

# A BOLDER VISION FOR BELFAST

## Reimagining the Centre

December 2019



Belfast  
City Council



Department for  
Communities



Department for  
Infrastructure

Jacobs

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# INTRODUCTION

**A bolder Belfast** is the City's vision to transform the centre of Belfast.

Like many coastal cities Belfast faces unprecedented challenges to build resilience and overcome the risks posed by climate change. At the same time it must also tackle a range of other challenges including how to improve its air quality and adjust to the needs of an aging population. Now is the time for bold decisions to deliver the changes we need. All of us must take individual responsibility if we are to achieve this transformation.

Fundamentally, this requires a significant re-think of how the City's streets and places are used to make them attractive, healthy, vibrant and accessible places where people want to be. Drawing upon our uniqueness we will protect and grow the diverse uses of the city centre which in turn will drive inclusive growth for the city centre.

The City has ambitious targets for sustainable economic growth and to enhance wellbeing for all, as set out in the **Belfast Agenda**. It sets out that "Belfast will be a city reimagined and resurgent. A great place to live and work for everyone". The centre of Belfast will act as the principal driver for this ambition. With a dynamic mix of land uses it will provide the catalyst for widespread change across Northern Ireland. However, in order to achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth that responds to the underlying challenges faced by the City, a radical approach is needed to reimagine how the centre of Belfast works best for the people who collectively own it.

The dominance of the car in the centre of Belfast must end. Far too much space is devoted to an inefficient and unsustainable means of transporting people to and across the City, which we know significantly contributes to the problems of air quality, severance and inequality of access faced by those living, working and visiting the centre of Belfast.

**A Bolder Vision for Belfast** therefore sets out how a green, walkable, cyclable network of streets and places will improve health for all, revitalise the City's economy and restore a sense of collective pride in the centre of the City by the communities within and around it.

The Vision has been developed collectively by **Belfast City Council**, the **Department for Infrastructure** and the **Department for Communities** with broad stakeholder input. This reflects the overwhelming consensus that something fundamentally needs to change to realise the ambition and protect the collective interests of the city's communities and visitors.

It aligns to the underlying policy context of sustainable and inclusive economic growth, regeneration and accessibility for all that is set out in the **Regional Development Strategy**, the **Belfast Agenda** and the **Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy**. But it recognises that these policies and strategies do not go far enough to achieve the fundamental change needed to deliver on the ambitions of the **draft Programme for Government** to improve wellbeing for all by tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth.

As we set out in this Vision, there is no time for delay in making the bold decisions needed to achieve this ambition. **The time for a bolder Belfast is now.**

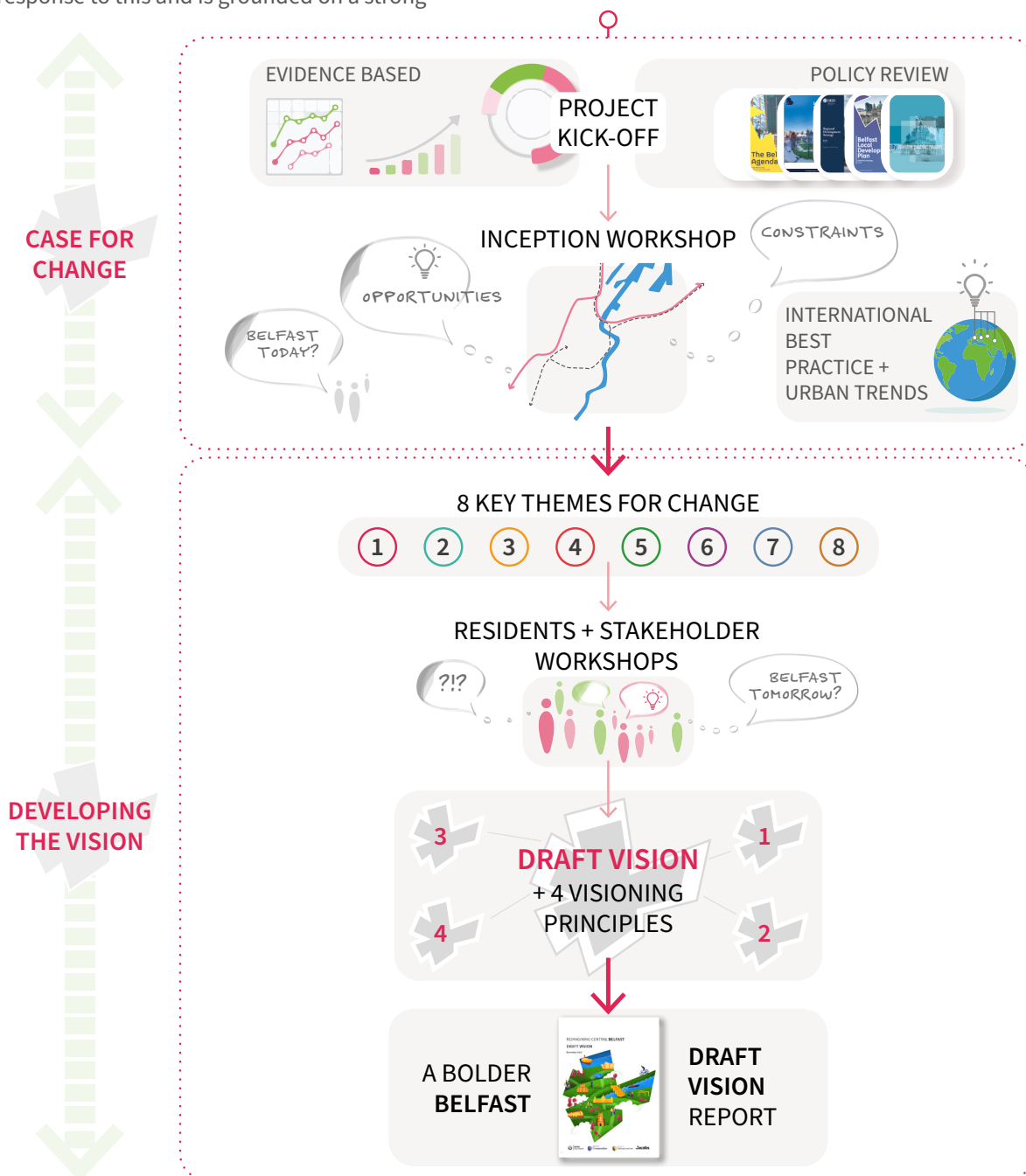


# THE JOURNEY

Following the fire at the Bank Buildings in August 2018, Belfast City Council, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities agreed to work jointly to explore options to create a functioning and successful city centre. In parallel, a public debate developed around the uses and function of the city centre.

**A Bolder Vision for Belfast** has been produced in response to this and is grounded on a strong

understanding and agreement of the key problems and opportunities facing Belfast. As part of the journey, we have reviewed what other cities are doing to address similar challenges and considered existing local policies. This led to the identification of eight key themes which, through focussed engagement with stakeholder and community groups have been funnelled to four visioning principles which inform this Vision.



# CASE FOR CHANGE



## We must address the climate emergency

- The operation of our buildings, streets and places need to be more resilient
- We need to protect the city from an increased risk of flooding and other extreme weather events
- The poor air quality in parts of our city isn't acceptable or sustainable



## Our streets are clogged with traffic

- Too many journeys are made by car often with only one person in the car
- Even with significant investment in public transport, car journeys are forecast to grow by 2030
- We need bold change to make space for prioritising walking, cycling and public transport to halt significant congestion and improve air quality



## Our population is changing

- We will have more older people
- The student population is also increasing and we need to retain their talent
- These changes are placing new and growing demands on mobility and access to public services including housing, schools and healthcare



## Our centre of Belfast is not accessible by all

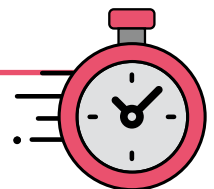
- We know that those with a disability make 39% fewer journeys than those without
- Roads and junctions have created physical barriers between communities and the city centre
- We must let people know that the city centre belongs to them and overcome issues around belonging



## Our economy is changing

- The nature of high streets is changing. In Belfast, we have too many vacant retail units and need to diversify our streets
- Working patterns and employment opportunities are changing, but our business start-up rates are too low
- The city centre is diversifying its land use to improve conditions to live, work and visit

## The Time is Now



Underlining all these challenges is one key opportunity: a growing recognition that something needs to be done.









Policy, strategy and public engagement are all moving in the same direction, and now is the time for Belfast to fundamentally change the way that its centre works for everyone and to protect the future of the city.

# DEFINING THE PROJECT PRINCIPLES





The Visioning Principles below were developed from the eight themes for change, refined through Community and Stakeholder Workshops.

The eight key themes for the centre of Belfast have led to the selection of best practice cities across the globe to inform **A Bolder Vision for Belfast**.

## Themes for change

|   |   |
|---|---|
|    | City Centre as an Inclusive Place to Live, Work and Visit |
|    | Community Focused Regeneration                            |
|  | Prioritise Walking, Cycling & Public Transport            |
|  | Remove Reliance on Car Travel                             |
|  | Active and Inclusive Public Realm and Green Spaces        |
|  | Vibrant and Safe Streets                                  |
|  | Embracing our Rivers                                      |
|  | Overcoming Severance with Surrounding Communities         |

## Visioning Principles

|   |  |
|---|--|
|    | <p>Creating a <b>healthy, shared, vibrant and sustainable environment</b> that promotes wellbeing for all, inclusive growth and innovation.</p>                    |
|  | <p>Fundamentally <b>changing</b> the centre of Belfast <b>to prioritise integrated walking, cycling and public transport and end the dominance of the car.</b></p> |
|  | <p>Providing <b>lively, safe and green streets</b> linking inclusive shared spaces to promote resilience and enhance <b>our built heritage.</b></p>                |
|  | <p><b>Removing severance and barriers to movement</b> between the centre of Belfast and the surrounding communities to improve access for all.</p>                 |

# LEARNING FROM OTHER CITIES

## Liverpool

### Ambition

To improve social and economic activity in the city centre and riverfront as a result of de-industrialisation, and encourage in-migration to increase the residential population in Liverpool city centre.

### How they realised their vision

Harness the local heritage, urban fabric and local culture to create a unique town centre environment; attractive creative industries, night life and city-centre living. Use of green corridors to tackle issues such as flooding, air quality, climate change and health and wellbeing through 'nature based solutions' - providing sustainable transport corridors and introducing nature into the city centre.



## Oslo

### Ambition

To create a greener and more inclusive city for all - a city with less cars to make way for a more vibrant and active city centre.

### How they realised their vision

Needed to provide transport choice and develop an inclusive city centre. Adoption of Climate Budget 2020 following Paris Agreement built around transport, energy and buildings and Resource Efficiency, 42 measures quantifying emission cuts by 2020 and an exemplary public procurement.



## Utrecht

### Ambition

To become a world class bicycle city, where twice as many bicycle journeys are made towards 2030 and people of all ages can safely and comfortably access important nodes of the city cycling.

### How they realised their vision

Walking and cycling prioritised and backed by policy and law to create a safe city centre.

Some central areas of the city are only accessible by bike, bus and foot, and private vehicles are not allowed.

Cycling routes as a way of connecting communities  
Reconfiguration and redesign of roads to discourage car travel, and encourage behavioural shift to travelling by bike as an everyday occurrence.



# THE VISIONING PRINCIPLES

“ Creating a **healthy, shared, vibrant and sustainable environment** that promotes wellbeing for all, inclusive growth and innovation. ”



This principle is underpinned by the following **key themes for change**:



City Centre as an Inclusive Place to Live, Work and Visit



Community Focused Regeneration

## Strengths



## Challenges



The **Belfast Agenda** sets ambitious targets for the city in terms of demographics and economic activity by 2035 as a regional capital. With the residential **population growing** by 66,000 residents, the centre of Belfast has a historical opportunity to be at the heart of that change and transform the urban centre.

The **availability** of vacant, derelict and underused land such as surface car parking, provides the platform to the city to be re-shaped. This is an opportunity to rethink our land use to create a vibrant and diverse city, with people who live, work, play and learn in Belfast City Centre in balance with visitors and surrounding communities.

The centre of Belfast currently has **low levels of residential population** compared to the wider region. This is due to many reasons, including a lack of **community infrastructure** and **amenity spaces**, as well as a shortage of new housing and mixed use developments. A forecast increase in the student population and associated accommodation could also create an unbalanced demographic for the city.

The city is facing the challenge of maximising the value of educational institutions to **retain the young talent** by creating jobs that match their skills and vice versa.



“ Fundamentally **changing** the centre of Belfast to **prioritise integrated walking, cycling and public transport** and **end the dominance of the car.** ”

2

This principle is underpinned by the following **key themes for change**:



Prioritise Walking, Cycling and Public Transport



Remove Reliance on Car Travel

### Strengths



A **re-balanced street network** offers a great opportunity to provide quality spaces that promotes walking, cycling and public transport to travel to/from and across the city. **Reduced levels of private vehicle** use give more space for people who walk and cycle and a more effective and reliable public transport network.

Easy **interconnection** between these transport modes is also essential. The enhancement and creation of interchange hubs around the city is an opportunity to transform the way people **move around and in and out of the city**, promoting walking and cycling for last mile journeys.

### Challenges



Presently the public realm is vastly dominated by road traffic negatively impacting on wellbeing in a multitude of ways and generating an **unfriendly walking environment** and congestion, which undermines public transport reliability. There is a **disconnected cycle network**, that hinders cycling as a way to commute or simply as an everyday way of getting about.

The **public transport** routes often require users to go across the city. The wider availability and comparatively low costs of parking encourages continued reliance on private cars for travel in and out of the city.

“ Providing **lively, safe and green streets** linking inclusive shared spaces to promote resilience and enhance **our built heritage**. ”

3

This principle is underpinned by the following **key themes for change**:



Active and Inclusive Public Realm and Green Spaces



Vibrant and Safe Streets

### Strengths



Currently the City Centre is seen as a shared space that has a large **availability of open space** in streets and public realm. This provides a rich opportunity to reimagine and re-design the public realm, building on the Open Spaces Strategy to create more inclusive, safe and vibrant open and green spaces with the integration of biophilic design. There is **potential to develop** vacant land in the centre of Belfast, and **through good design, provide the diversity in open space and land uses** that would create a more vibrant and safer environment. This needs to capitalise on the existing assets such as the **River Lagan and the built and natural heritage across the city**.

### Challenges



The challenges identified highlight the **lack of activity outside of working hours**, which results in a perceived poor safety and secure environment. There is a general need for vibrancy and colour in the centre of Belfast’s streets that would **attract activity** and strengthen the **sense of belonging**.

There is demand to deliver more leisure areas and high quality open spaces where people can exercise, play and rest. Both green and blue spaces should be enhanced and optimised using both soft and hard landscaping elements, further strengthened with **flood mitigation, SuDS and biodiversity**.

“ **Removing severance and barriers to movement** between the centre of Belfast and the surrounding communities to improve access for all. ”

4

This principle is underpinned by the following **key themes for change**:



Embracing our Rivers



Overcoming Severance with Surrounding Communities

### Strengths



The success of the centre of Belfast depends on its relationship with the **surrounding communities** and the wider city. Improving connections across **existing severing infrastructure** is essential, and places like the new Transport Hub at Weaver’s Cross have the opportunity to transform that.

Building on the city’s **existing assets** is also key. Connecting the centre of Belfast with the River Lagan and the wider city can help to improve the **quality of life and wellbeing** in Belfast, as well as serve as a main **route for active travel**. Likewise, connecting further north to the Titanic Quarter can unlock further opportunities.

### Challenges



One of the centre of Belfast’s main challenges is overcoming severance built over the last decades. The **inner ring road and the motorway** form a double barrier hindering connectivity to the wider city and creates a social disconnect between communities and reinforces segregation. Junctions over the **Westlink** are busy and unfriendly for other modes of transport than driving. Also historically, the river has not been a point of attention as an industrial city, and some of the latest development does not address it appropriately. The challenge is to **transform** these places so that they connect people rather than divide neighbourhoods.

# THE VISION

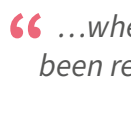
By 2035, the centre of Belfast will be a place where...



## Healthy, shared, vibrant and sustainable environments



“...the centre of Belfast is a shared and climate resilient place where talent is nurtured, people of all ages choose to live, work and visit, benefiting from breathing clean air and climate resilient place.”



“...where opportunities for sustainable investment and inclusive growth have been realised and everyone can move freely around, enjoying a wide choice of retail, leisure and cultural attractions.”



## Prioritise to support walking, cycling and public transport



“...walking and cycling are the most common and easiest ways to move around and through the centre of the city.”



“...cars are an unusual sight and it is quick and easy to use sustainable transport to get to and from the centre of the city.”



## Lively, safe and green streets and our built heritage



“...people of all ages and abilities socialise in the many parks and leisure spaces, which now exist where there was once vacant land and car parks. Lively streets are welcoming and our historic buildings are celebrated and repurposed.”



“...main streets are green, tree lined and full of people. They are safe and shared spaces and have a variety of cultural activities taking place within them. ‘Entries’ are enticing and fun spaces to be explored.”



## Removing severance and barriers to movement

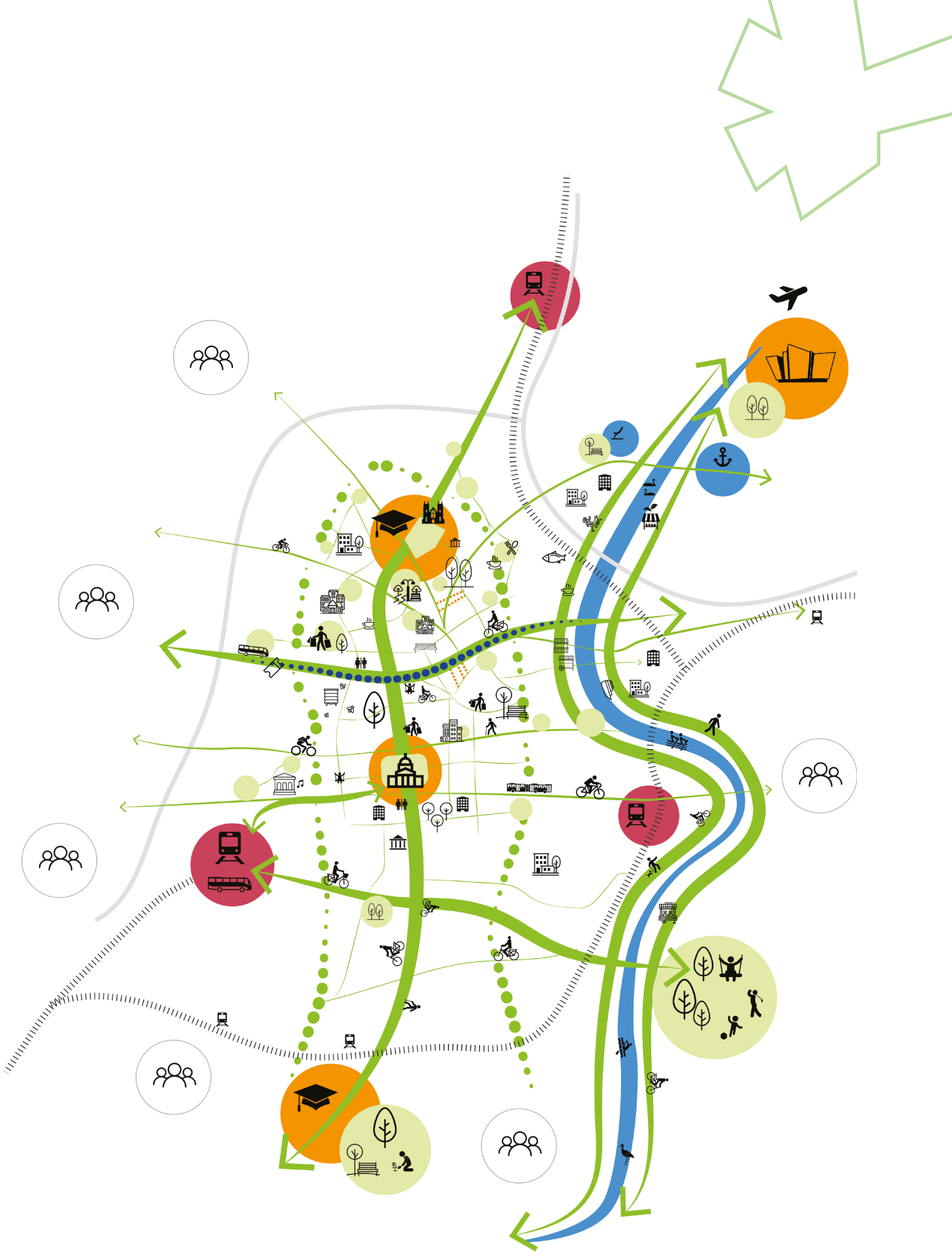


“...the River Lagan is well connected to the city core with multiple crossing points, and activities and attractions taking place on the river and along its banks.”



“...the inner ring road is a linked network of parks, recreational spaces and green streets with many connections with the surrounding communities and the River Lagan.”





**...a bold vision has connected communities and realised transformational change.**

# WHAT IF...?

**A Bolder Vision for Belfast** establishes the principles required to adopt to deliver the **ambitions** we have for our city. The following concepts are transformational changes achieved by other cities and demonstrate what a bolder outlook for our City might be, through a series of **'What If' ideas**.

These ideas were identified through the engagement events held, they have been benchmarked against our 4 Visioning Principles and are mostly intended to inspire potential solutions that will help deliver **A Bolder Vision for Belfast**.



Krakow, Poland

**...the inner ring road became a circular park?**



**...the centre of Belfast was fully pedestrianised?**



Copenhagen, Denmark



Oslo, Norway

**...the city centre became the first place in Northern Ireland to become carbon neutral?**





**...you could swim in the River Lagan?**



**Copenhagen, Denmark**



**Freiburg, Germany**

**...everyone walks, cycles and takes public transport?**



**...connections to our train stations were pedestrian friendly, easy and colourful?**



**Glasgow, UK**

**CALL TO ACTION**

**...EVERYONE WAS PART OF THE CHANGE ?**

# WHAT IF...?

**...buildings were reimagined to celebrate our unique heritage?**



Glasgow, UK



Perth, Australia

**...public transport within the centre was free?**



Atlanta, USA

**...car parks became places for people rather than cars?**



Utrecht, Netherlands

**...we reconnected with the River Farset?**







**...pedestrians and cyclists  
always had priority?**



**Madrid, Spain**



**Glasgow, UK**

**...there were green decks  
over the Westlink?**



**...the city centre became a place for  
everyone to play?**



**London, UK**

**CALL  
TO  
ACTION**

**...EVERYONE WAS PART OF THE CHANGE**

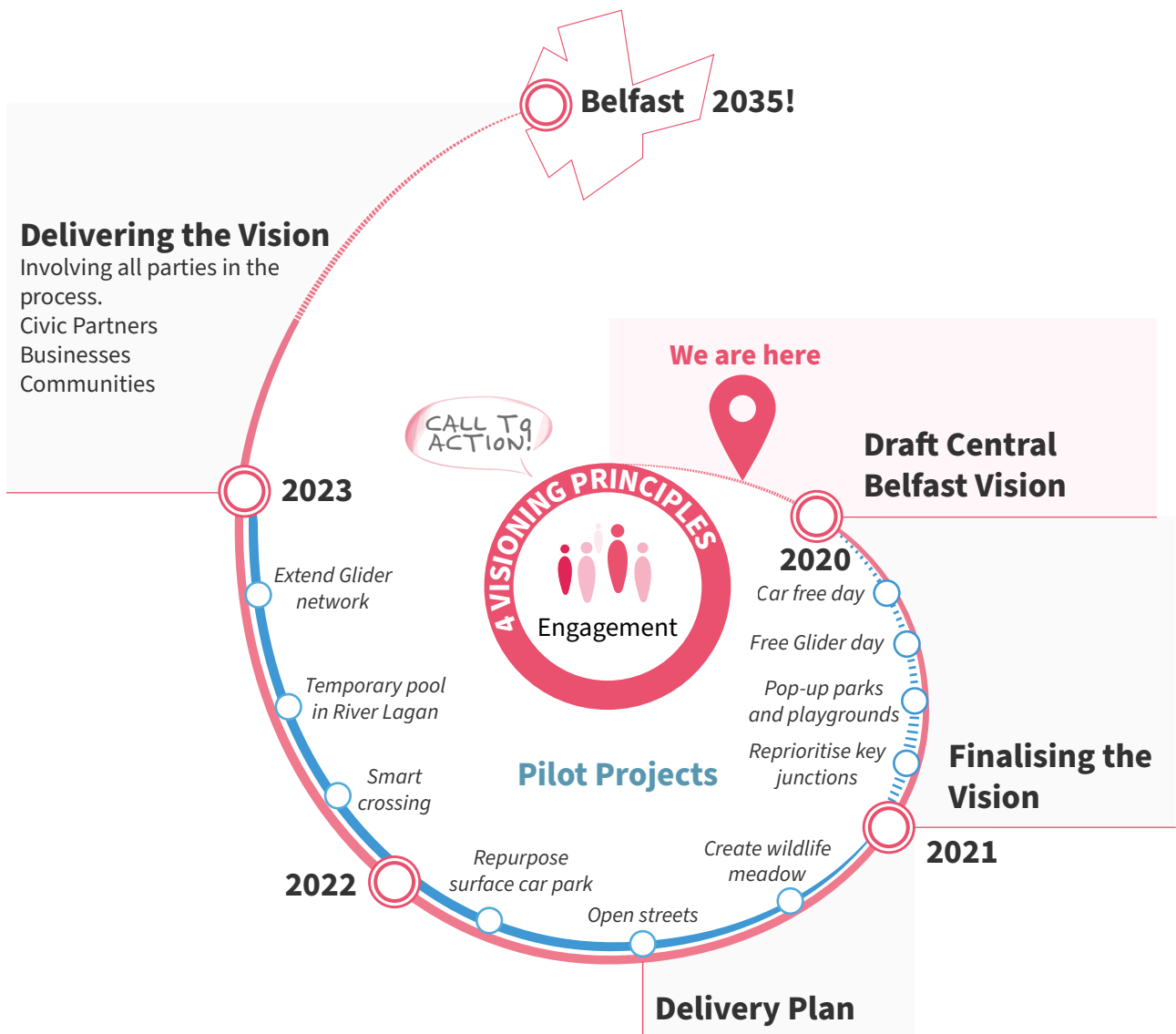


# NEXT STEPS

To be truly effective, this Vision will need to be supported by policies and strategies at city and metropolitan levels. It is key that further stages of **A Bolder Vision for Belfast** are developed in close collaboration with the Local Development Plan team and other agencies responsible for development, regeneration, environmental, transport and community policies. Any potential interventions will mean different things to each partner organisation. We need to consider how it will transform what we do. This will be addressed in Phase 2 where we will outline pilot projects that will test and embed our Vision.

This Vision is the continuation of a journey for the city instigated with the Belfast Agenda and recent policies and strategies focusing on the centre of Belfast in 2035. Through continued public consultation and stakeholder engagement, the following stages will finalise the Vision around the Visioning Principles identified here. The Delivery Plan will be developed in coordination with this Vision, and it will set up the programme for the interventions with the most beneficial outcomes for the city.

Fundamentally, for this Vision to be successful we need **everyone to be part of this bold change.**





**Belfast**  
City Council



Department for  
**Communities**



Department for  
**Infrastructure**

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