
- f) The main findings in this document which are directly relevant to the problems in Castle Street include the following:

- g. fundamental to the successful development and prosperity of Comber is the quality of its public realm and visual attractiveness. Such quality is sadly absent in Castle Street
- h. traffic heavily dominates Comber Town Centre and has weakened its ability to present itself in an attractive way
- i. the present treatment of the public realm reflects a vehicle orientated environment. Asphalt is applied uniformly to carriageways and footpaths alike diluting a sense of hierarchy between people and vehicles and distinction between streets
- j. there is a need to establish a shop frontage policy and design guidelines for retail outlets to ensure high quality facades and signage
- k. other relevant issues which were highlighted included the need to identify a hierarchy of streets and spaces to prioritise the inclusion of more expensive natural materials, use of a distinctive signing, landscaping and lighting strategy
- l. the issue about construction of phase three of Comber by-pass, the Ballygowan link, was also considered relevant

3. Problems in Castle Street - a more detailed look

- a. Castle Street is relatively short in length: about 270 metres, running from Castle Lane at its western end to Comber Square at its eastern end. The property on both sides of the street consists almost entirely of retail and other commercial premises numbering, at ground floor level, about 60 in total.
- b. With the exception of several more recently constructed and refurbished shops, the majority of these premises are of much older two storey construction. Also remaining are a few very old one storey former cottages converted to retail use. Much of the floor space at first floor level is either unused or underused.

Vacancies

- c. Of the 60 or so commercial premises fronting the street over one quarter is presently vacant and, in some cases, is in such poor condition as to be incapable of use. See photograph in “Appendix A” Furthermore in terms of vacant floor space it has been estimated that this may represent as much as one third of the total ground floor space in Castle Street. “Appendix B” shows the distribution of vacant land and buildings.
- d. It may be argued that the high incidence of vacancies and disrepair in these premises has little to do with the current economic downturn. Rather it has been in evidence for many years and may be more directly related to the problems of congestion and the poor state of the public realm in Castle Street. Some examples of this are as follows:

Footpaths

- e. On both sides of the Street footpaths are finished in asphalt but over time with wear and vehicle damage a patchwork of tarmac repairs and infilling by utilities has resulted in serious deterioration of most surfaces. Some sections are now in a rough and uneven condition.
- f. In the 50 metre section, from the junction with Comber Square, footpath width is little over 1.4 metres on the south side, at its narrowest, and as little as 0.8 metres (32 inches) on its north side. See photographs in “Appendix A”. Also in this section, and elsewhere in the street, curbs have been compressed almost to road level as a result of encroachment by vehicles. Footpath width along the length of the street is significantly less on the north side than on the south side.
- g. The narrow footpath fronting the “Metcalf site” – a large cleared site in the centre of Castle Street is in particularly poor condition. This represents a significant hazard to pedestrians. See photographs in “Appendix A”. Further comment is made about this site in the following paragraph.

19-21 Castle Street – The Metcalfe Site

- h. This large prominent site is cleared and has remained undeveloped for several years. The frontage is bounded by a metal and wire

fence which appears damaged, unsightly and insecure. Sections of the adjacent footpath are crumbling into the site which has been excavated to a lower level. Behind the fence the footpath is supported only by loose stones and rubble. This represents a very obvious hazard to both pedestrians and to vehicles encroaching onto the footpath. Large amounts of litter and rubbish have accumulated behind the fence adding to the overall impact which is one of blight and neglect. See photograph in "Appendix A" All of this is seriously detrimental to the amenity and environment of Castle Street and to the Town of Comber in general.

- i. CRL is aware that the site owners are, at present, actively pursuing planning permission to develop the site and it is to be hoped that this will result in a successful outcome. In the meantime any improvement scheme must at least deal with the issues of safety and visual amenity and provide for a secure hoarding to adequately screen the site.
- j. **Litter Bins** - Not a single litter bin can be found in Castle Street. One is located at the top of Castle Lane close to Castle Street. This is inadequate.
- k. **Street Lighting** - All lamps of standard specification are located on the south side of the Street. Only one is located on the north side. Provision for better quality lighting is an appropriate part of any public realm improvement.
- l. **Signage** - There is an absence of any signage helping visitors to orientate themselves quickly and easily. Signage is limited to one Castle Street sign located at each end of street.
- m. **Planting/Street Furniture** – Castle Street presently lacks any distinctive place or focal point. This might be created by the placing of street furniture, sympathetic planting and the use of more attractive surfaces materials. The most obvious location for such a focal point would be near its junction with Bridge Street Link, the widest part of Castle Street.
- n. To sustain any sort of improvement in Castle Street it is accepted that such improvements will only be achieved through co-ordinated activity between local authorities, public bodies and private interests. It is vital therefore that local business interests are consulted and given a role in ensuring that public funds are

effectively spent. Once in place the public realm needs to be maintained to high standards.

4. Traffic congestion and Proposals for a one-way system

- a. Any one who lives in Comber can testify to the problems of traffic congestion and the increasing extent to which people and vehicles are coming into conflict in Castle Street. The photographs included in “appendix A” show some examples of this.
- b. Options to address this problem are contained in the recent Roads Service report : Comber One-Way System, dated August 2009. If implemented the preferred option may go a long way towards alleviating problems in this lower section of Castle Street. Indeed CRL had during a Steering Group meeting in 2005, informally sketched out some suggestions to DRD, DSD and ABC for a similar one-way system arising from other proposals for the improvement of Comber Square.
- c. CRL therefore fully supports adoption of Roads Service preferred option, option 4.2: Castle Street one-way from the Square towards Mill Street following down Bridge Street Link to the existing car parks. Bridge Street Link to be two-way from the car parks to Bridge Street.

5 Urban Regeneration

- a. DSD has presently various programmes in place to address the issues of deprivation and urban decay including Urban Development Grants (UDG), Environmental Improvement and Neighbourhood Renewal Schemes. Only one of these schemes: UDG was, in the past, made available temporarily to encourage urban renewal in Comber.

Urban Development Grant

- b. This scheme provided cash grants for private developers to cover the funding gap or shortfall between the cost of development and its value on completion. Projects undertaken by owner occupiers could attract grant of up to 40% of eligible costs on refurbishment works and 30% on new build works.

- c. In the case of Comber, application of the UDG scheme (withdrawn by DSD several years ago) was much too transient to effectively encourage any significant degree of regeneration. Its precipitated withdrawal was a serious blow to development prospects for the town of Comber. However CRL has recently noted the statement on the DSD web site that there is flexibility to respond to urgent needs outside of priority areas currently limited to Belfast and Londonderry. CRL believes that the problems in Castle Street are sufficiently serious and urgent to warrant the reintroduction of this grant if only on a limited time scale.

Environmental Improvement Scheme

- d. In its promotional material DSD states that this scheme is used to improve the appearance of our towns and cities and to regenerate the area by restoring confidence and attracting new investment. The scheme is used mainly to improve the appearance of public open spaces in the centre of cities towns and villages.
- e. It is for DSD to judge whether or not Castle Street would be a suitable subject for application of this type of scheme.

COMBER REGENERATION LTD

Comber Regeneration Ltd was incorporated in June 2004 as a not-profit-company under the auspices of Ards Borough Council. The Mission Statement is: “to develop and, where appropriate, implement ideas to assist in the commercial and residential regeneration of the town. CRL will assist in progressing initiatives proposed by other stakeholders which will improve the social and environmental fabric of the town and its environs and enhance the architectural landscape.”

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