



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Town Centre Regeneration Inquiry —  
Departmental Response**

25 February 2010

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Simon Hamilton (Chairperson)  
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Billy Armstrong  
Mrs Mary Bradley  
Mr Mickey Brady  
Mr Thomas Burns  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mr Alex Easton  
Ms Anna Lo  
Mr Fra McCann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Henry Johnston                                 ) Department for Social Development  
Mr Ian Snowden                                     )

**The Chairperson (Mr Hamilton):**

I welcome Henry Johnston, director of the urban regeneration strategy directorate, and Ian Snowden, director of the regional development office. Members have copies of the Department's response to the Committee's report on its inquiry into town centre regeneration.

I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones and other electronic devices as the session is being recorded for Hansard.

I invite Ian and Henry to give the Committee a brief rundown of the Department's response. I will then open the floor to members to ask questions.

**Mr Henry Johnston (Department for Social Development):**

I will not go through the response point by point. I will make some broad opening remarks and will talk about nine of the 17 recommendations that we agree with; two that we are neither fish nor fowl on; and six that we have not accepted, four of which because they are the responsibility of someone else. We will then focus on the two recommendations that we said no to.

The Department broadly welcomes the report, particularly because it underscores the importance of the policy and strategy framework, which we will be speaking to the Committee

about over the coming months. That framework addresses all urban spaces, including Belfast, whereas this report focuses on the regional towns and cities. We have some issues to resolve with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) following a positive meeting between the two Ministers that focused on villages. That fits a bit below this, but the issues around the regeneration of villages and smaller towns are similar.

A number of pieces of work are already underway that address recommendations in the report, particularly master plans referencing important geographic or legacy assets. We may come back to that later. Ian will be able to fill you in on where we are with master planning across regional towns and cities. Some of the proposals relate to the work of other Departments. Although we are sympathetic to the recommendation about Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS 5), that is not the responsibility of the Department for Social Development (DSD).

The only recommendation about funding that we have said a clear no to is that we do not agree to the idea of top-slicing funding for town centre management. After the review of public administration (RPA), that will be a matter for councils. We will be transferring the resources to

councils, and it will be for them to make local decisions on whether they support local town centre management and on the way in which they will deliver it. It is already delivered in different ways across Northern Ireland. It is sometimes delivered by councils and sometimes on behalf of councils by an arm's-length body. The best model is typically one in which contributions are being made by councils and the private sector. That brings us on to the area of business improvement districts (BIDs), which I will touch on briefly later.

In summary, we agree wholeheartedly on nine of the recommendations: recommendation 1, which is about the need to create a framework; recommendation 2, which is about delegating responsibility to councils and the finance to take that forward; recommendation 3, which is about a hierarchy of plans, some of which are outwith DSD such as the regional development strategy (RDS); and recommendation 5, which is about considering a development fund. We are doing that as part of the framework work. We also agree on recommendations 6 and 7, which are about key performance indicators, and we are doing a fair amount of work on that at present. We also agree on recommendation 8, which is about the necessity to create a menu of interventions that people could tailor to their own circumstances; recommendation 14, which is about addressing derelict sites and a review of what we are doing in respect of vesting; and recommendation 15,

which is about housing, including housing on brownfield sites.

We are supportive of two recommendations that are not entirely for the Department. Recommendation 10 is about the possibility of BIDs. We are doing a fair amount of work in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Department of the Environment (DOE) on how to take forward BIDs and the practicalities of doing that. The report recommendation is to deliver that within the RPA time frame, but that will not happen. There is no way that we will get it done for May 2011. Recommendation 17 is about problems in respect of utility companies destroying the public realm. Although that is an area of concern for us, we do not have direct control over the utility companies and their way leaves.

We have reservations about recommendation 4, which is about reviewing plans. We will, perhaps, cover that point in more detail. We have been doing what is recommended in respect of some of the plans that we have produced to date. A lot of master plans are under way, and we are taking account of those recommendations in the current master planning work. We disagree with recommendation 9, which is about Department core funding for town centre management.

We are sympathetic to recommendation 11, but PPS 5 is a matter for DOE. Recommendation 12 is about car parking, which is an important issue in relation to regeneration, but setting policy and tariffs for car parking is currently the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development (DRD). We understand that the tariff-setting responsibility will move to local councils with the transfer of car parks under RPA. Recommendation 13 is about pedestrianisation, which is another issue that impacts on our public realm. Again, however, that is primarily a matter for DRD. Recommendation 16 is about consultation guidelines. We comply with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) guidelines, which we thought were fairly clear. If they are not, that is primarily an issue for OFMDFM.

That was a summary. We agree wholeheartedly with nine recommendations; we agree to an extent with two; and we reject six, four of which because they are not the responsibility of DSD.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much.

One of the issues raised throughout the Committee's inquiry was the need for cross-departmental co-operation. Some of the recommendations that you have put into a non-committal category relate to DRD or DOE. However, the essential point is valid: cross-departmental co-operation is important for effective regeneration in town and city centres. You mentioned the new urban regeneration policy at the outset. Will that facilitate or have a framework for improving cross-departmental co-operation, even in respect of alternative governance arrangements for town centre regeneration? Will that framework be in place well in advance of the transfer of those functions under RPA, so that you can assess its effectiveness before it is handed over to local councils lock, stock and barrel?

**Mr Johnston:**

Assuming that it makes it through the processes, the framework will be in place prior to May 2011. We already do a fair amount of pretty good structural work across other Departments, particularly in relation to the focus around master planning. When I finish my general point, perhaps Ian will touch on the practicalities of what that means on the ground for development and delivery.



More generally, the regeneration framework will have to take account of what is, hopefully, the new reality in respect of councils. We consider that our work, particularly our work on master planning, will fit into the community planning and new development planning contexts slightly better than it does at present. We hope that a lot of our master plan work will be given to us from the community planning context or from the development planning strategic tier. We hope that that will ensure better linkage across the public sector; across councils and the delivery agents in central government and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs).

**Mr Ian Snowden (Department for Social Development):**

Operationally, we have quite good working relationships with DOE and DRD in most of the areas in which we work. To some extent, those relationships depend on the personalities of the people with whom we are dealing in the other Departments. By and large, however, they are positive in the way in which they approach town centre regeneration. They are quite willing to work with us in town centre partnerships or working groups for any particular regeneration scheme, whether that is a public realm or comprehensive development scheme. The transfer of so many of the issues that affect town centre regeneration to new local authorities under the RPA arrangements

will create the opportunity for more cohesive decision-making. At the minute, because we are split into different Departments, that cohesiveness may be missing. A benefit of the new RPA structures will be more effective and integrated local-level decisions on planning, roads, car parking and town centre regeneration.

**Mr Hilditch:**

I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council, a director of Carrickfergus Development Company and a member of the Carrickfergus master plan steering group. I am also on the mid and east Antrim transition committee for the new council.

**The Chairperson:**

How do you find the time to come here? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Hilditch:**

I agree that it is crucial that the delivery framework and strategy must be in place before any handover. We do not want to lose the momentum that has been built up.

Recommendation 12 is about the issue of car parking and car parking charges, which has been the major bugbear for all towns outside Belfast. Concessions that are not possible in other towns have been given in Belfast. In a joined-up approach, something will have to give somewhere. Is it the case that charging does not come to local councils under RPA?

**Mr Johnston:**

Initially, it was not going to come to councils, but it does now.

**Mr Hilditch:**

That is better news.

**Mr Johnston:**

At present, DRD has to break even across all its car parks. That is done by charging more in Belfast and much less in some county towns. Nevertheless, when they are imposed, parking

charges can cause a local furore.

**Mrs M Bradley:**

The people in the towns would not agree with parking charges.

**Mr Hilditch:**

There is no doubt that out-of-town shopping centres are taking away from our town centres, and car parking is an integral part of that. I am glad to hear that that charging element has changed somewhat.

**Mr F McCann:**

Thanks for the presentation.

I have a couple of points, one of which relates to funding. I am concerned that adequate funding will not be transferred to enable town centre management or to allow local councils to

deal with the work that needs to be carried out in town centres. Ministers say that they cannot make commitments beyond a new Assembly term, but, as we discussed yesterday, town centre regeneration requires a long-term financial commitment. Past funding has been of a stop-start nature with no real commitment. That does not take away from some of the excellent, commendable work done by DSD on the ground in many towns and cities. However, all that work goes awry if a proper funding strategy is not put in place. I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. Councils are petrified by the size of the bill that they will pick up, which will have a direct impact on the setting of rates down the line.

I want to raise a point about utilities. I know that responsibility in that area is shared with other Departments. However, DSD has the lead responsibility in public realm schemes. The example has often been used that, within days of a multimillion pound public realm project being finished in the centre of Belfast, DRD or DOE dug up the ground there. The new surface was replaced with tarmac, which destroyed all the previous work. I believe that, as the lead Department, DSD should have to pursue the case departmentally or, depending on the utility, legally to ensure that that does not happen. The only way to bring in utilities involving other Departments is to do so as part of a strategy. Otherwise, a Department or utility company can

come along and undo, through its work, the good work that another Department or utility company has just done. As the lead Department, DSD must take that problem into consideration and pursue a solution to it.

**Mr Johnston:**

At the minute, we are unable to commit to funding in the new comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. That is an issue for town and city centre regeneration projects, which are not carried out in neat one-year or even three-year timescales. Given the time that it takes to go through the process of getting a developer on board, putting a package together and assembling a site, the gestation period for some of the bigger schemes can be a decade. It is like lending long and borrowing short. As part of our planning for the new CSR, we will take up with DFP the issue of delivering continuity of certainty. We are also particularly concerned that we might not get an allocation result until late in the current CSR period, which would present continuity problems.

More generally, we hope that councils will not encounter some of the structural issues that we

face on bigger schemes. For example, we must have debtor cover for schemes that are worth more than £20 million, and that places a burden on us. That point is not germane to this discussion, but it is to development in the north-east quarter of Belfast. Development agencies in GB and councils are not constrained in the same way, which may be a good thing flowing from RPA.

We intend to move staffing resource across to the new councils to give them the staff to take forward some of the regeneration work. The plan is to slightly change the balance of the DSD budget under RPA so that all 11 new councils at least get something out of it.

NIE was responsible for the particular utilities problem that was referred to, and I think that it is about to do it again. There is an equivalent reinstatement obligation, which means that, when a utility company completes an exercise, it is supposed to restore the site to the original order. However, given that it is not only our infrastructure that is being damaged and not being brought back to the same standard, all Departments that are affected must address the problem, and we will take that up with colleagues in other Departments. Work has already been done with utilities

to minimise the number of openings and closures and to forward plan work, but sometimes it does not work out that way.

**Mr Snowden:**

To avoid that difficulty, when developing a public realm project, which typically takes three to four years from initiating the project to carrying out work on the ground, there is quite a lot of contact with utility companies to identify whether any maintenance work that they have planned can be tied in with our work. Consequently, we can get contributions from them towards the cost of the scheme. However, if they do not play ball with us, they could well turn up two days after we have finished a project and dig the whole thing up again.

Utility companies have a statutory obligation to supply people who require their services, so if we have finished a public realm scheme and a property owner requires a supply to their property, the utility companies have a right to go back and do whatever work is necessary. As Henry said, as far as possible, we try to ensure that things are put back to the agreed standard, but DSD has no legislative authority to require that any particular action be taken. Given the difficulties that have



been experienced in Belfast city centre, we have been trying with DRD to see what might be done about the problem. Our Minister has been in contact with Conor Murphy to consider what the two Departments could do, either together or individually, to address it. We do recognise that it is an issue.

**Mr F McCann:**

I may be wrong, but my understanding is that utility companies do not need to apply for planning permission for schemes or for installations that they intend to carry out. A utility company started digging up the road where I live at 8.00 am on a Sunday morning until residents went out and complained. Four weeks later, the company returned to do the same job for another house about six doors down. That has to stop, because, if it happens in every village, town and city across the North, the result is a patchwork quilt that is unsightly and annoying for residents and everybody else. Legislation must be passed to stop that happening. Some utility companies know six to eight months in advance that they are going to be working on a scheme. Those companies have to plan strategies, so they should have to apply for planning permission to carry out such work. They need to know that some of their actions are intolerable and will not be accepted.

I understand what you said about the Minister not being able to allocate funding for the long term because of parliamentary terms. However, it is very difficult to build a strategy when it is not known what money will be available to support it. We need to have a mechanism so that we can strategise ahead to allow us to do the work that is needed in town centres.

I want to raise a point about the reviews of master plans. It would be crazy to not have a built-in system of reviews, because Departments have a fixed view of how things are done. Often, people outside the box are the ones who come in with new and interesting ideas on how to move things forward. Built-in reviews allow you to constantly build on your master plan.

**Mr Snowden:**

The programme of master plans will be finished fairly soon. When we set out to develop master plans for town centres, we take a 15-year forward look at what might happen in a town. Some of the master planning commenced when the economic situation was much better. However, if you are looking at the longer term — between 15 and 20 years — you are trying to look at the

structural issues that a town centre faces and how it will have to develop over a longer period of time rather than react to any particular short-term issues.

You are right that a mechanism — some type of structure, organisation or steering group — must be in place to make sure that the master plan is being delivered and to consider how it might need to be adjusted. The master plans are not as detailed or specific at a town-centre level as they might be for an individual site; they are more like a high-level concept or a strategy. We hope that, when the private sector and other agencies get involved, there is scope for innovation and for good ideas on how to take the master plans forward to be generated and implemented. Allowing that degree of flexibility and governance oversight will help to address the issues that you raised.

**Mr Johnston:**

We have 47 or 48 master plans at present, including Belfast's. Only one of those master plans has been completed; implementation is under way in six cases; implementation structures have been agreed in two cases; and the master plan has been agreed but nothing has been done about implementation in three cases. Therefore, 35 of those master plans are yet to be agreed, and they

are either out to consultation, still in production or future scheduled. About three of them are scheduled for the future.

The aim was to get as many of the master plans in place as possible prior to 2011 to inform our thinking on delivery up to that point and to provide a starting point for councils, because we anticipate that it will take them a while to get into gear post-2011. The experience in Scotland on Community Planning shows that that can take a couple of years, so we do not want to have a hiatus in which people have nothing to rely on. It would be handy for councils with multiple town centres to have master plans for each one, because it will provide councillors with something to discuss when deciding priorities across the borough.

**Mr Burns:**

I apologise for arriving late, which was due to the weather conditions.

Town centres are the flagships of our council areas. I declare that I am a member of Antrim Borough Council, which has been involved in many projects. Our town centres sometimes get

into a dilapidated state and need regeneration. Shopkeepers do not have the money necessary to attract new businesses, which, in the absence of an attractive town-centre environment, drift to the edge-of-town developments that exist everywhere.

As Fra said, one of the biggest problems that people complain about is digging starting up again when a job has just been completed. More effort must be put into ducting beneath the new infrastructure, so that surfaces need not be ripped up. In the next 20 years, fibre-optic cables will be used by all those buildings for phone and other communication. Utilities and other services will change, but can we leave ducting now that will minimise the need to rip up again so much of what we have put down already? We need a greater degree of planning about that, especially at a time when we are moving into new councils and council areas are merging. My council is joining with Newtownabbey Borough Council. Antrim Borough Council does not know everything that is happening in, for example, Ballyclare, even at a basic level, yet we are coming together. More ducting must be installed during town centre regeneration to save an awful lot of digging up afterwards.

**The Chairperson:**

Are you any good at ducting, Henry?

**Mr Johnston:**

No. Public realm schemes expose pretty cruelly the very poor information that utility companies have on where the current infrastructure is. Ripping up the tarmac is the only way to know exactly what is there, and that adds unforeseen costs. The problem with ducting is who pays for it. One can look to BT, but it is not a monopoly.

**Mr Snowden:**

We try to forward plan as much as possible. We have been looking for about three years at a public realm scheme on High Street and Market Square in Antrim, which we held back on because we knew that Northern Ireland Water was going to begin major work in the town centre. That was specifically to avoid the problem being discussed.

Although public realm work appears to be just surface refurbishment — installing new

pavements, street furniture, and so on — quite a lot of the expense of such schemes is underground and unseen. It is to do with utilities: putting in or fixing underground services and rebuilding the roadbed. Sometimes half the cost of a scheme can lie underground, where it is not seen. We try to liaise with utility companies as much as possible to see what we can do to improve the situation and to get contributions from them, but, as can be imagined, those negotiations can sometimes be long and drawn out. However, we try to plan as much as we can. Again, it depends on the degree of co-operation that we get from the other side.

**The Chairperson:**

I should point out that the Committee is due to meet the Committee for Regional Development after Easter to look at the Streets Ahead project in Belfast, so we can raise that issue then, particularly since the report on the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is due soon. I understand that the legislation will impose punitive costs for opening up roads and streets, which should deter utility companies and others from doing precisely what we are talking about. At present, there does not seem to be any deterrent from doing that whenever they want. It might not stop the problem, but at least it will have some impact on it. It is an issue in which the Committee is taking an ongoing interest.

**Mr Burns:**

People are continually seeking better broadband services. We are making a major investment to improve broadband throughout rural areas and in towns. The only way to improve broadband is to get customers linked to fibre optics. The big multinationals that operate on a fibre-optic site can send information at lightning speed. That is what people want. They can control shop fronts and everything else if they have a fibre-optic cable connection. I can see us having to dig up everywhere in a few years' time to lay those fibre-optic cables. It would be more sensible for that ducting to be put in the ground at this stage. I take the point that it is a question of who pays for it. If hundreds of thousands of pounds are spent on a scheme, people will ask where all the money went. The answer is that it went underneath the ground; it was buried. In the long term, however, that seems to be a better solution than having to dig it up.

**Mr Johnston:**

We will take up your point with the telecoms side, either via the regulator or the Department.

The issue is not only about who pays for the ducting but about the type of ducting that is used.

Various people use different technologies. BT uses a blown fibre solution quite a lot. Fibre is



blown in and, if there is a fault, it can be taken out and put back in again. If that method is not used and there is a fault in the cable, finding the fault involves digging it all up. There are issues about who pays, how it is ensured that that is equitable in a deregulated market, and what technology is used to have some sort of forward potential. We will take that point back through the system.

**The Chairperson:**

It is an issue that members are concerned about. The Committee has shown an interest in it in its report and subsequently. It underscores the original point about getting Departments to work together on those types of issues. You are talking about getting private sector companies involved. It shows that we need to knit together everything as best we can.

I want to raise two broad issues, the first of which is in respect of BIDs. You said that there is insufficient time to have the requisite legislation passed to allow for business improvement districts. That is understandable, but is the Department positive about the idea of introducing legislation? Does it intend to try to do that at some later stage, or are there no plans at all?

**Mr Johnston:**

We are positive about exploring it. It will have to go out to public consultation. Some people are very keen on BIDs. They think it is a great idea. Businessmen resent contributing to voluntary BIDs or collective activity when they think that people are freeloading. They have particular difficulties with some of the national or multinational companies that will not contribute unless they are compelled to do so. That is one side of the argument. The other side of the argument is that the BID levy is a relatively small amount of money: is it worth the candle?

There is an issue about how the system would be run. We have had some discussions with Land and Property Services (LPS), which led to the conclusion that, if we tried to do it through the LPS system, there would probably be a disproportionate cost. It would probably cost more than would be received. We need to look at how we could get that information out and use it to support a business levy of some description at a cost that was commensurate with what would be received. We are doing that bit of work at the minute.

We would then need to consult publicly, and, as each BID was to go forward, there would be a local vote in the area affected to determine whether people were prepared to contribute. There are a couple of areas in Northern Ireland in which people would be very keen to move ahead on that fairly soon. However, looking across Northern Ireland as a whole, it is disappointing in some areas how little contribution comes from the private sector to the management and town centre promotion work. That is historic; it is not just that times are very hard now for some companies, particularly small independent companies.

**Mr Snowden:**

Looking outside Belfast, the most interest has been shown by Lisburn, Ballymena and Coleraine. Those towns have made some strides towards getting private sector contributions into work that they are doing at present. As Henry said, there are concerns in those towns about freeloaders, particularly multinational companies, multiple retailers, banks or financial institutions that benefit from work that is done in a town centre without making any contribution to it as a matter of national policy. On the other hand, there are some national firms that are very positive about contributing, such as Boots, which makes a big contribution to town centre management and business improvement districts.

Not everyone is in favour of BIDs. If we are going through the legislative process, we have to go through the full consultation exercise and so on. That takes time, not to mention sorting out the administrative and legal issues that would be associated with it, such as how it would fit into the rating system and who would have overall policy responsibility for it. We have had several meetings with DOE and DFP at ministerial and official level to look at the issue, so it is being taken forward.

**The Chairperson:**

That is positive. There is sometimes a lack of understanding about BIDs, and that may be why some traders are reticent to contemplate the idea. However, it is positive that it is being taken forward.

The last issue that I want to raise is that of vesting. How many times do vesting powers have to be used in respect of regeneration schemes? You may have to come back to the Committee on the answer to that question.

**Mr Johnston:**

We will come back on that. Generally, there are three types of vesting. The Department vests to take forward comprehensive development (CD) schemes. We do either a contested vest, which takes a lot of effort and a long time as we need to be sure of our ground, or a friendly vest, where the developer has assembled the site but is uncertain about the title. We would friendly vest the site from him, and he would buy it back from us, which gives him a clean title on it. We can provide the Committee with figures on how much of that the Department does.

We have also been asked to vest to tackle dereliction. I can think of one town, which I will not mention by name, where there is a prominent row of derelict properties at the entrance to the town. We have been approached to vest that land. However, we cannot do so, because the person who owns that property has only to say that they have plans to develop it, and our chances of vesting it are scuppered. Our powers to tackle dereliction are quite limited, unless we are doing so within a plan that has been defined already. We cannot vest speculatively: we cannot judge a property to be awful and decide to vest it. The only way in which we can do that safely is as part of a wider scheme to develop that area. I know that that is a frustration. We have had a

number of approaches about vesting derelict properties.

**The Chairperson:**

Vesting is a critical tool in regeneration, and I daresay that there is not one major regeneration scheme that does not have an element of vesting. Although councils will have the function of town centre regeneration post-RPA, will it still be the case that they will have to go through the Department?

**Mr Johnston:**

Yes. The vesting powers are built back on the DOE legislation, and all the vesting has to be approved by the competent Department. That is the case for councils' vesting.

**The Chairperson:**

Is DSD the competent Department?

**Mr Johnston:**

It will be DSD if the council is vesting for regeneration purposes. The RPA legislation will include statutory guidance that will state when councils have to obtain DSD approval for vesting. That is essentially a mirror of what currently happens, and it all links back to the same 1972 legislation.

**Mr Snowden:**

It is important to recognise that vesting is viewed legally as quite a draconian power of the state and the Government. We use it only when absolutely necessary. The test is that it must be proven to be absolutely necessary, which can sometimes be difficult when dealing with complex situations. Vesting has not been used a tremendous amount in recent years outside Belfast. It was most recently used in Portadown, where one site was vested between Curran Street and Obins Street, an area in which we are taking forward a development. Prior to that, in the 1990s, a certain amount of vesting was done in Ballymoney, Carrickfergus and Dungannon. That was quite a long and drawn out process, and we are still dealing with some of the legacy from those schemes. Therefore, vesting is not something to be entered into lightly. People can be quite vigorously opposed to it in principle rather than just in terms of how it affects them specifically.

We have to be quite careful about how it is used.

**Mr Johnston:**

Does the Committee want figures for Belfast and Derry as well as the county towns?

**The Chairperson:**

Yes, include everything of interest.

**Mr F McCann:**

Some of the sites are owned by developers. The developer is interested only in market forces and the price that he or she will get for the site. Surely, a master plan shows intent to develop, which would allow the Department to come in and deal with the situation.

**Mr Snowden:**

A master plan is an important first step. If you do not have a master plan in place that



demonstrates the necessity to develop a particular part of a town or city, you will be on quite dodgy ground from the start with any attempt to vest. You need to work from some sort of independent rational basis that tells you that the area is one in which you should be looking to use your powers. Having a master plan would be the start of the process.

You want to avoid using vesting powers and, therefore, will try to negotiate with landowners. Only if it is quite clear that there is no prospect of proposals being brought forward by the private sector do you move in to either free up the situation, because there are competing interests, or to vest the land out to take the scheme forward yourself.

**Mr Johnston:**

If there is an extant area plan and the master plan conforms to it, we are probably fine to move down that route and will probably get through the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) process.

If we have an area plan that is out of date or a case in which the master plan proposes something for a site that is at variance with the site designation within the area plan, we have to go through another hoop and take forward a development scheme. We have a power, which will be given to

councils, though they should not need it, to statutorily modify the area plan so that it conforms to the master plan. The Planning Service will take notice of the master plans that we are creating, but that is not something that it will take into material consideration.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you for your evidence. The Committee is keen that town centre regeneration in the future is as positive and as focussed as it can be, which is why members would like to see any framework in place well in advance of it being handed over to councils, so that it can be tested and any potential niggles and problems ironed out. Thank you very much for your time.