

ESP/EBCDA Response to Belfast City Council's Resilience Strategy

1 Introduction

This paper is a collaborative response from EastSide Partnership (ESP) and East Belfast Community Development Agency (EBCDA), in relation to Belfast City Council's draft Resilience Strategy. It draws on the experience from working in local communities from a strategic and grassroots level.

ESP is a broad based social partnership with community, statutory, political and business members who are dedicated to the regeneration of East Belfast, with the responsibility to encourage stakeholder organisations to work together to develop and implement plans for the social, economic, environmental and cultural regeneration of east Belfast.

EBCDA exists to provide resources, support and capacity building programmes for community groups that are based on partnership, equal opportunities and sustainable outcomes.

EBCDA's job is to add value to the activity undertaken by groups in local areas and to work with key organisations to ensure the continued development of a community sector in East Belfast that is recognised, valued and effective. We seek to support successful community development, encourage reflective practice and promote cooperation and locally based solutions.

The goal of transitioning Belfast to an inclusive, low-carbon, climate-resilient economy in a generation may be ambitious but we welcome Belfast City Council's commitment to ensuring the city's preparedness for the impacts of climate change and a series of other potential shocks and stresses, and are pleased to be able to respond to this consultation process.

2 Policy background

EastSide Partnership's strategic plan for 2020-23 makes reference to (i) The Belfast Agenda and (iii) NI Programme for Government; EBCDA's strategic plan for 2020 to 2025 make reference to: (i) The Belfast Agenda; (ii) Making Life Better – Strategic Framework for Public Health; and the (iii) NI Programme for Government as key public strategies influencing our work.

(i) The Belfast Agenda

The Living Here strand of the Belfast Agenda makes specific reference to making the city a great place to live, with good housing, excellent local facilities, and open spaces with healthy and safe neighbourhoods, and also acknowledges the pressing challenges faced in terms of health inequalities, housing, and life expectancy¹.

¹The Belfast Agenda, 2017.

RECOMMENDATION: *Given the extensive community engagement undertaken by Belfast City Council for the community plan, the Resilience and Sustainability Boards for the Strategy should very obviously dovetail with the Belfast Agenda's stretch goals and work streams of the Living Here Board.*

(ii) Making Life Better

The Public Health Agency's Strategic Framework acknowledges that people in different social circumstances experience different levels of health. It also commits to working with people to address agreed priorities and build on the assets we have in our communities to improve health - "as far as possible we will devolve responsibility and activity to community levels of working²."

RECOMMENDATION: *Belfast City Council should ensure that the Resilience Strategy should, where possible, devolve responsibility and activity to the appropriate levels for maximum community impact.*

(iii) Northern Ireland Draft Programme for Government Framework

The aims of the Resilience Strategy's areas of focus cross-over with the current draft Programme for Government's outcomes, specifically: (2) we live and work sustainably - protecting the environment; (3) we have a more equal society; (4) we enjoy long, healthy, active lives; (11) we connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure; and (12) we give our children and young people the best start in life³.

RECOMMENDATION: *As a new Programme for Government (PfG) is developed for beyond 2021, Belfast City Council's Resilience Strategy should ensure its delivery aligns with, and looks for opportunities to inform, the next PfG for Northern Ireland.*

Other strategic drivers include the Department for Communities' Inner East Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan⁴, and the EastSide Urban Villages initiative⁵ - both of which contain direct actions relating to the three themes of children, climate, and connectivity.

In addition to these strategic plans, we believe the following document also offers a strong framework for supporting and holding the Resilience Strategy

² Executive Summary, Making Life Better Strategic Framework 2013-2023, <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/about-us/making-life-better>, 2013.

Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021, <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/newnigov/draft-pfg-framework-2016-21.pdf>, 2016.

⁴ Neighbourhood Renewal: People and Place, <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/neighbourhood-renewal-people-and-place>, 2003.

⁵ EastSide Urban Villages Strategic Framework, https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/EastSide%20Strategic%20Framework_0.pdf, 2016.

to account:

(iv) A Common Purpose for Our Environment

This document⁶ is a response to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs public discussion document on an Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland, and is the result of a collaborative discussion between a range of sectors, networks and organisations held at NICVA in November 2019. Of particular relevance to the Resilience Strategy is the document's call for:

- A Northern Ireland Environment Bill to give the Environment Strategy a binding, legal footing;
- The creation of an Independent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Northern Ireland remains the only part of these islands without an EPA;
- The mainstreaming of UN Sustainable Development Goals;
- A NI 'Well-being of Future Generations Act - Based on the Welsh example, this Act would improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of NI by encouraging cross-departmental cooperation; and improve partnership working with people and communities to undertake long-term planning to prevent problems through a more joined-up approach. It would help create a NI that people will want to live in, now and in the future.

RECOMMENDATION: Belfast City Council should ensure that implementation of the strategy involves collaborative conversations across a similar range of sectors, networks and organisations across the city.

3 Themes

We welcome the three multiple problem-solving levers of children, climate and connectivity. However the strategy runs the risk of defining resilience too narrowly through these themes.

Children and Young People

It is important that children and young people are considered as a key area of focus with early interventions being considered. Our future city should be built with children and young people in mind.

High quality and meaningful spaces should be designed that are attractive and enjoyable - co-designed with children and young people to ensure that they are multi-functional to support health and well-being, build community cohesion and provide educational opportunities.

⁶ A Common Purpose for Our Environment, <https://www.nicva.org/article/a-common-purpose-for-our-environment>, 2020.

In 2015 EBCDA facilitated a process called #OurEastBelfast with young people who were consulted as part of the Belfast Agenda process on the future of their part of the city. In partnership with local youth workers, young people told us (amongst other things) that by 2030 they would like East Belfast to be a place where: Everyone has a good standard of living and there are opportunities to participate in physical activity and sports clubs⁷.

One of the outcomes of Department of Education's Children and Young People's Strategy 2019 to 2029 is that children and young people experience economic and environmental wellbeing. It states that "Children and young people often have a greater appreciation and understanding of issues such as pollution, climate change, recycling or waste management than adults⁸."

In setting this outcome, the strategy identifies district councils, children and young people, parents/guardians, schools/youth settings, early years settings, and the community and voluntary sector as key partners.

RECOMMENDATION: Belfast City Council should also commit to ongoing meaningful engagement (and where possible, co-design) with children, young people, and other partners in the monitoring and delivery of the Resilience Strategy.

Connectivity

It is challenging to improve social connectivity when housing and education remain segregated and dominated by green/ orange politics.

Reference is made to 100 Resilient Cities in the strategy. Can we learn from cities like Cape Town and other places where race, segregation etc have been factors, how did they approach this? How can we use this learning to be a city 'free from the legacy of conflict'?

RECOMMENDATION: Belfast City Council should explore learning from resilience work in similarly divided cities.

Infrastructure

There is a lot of emphasis on 'grey' infrastructure –it is important that social, economic and environmental impact is considered. Build the right infrastructure where the need is greatest to encourage connectivity but to also drive regeneration.

⁷ Our East Belfast, https://www.ebcda.org/sites/default/files/reports/OurEast-Belfast_A5Flyer.pdf, 2015.

⁸ Page 74, Department of Education Children and Young People's Strategy 2019 to 2029, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/2019-2029%20CYP%20Strategy.pdf>, 2019.

Young people are becoming much more transient and moving freely across the city. The Belfast City Council Leisure Transformation Programme is a positive move to encourage movement across the city. How do we create points of interest across the city to enable greater connectivity and movement? Potential opportunities for community tourism which would benefit the city and local neighbourhoods.

The Glider has transformed how the public can move from east to west quickly. It demonstrates that by providing the opportunity the public will choose a more sustainable mode of transport however this needs to be developed. The need for better transport across neighbourhoods, not just in and out of the city.

Public transport in Belfast is expensive. Examples in Milan where the local authority have subsidised transport to 1.5 euro per journey has seen a massive increase in use of sustainable transport.

Roll out of the Belfast Bikes scheme to more neighbourhood locations to enable connectivity, boost visitors and improve health and well-being.

RECOMMENDATION: Belfast City Council should remove barriers to sustainable transport for areas of multiple deprivation.

Climate

It is vital that issues such as climate change are accessible and understood by deprived communities and not seen as a 'middle class' issue. It should be recognised that socio-economic deprivation needs to be addressed alongside environmental issues.

Car usage and education - 1000s of additional journeys taken a day due to our separate education system leading to increase in congestion and pollution.

Framing resilience mainly through the impact of climate change, which is correct, risks turning people off who may be (i) disproportionately affected by its impact, and (ii) facing an already complex set of socio-economic challenges.

RECOMMENDATION: Belfast City Council should consider re-framing some of its language around climate change to emphasise how areas of multiple deprivation are more disproportionately affected - for educational benefit and also to ensure communities have a voice within the Resilience Strategy,

In conclusion, the sub-themes within the three above feel a bit arbitrary. Broader consideration of wider social, economic and health related resilience issues should be reflected eg. mental health, fuel poverty, good jobs.

4 Shocks and Stresses

No one would disagree that a resilient Belfast is in the best interests of all res-

idents. Therefore the shocks and stresses identified in the draft Resilience Strategy are a welcome “grounding” of the importance of transitioning to a low carbon economy.

The resilience challenges identified in the past decade set the scene effectively. We would however suggest that the 2012 flag protests should not be portrayed exclusively as having a negative impact on the economy. The protests also presented significant opportunities for civic and community engagement with groups and individuals who had previously felt marginalised.

Such simple stereotyping is unhelpful to those of us who are committed to seeking climate justice and addressing socio-economic disadvantage. Climate change remains an (at best) marginal or (at worst) contested issue of concern for many in the neighbourhoods where we work, and needs to change.

Below are some brief comments on the shocks and stresses.

Shocks

Infrastructure capacity

Inner city neighbourhoods must not bear the brunt of poor planning decisions in any fallout of the tensions between infrastructure planning and economic growth.

Condition of existing NI Housing Executive stock

Existing housing stress, income deprivation and climate change are a potent mix of challenges. Vulnerable tenants should remain at the forefront of improving stock conditions.

Climate change

Though the long-term impact of climate change will be devastating, it remains low on the list of priorities in many already stressed and challenged neighbourhoods. Serious thought needs to be put into re-interpreting the language of climate change in a meaningful way for those likely to be most disproportionately affected.

Flooding and extreme weather events

As stated in your Resilience plan 27% of properties most at risk of flooding are in Northern Ireland’s most deprived areas. Future-proofing must prioritise these neighbourhoods. The East Belfast Flood Alleviation scheme has been a success as part of a green and blue infrastructure project – identify opportunities across the city to roll this out.

RECOMMENDATION: Belfast City Council should identify opportunities and resources for flood alleviation schemes across the city.

UK exit from European Union

We agree that the UK Exit from the EU will remain a significant area of focus and of risk management for the city.

Cyber Resilience

In order to be a truly cyber-resilient city, digital infrastructure and connectivity should be accessible to everyone. Access to educational resources for home-based learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this need.

Stresses

Economic recovery capacity

In relation to strengthening resistance and recovery to economic shocks, often economically inactive people fail to feel benefits of return to growth and can result in widening inequality - further reducing resistance to the next shock. The impact of COVID-19 has exposed greater inequality in terms of the impact of people who are economically inactive. With us probably heading into another recession this economically inactive status will continue to rise.

Population change

Inner East Belfast, like many inner-city neighbourhoods, contains the demographic challenges of managing a very young and a very old population, and the tensions that brings. Ensuring that Inner East Belfast is an attractive long-term place to live for families is vital to ensuring population growth.

Dependency on fossil fuels and carbon intensive systems

Education and a well-managed transition to low-carbon systems should have checks and balances built-in to address inequality of opportunity in terms of accessing low-carbon/affordable energy or transport.

Prevalence of car use

Inner city neighbourhoods are heavily impacted by commuter parking and higher levels of air pollution. Local and central government have not taken the scourge of car use on Inner East Belfast seriously enough.

Housing supply in the city

We agree that a new generation of homes should include a mix of tenures to accommodate households on a range of incomes, with lessons learned from other cities.

Segregation and division

The reality of a deeply divided city is not taken seriously enough in the strategy in terms of its impact on individual and community resilience. More concrete links with Belfast City Council's existing good relations work should be explored.

Mental health and use of prescription drugs

Building emotional resilience needs stronger emphasis within the strategy. People build communities more than physical infrastructure. The word resilience for many, means *emotional resilience* and therefore a Belfast Resilience Strategy that doesn't give the emotional resilience a strong place and discussion is disappointing. The city of Belfast, and Northern Ireland as a whole has lived through a conflict. This has left tangible trauma in all communities which should be acknowledged.

We would encourage engagement in emotional resilience which can be defined as our ability to cope with and overcome adversity. It can be built upon at any stage in our development with the right help and support networks around us.

Trauma informed care in a community can be described as the system of all parties involved recognising and responding to the varying impact of trauma on society. To achieve this, organisations and those parts of the system would infuse this knowledge, awareness and skills into their organisational cultures, policies and practices. They act in collaboration, using the best available science, to facilitate and support resiliency and recovery.⁹ Now would be an key time to include trauma informed care in the Belfast Resilience Strategy.

The recently-published Mental Health Action Plan for Northern Ireland¹⁰ contains a number of actions specifically relating to championing mental health across all sectors of life, and improving pathways for support.

It is known that unemployment is a factor of mental ill health and it is estimated that the likelihood of developing a mental health disorder is doubled if unemployed. That means for every 1% increase in unemployment an estimated 9,000 people are twice as likely to develop mental health disorders. The unemployment rate has risen from 29,700 in March 2020 to 65,200 June 2020¹¹ and this will impact the increase of mental health in a staggering way, alongside the anticipated increase due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Our experience of place impacts on our wellbeing and development. And yes the discipline of psychology needs to be embedded in public policy debates and decisions at city level. Evidenced-based research and findings need to be involved, not just people's opinions.

RECOMMENDATION: The Resilience Strategy should actively link in with and

⁹ Chadwick Trauma Informed Systems Project - CTISP National Advisory Committee, <https://ctisp.wordpress.com/> 2010, California

¹⁰ NI Mental Health Action Plan, Dept of Health, <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-action-plan>, 2020.

¹¹ Claimant Count, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/labour-market-and-social-welfare/claimant-count>, 17 June 2020

support strategic initiatives addressing the wider determinants of poor mental health and abuse of prescription drugs.

We would strongly recommend engagement in having Belfast become a trauma informed environment. Engagement with Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland and their work specifically looking at developing systems that are trauma informed.¹² This work is invaluable in working towards breaking the cycles transgenerational trauma and the impact that has on mental and all the subsequent consequences

Governance and financing of risk

Robust evidence-based urban policy, delivered in partnership between local and central government, and overseen by accountable elected representatives and public servants who are aware of each other's respective strengths and weaknesses, is essential for effective governance. This needs to be matched by a healthy framework for co-design and co-delivery with the community/voluntary sector and wider civic society.

5 Other comments

The Resilience Strategy could end up being a disembodied voice within Belfast City Council, particularly in relation to existing areas of the council's work that are deeply embedded in local communities such as East Belfast DPCSP, Good Relations, and community services in general. With area-based Integration Managers now in place for Belfast City Council in North, South, East and West Belfast, there is potential for greater connectivity with existing positive engagement.

There is a lack of detail within the strategy on neighbourhood resilience. Inner city neighbourhoods can be viewed as merely a problem rather than a resource. Despite complex and deep-seated challenges, areas like Inner East Belfast are showing considerable resilience and community leadership.

RECOMMENDATION: Belfast City Council should produce a community engagement plan for the Resilience Strategy in partnership with area-based staff and the wider community and voluntary sector in the city.

Conclusion

The seven qualities of a resilient city are identified in the draft Resilience Strategy as: reflective, resourceful, inclusive, integrated, robust, redundant, flexible.

However we contend that unless inequalities of opportunity in areas such as education, employment, and environment are addressed in a meaningful way, Belfast will not be a truly resilient city.

¹² <https://www.safeguardingni.org/aces/trauma-informed-practice>

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