



COMBER TOWN CENTRE MASTERPLAN



St. Mary's Church, Comber

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Aerial view of Comber

1. INTRODUCTION

The Department for Social Development (DSD) in conjunction with Ards Borough Council (ABC) appointed URS (now trading as AECOM) in March 2014 to prepare a Masterplan for Comber. The Masterplan process required continuous engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. This document is the culmination of that process and sets out an exciting range of short, medium and long term proposals and actions, which will enhance Comber and its neighbourhoods.

The Masterplan has been facilitated by a team led by AECOM; a multi-disciplinary consultancy which consists of a range of specialisms including town planning, landscape architecture and urban design. The AECOM team was assisted by Count Us In (Transport Consultants) and Roderick MacLean Associates (Retail Consultants). The consultancy team worked closely with the Project Steering Group which consisted of Local Councillors, Council Officers, DSD, Statutory Agencies, representatives from local businesses and the community/voluntary sectors. Their local knowledge was invaluable when identifying Comber's strengths and weaknesses.

All proposals contained within the Masterplan will be subject to further consultation and development.



Existing visitor information

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

What is a Town Centre Masterplan?

The Town Centre Masterplan is an evidence-based document that sets out the strategic vision for Comber over the next 15-20 years. The Masterplan aims to promote and guide growth and development, with the aim of creating a vibrant, high quality and fully integrated settlement. This Masterplan is a non-statutory document, therefore it is not required by law, but has been brought forward to help guide the future regeneration of Comber for the next 15-20 years. The document can be used to help guide the community planning process and be used by a range of stakeholders to help draw down funding for particular projects. The Action Plan in Chapter 8 prioritises and establishes indicative timeframes for the delivery of identified projects. Generally, the delivery of this Masterplan will not fall to one group or organisation, but will require a concerted effort from a range of stakeholders. However the results will be rewarding to those who live, work, visit and conduct business in Comber.

The Masterplan should not be confused with the current public realm scheme (also designed by AECOM). The public realm scheme once completed, will greatly enhance the aesthetics of the Town Centre. It is an integral piece of the jigsaw, whereas the Masterplan strives to provide an overarching framework within which the crucial elements of a vibrant town will evolve.

Where does the Masterplan cover?

Town Masterplans typically focus on projects within the town centre boundary, as identified by the Local Area Plan (Ards Down Area Plan 2015). Comber's Town Centre boundary includes the following streets: The Square, Castle Street, High Street, Bridge Street, Bridge Street Link and Killinchy Street. In recognition that several of Comber's

key assets are outside this boundary a more holistic approach is being taken to ensure that the revitalisation of its surrounding assets will directly impact on the future success of the Town Centre.

How has the Masterplan been produced?

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

- Research, information gathering and analysis
- Preparation of vision and regeneration objectives
- Draft projects and proposals
- Preparation of Masterplan and Action Plan

The appendices to this Masterplan are set out in a separate document and include a range of information which was gathered to help inform the Masterplan.

The research involved a range of quantitative and qualitative techniques including workshops with key stakeholders, telephone household surveys, desktop research and questionnaires. At each of the key stages of the Masterplan process the team tailored the research method to suit the objective, for example at the draft projects and proposals stage the team prepared a public exhibition which aimed at gathering feedback from the public through the use of questionnaires.

The appendices to this Masterplan include the following information:

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

A brief history of Comber

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

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

Thomas Andrews rose to fame as designer of the ill-fated RMS Titanic and tragically lost his life when the ship sank in 1912. By 1841 the town had 1400 inhabitants. The 20th Century saw Comber lose much of its industry and re-establish itself as a commuter town for the Belfast urban area.

Today Comber has a population of approximately 8,521 inhabitants (2011 census: calculation based on the total of Super Output Areas Comber East 1 & 2, Comber West 1 & 2, Comber North 1 & 2).



Aerial view of The Square



The Comber T.T. Races (1933)



The Square (1960s)



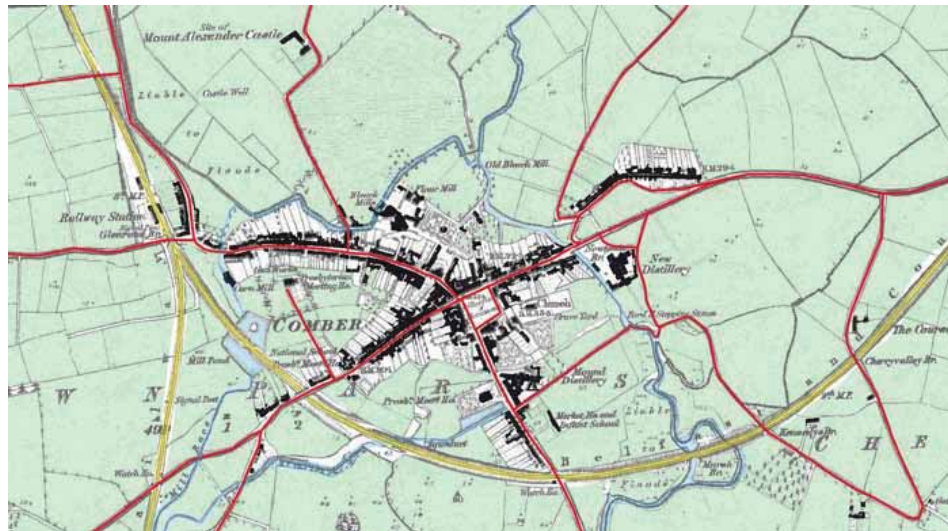
Former Andrews Mill (1920)



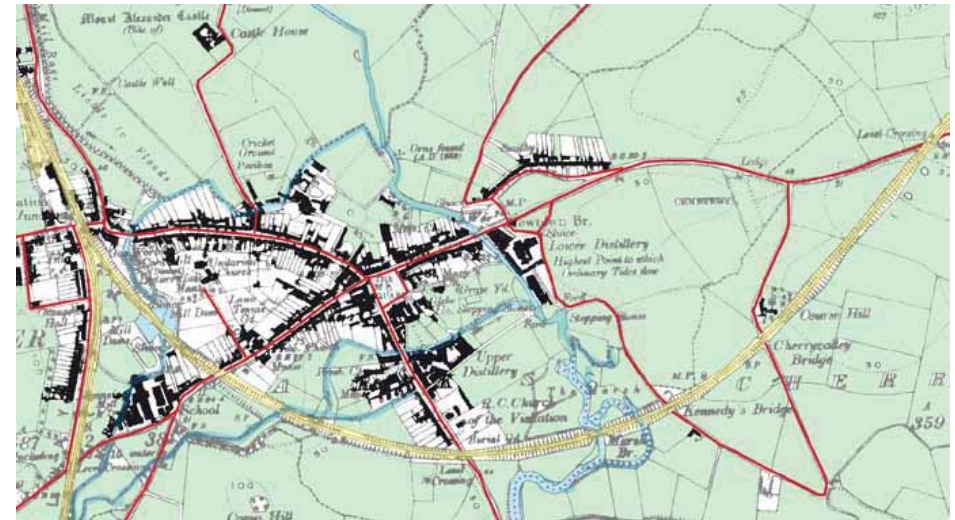
The Georgian House, The Square (1930)

The development of Comber

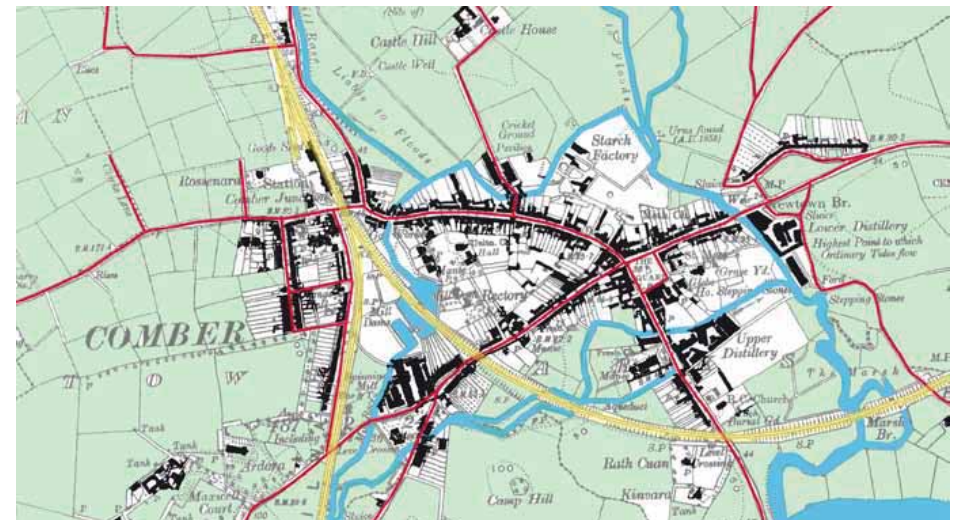
For centuries, the settlement of Comber has developed around a healthy production and milling industry due to the nearby availability of materials and natural environment required for the industrial processes. This heritage led Comber to become a famous producer of Comber Whiskey and linen products.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



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



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



Comber 1957 - The town continued to grow around its industrial heritage with further growth in residential provision. The core of the town was based around The Square which has remained intact to the present day.

The current physical structure and character

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

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

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

Other buildings such as the distillery, have been demolished to make way for new build residential apartments to facilitate the rising population as Comber has become established as a primary commuter town.



Built form and open space analysis

The quality of the town centre environment within Comber is generally in reasonable condition. The proposed public realm scheme will enhance the environment for residents and visitors to the town. A new suite of street furniture and street lighting will help create a more legible and accessible environment for people of all ages. The Square is the centre piece of Comber and the proposed scheme will reinforce this principle by attracting an increased footfall to the Town Centre.

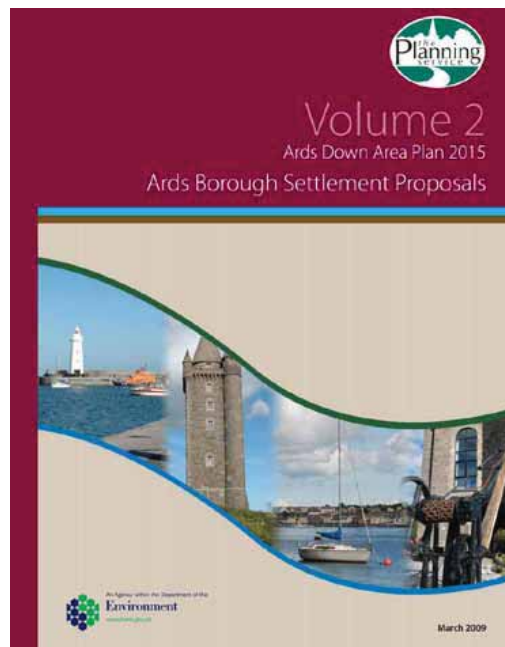
The built environment consists of some great examples of historic architecture. However on the main retail streets such as Castle Street, this has been weakened by neighbouring vacancy and dereliction of key buildings. Large volumes of traffic coupled with narrow streetscapes have resulted in movement and accessibility issues along certain streets.

Planning context

The statutory planning context for Comber is set out in the Ards Down Area Plan 2015. The plan identifies several policies and designations relating to the town which have been considered whilst preparing the Masterplan.

Ards Down Area Plan describes Comber as ‘a localised service centre with a number of businesses providing convenience, durable and retail services. It also acts as an educational, religious, and social centre providing health care and recreational facilities and a growing commuter settlement with trunk road connections to Newtownards and Belfast.’

Several opportunity sites are identified including the lands along the southern side of The Square, lands at Castle Street and 25-35 Bridge Street.

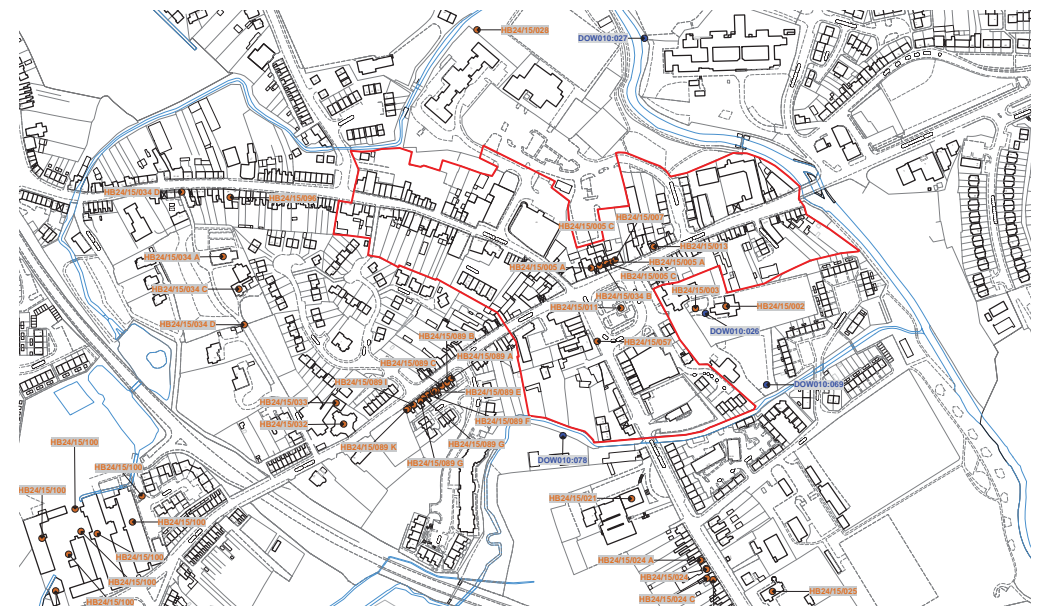


Ards Down Area Plan 2015

Built and natural heritage context

Comber has a wealth of built heritage assets, including listed buildings and historic monuments, which has been recognised by the designation of Areas of Townscape Character at The Square and The Mill Village. The Masterplan has considered the importance of these assets and encourages their preservation and enhancement where possible. All projects and proposals identified in the Masterplan will require the necessary statutory consents, however it is essential to consider their impact on built heritage at an early stage and indicate risks where necessary.

There are no European environmental designations within the town centre. Strangford Lough however, has multiple designations such as Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI), Ramsar, Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Projects identified within the Masterplan such as the lough section of the Enler River Park, will need to be sensitive to the environmental designations associated with Strangford Lough. The proposals in this area aim to promote ecological awareness of this important asset.



Comber's built heritage assets - for further details see Appendices

Public realm enhancements

Ards Borough Council has received major funding support from the Department for Social Development for a public realm scheme in Comber Town Centre. The £2.4 million scheme, currently under construction, is a key element of the Masterplan. The scheme is focussed on Castle Street, Bridge Street Link, Bridge Street, The Square, High Street and Killinchy Street.

The design proposals seek to complement Comber's townscape character, rich history and listed features. The following elements are included within the scheme design:

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



Artist's impression of the new public realm enhancements



Artist's impression of the new public realm enhancements



Service vehicle on lower Castle Street at the junction between Castle Street and The Square

Traffic and movement

In January 2013, Ards Borough Council commissioned a study of traffic management in Comber. This report provided a review of the access and movement issues around the Town Centre. The consultation during the masterplanning process has reinforced the significance of these issues.

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

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



Existing parking conditions on Castle Street

It is noted that the High Street/Killinchy Street traffic signal controlled junction, is under less pressure as a result of constructing the bypass. However the reduction in capacity has not resolved issues that currently exist along Castle Street and in particular along the stretch of road from Bridge Street Link to The Square. It is acknowledged that there are problems in relation to the footpath widths in this area, however there are associated constraints with the existing building lines on Castle Street. The narrow width makes it difficult for two large vehicles to pass along this stretch of road.

When servicing takes place to the shop fronts, it is common for heavy goods vehicles to straddle the footway and the nearside traffic lane. This results in blocking both the footway and the traffic lane stopping traffic travelling to and from The Square. The image of Castle Street on page 12 highlights the issues when a service vehicle is driving along the road.

The January 2013 Traffic Management Report, which utilised previous work carried out by DRD Transport NI, identified several options for a one-way system. However no consensus was reached regarding the best solution. It is important to continue investigating solutions to this problem, given the potential future growth in traffic and footfall in Comber being generated by an increased population from residential developments in the vicinity and a potential rise in visitors.



Carriageway and pavement width on Castle Street



Sourced from Ards Chronicle

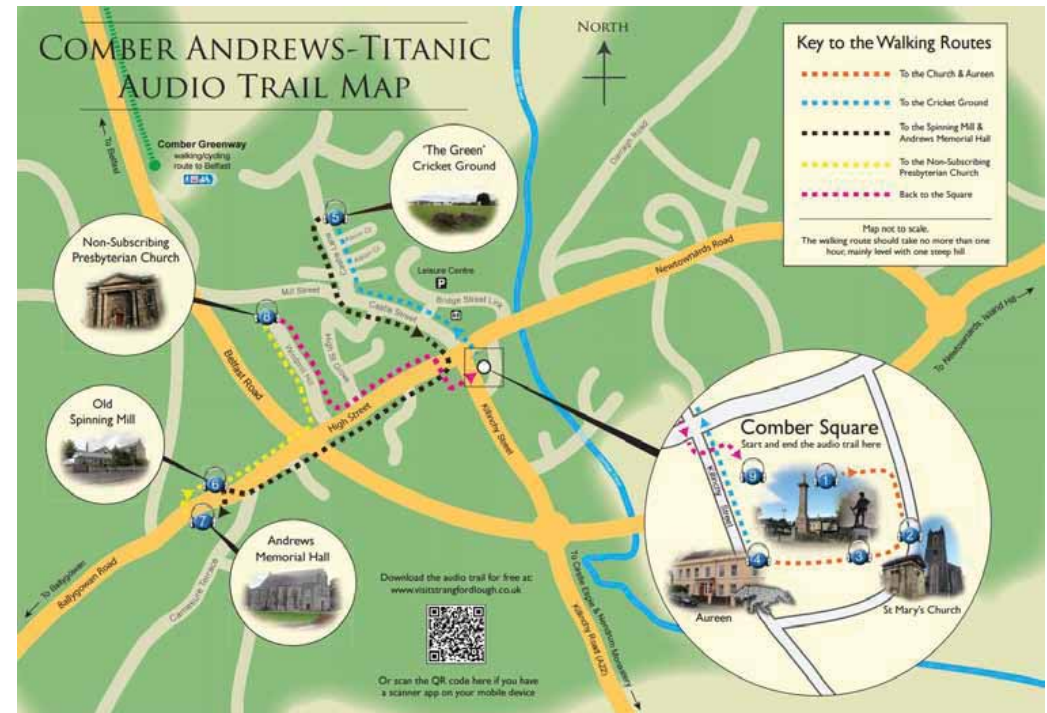
Tourism and recreation

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

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

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

There has been no train linkage between Belfast and Comber since 1951 when the Belfast and County Down Railway ceased operating. The route of the line remains however, and in 2008 it was officially opened as the Comber Greenway, supporting walkers and cyclists. The Greenway runs from Dee Street in East Belfast to the Old Belfast Road just outside Comber. In Belfast, the route links the Odyssey, River Lagan and Titanic Quarter. The Comber Greenway is a major asset for Comber, however it terminates short of Comber Town Centre. Linking the Greenway to the Town Centre and beyond, is a core aspiration of this Masterplan.



The Comber Andrews-Titanic Trail



Strangford Lough

Titanic Memorial

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

(Comber Historical Society - website)

Built and natural heritage attractions



Strangford Lough and Lecale AONB



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



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

Town Centre attractions



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



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



The Cooperage - last remaining building of the Old Comber Distillery



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

Retail sector

A retail capacity study and town centre health check was carried out by Roderick MacLean Associates in conjunction with AECOM. Below is a brief summary of the findings.

Retail capacity

The retail capacity of Comber is considered modest. The forecast would support minor additions to the comparison retail offer in Comber, but more specifically, improvements in quality. The opportunities are shaped by the market rather than by estimates of expenditure capacity.

The capacity study highlighted that vacant and derelict properties in Comber may have the potential to contribute towards accommodating improvements to the retail offer. Most likely, many will now be redundant for retailing purposes, particularly those in the peripheral areas. Those in the core of the town centre should remain as opportunities for retailing and non-retail services.

Town Centre Health Check

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

Commercial and office space

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

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

Through examining the NAV rates for each street it has become apparent that the retail area with the highest rateable NAVs are situated on The Square and Castle Street. This coincides with this area being the primary retail core of Comber Town Centre.



Rollo Gillespie Monument

Residential

The Ards Down Area Plan 2015, suggests that over the lifetime of the document, Comber requires approximately 1700 residential dwellings to fulfil its strategic role in supporting the expansion of the Belfast Metropolitan Area. The plan indicated two small portions of town centre lands as protected housing – the nursing home on Bridge Street and The Mews development on Killinchy Street. Land zoned on Castle Street is the only designated residential site within the plan, however the majority of the site has been developed since inception of the plan. One of the major sites expected to meet the housing demand is the 37.5 hectare site at Riverside. The development of this site has the potential to boost the population of Comber.

During the consultation process, several important points were raised by key stakeholders:

- Comber is an area of high demand for social housing
- The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has identified a need for 225 units of social housing in the period up to March 2018
- The provision of affordable housing should also be considered
- Town centre living can enhance its vitality and viability and should be encouraged
- Future developments should seek to include a mix of tenures and affordability

The settlement of Comber consists of a broad range of house types and styles and this is reflected by the differentials in property values throughout the town illustrated by the heat map on the opposite page (www.geopii.com).



Comber property asking price heat map

Key



Lower asking prices

Higher asking prices

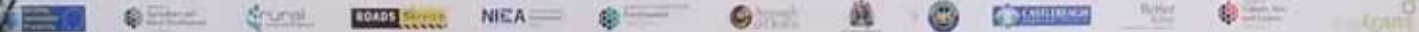
The Comber Greenway



7 miles of traffic free tranquillity

Belfast ▶ Dundonald ▶ Comber

Download a route map www.combergreenway.org.uk



3. MASTERPLAN CONSULTATION

The Masterplan process was guided and informed by a Steering Group consisting of Local Councillors, Council Officers, DSD, Statutory Agencies, representatives from local businesses and the community/voluntary sectors facilitated by the AECOM team. Consultation with the community and key stakeholders was an important element of the Masterplan process with various methods being utilised to reach the widest possible audience.

Stage 1 – Information gathering and analysis

Information gathering workshops were held to understand the problems and future aspirations of Comber. AECOM also undertook a site walkabout with members of the Steering Group to discuss certain issues. A consultation fact sheet and questionnaire was circulated to a broad range of stakeholders, which provided an early indication of Comber's strengths and weaknesses. A random telephone householder survey was also conducted at this stage. These components formed a solid statistical and evidence base on which the Masterplan was developed.

Stage 2 – Visioning and design

Visioning and design workshops were held with the Steering Group and other key stakeholder groups to formulate the vision and key regeneration objectives for Comber.



Images from the Steering Group visioning workshop

Stage 3 – Public consultation

Public consultation ran for a 12 week period between the 20th October 2014 and the 16th January 2015. Draft project boards were on display at Comber Leisure Centre and Comber Library for the duration of this period. AECOM also held a publicity event at the Comber Christmas Fair in the Square, where many members of the public had the opportunity to discuss the plans and lodge comments. During this time, AECOM had several focussed meetings with ABC officers to ensure that the draft plan was consistent with wider projects and initiatives being progressed by Council.



Launch of the public consultation exercise

Consultation on Proposed COMBER Town Masterplan DRAFT

Help Plan Comber's Future

Comber in Context

Consultation Process to Date

Have Your Say...

HELP PLAN COMBER'S FUTURE

Consultation on Proposed COMBER Town Masterplan DRAFT

Vision Statement

The Big Idea

How do we get there...?

VISION & CONCEPT

Consultation on Proposed COMBER Town Masterplan DRAFT

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MASTERPLAN

THE TOWN CENTRE

MASTERPLAN

Public consultation presentation boards

Key words highlighted during the consultation



Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>Strategic location, providing a convenient commuter base</i>	<i>Traffic and accessibility</i>
<i>Traditional small town with spacious square/attractive setting/planting</i>	<i>Dereliction and too many vacant units</i>
<i>Strong local customer base</i>	<i>Poor street surfacing in places</i>
<i>Strong community feel and active community/voluntary sector</i>	<i>Limited variety of activities in the Town Centre</i>
<i>Strong and varied historical and cultural heritage</i>	<i>Lack of visitor and tourist facilities</i>
<i>Good range and quality of sporting and recreation facilities – Comber Greenway Leisure Centre/Football/Cricket</i>	<i>Limited evening economy</i>
<i>Natural heritage – Enler River/Strangford Lough</i>	<i>High levels of retail expenditure leakage to larger centres</i>
<i>Perceived locally as a nice place to visit (see also weaknesses)</i>	<i>Issues with commuter parking in the Town Centre</i>
<i>Strong reputation for quality retail/products - new farmers market</i>	<i>Limited retail offer</i>
Opportunities	Threats
<i>To enhance the natural assets such as the Enler River by creating a linear park through the town by extending the Comber Greenway</i>	<i>Continuation of the economic climate, causing reduced spending and investment</i>
<i>Enhance linkages with Strangford Lough</i>	<i>Retail market trends with increasing market focus on larger centres and growth of the internet</i>
<i>Encourage the reuse of vacant buildings through flexible planning</i>	<i>Possible further cuts in public sector funding support for town centre improvements</i>
<i>Reduce the level of dereliction, including buildings and poor facades – development of opportunity sites</i>	<i>Increased demand for public funds due to the increased geographic size of Council area</i>
<i>Invest in the townscape and environmental quality</i>	
<i>Encourage and build upon the quality food and retail offer</i>	
<i>Utilise community planning for the benefit of Comber</i>	
<i>To create better pedestrian and vehicular linkages in and around Comber</i>	

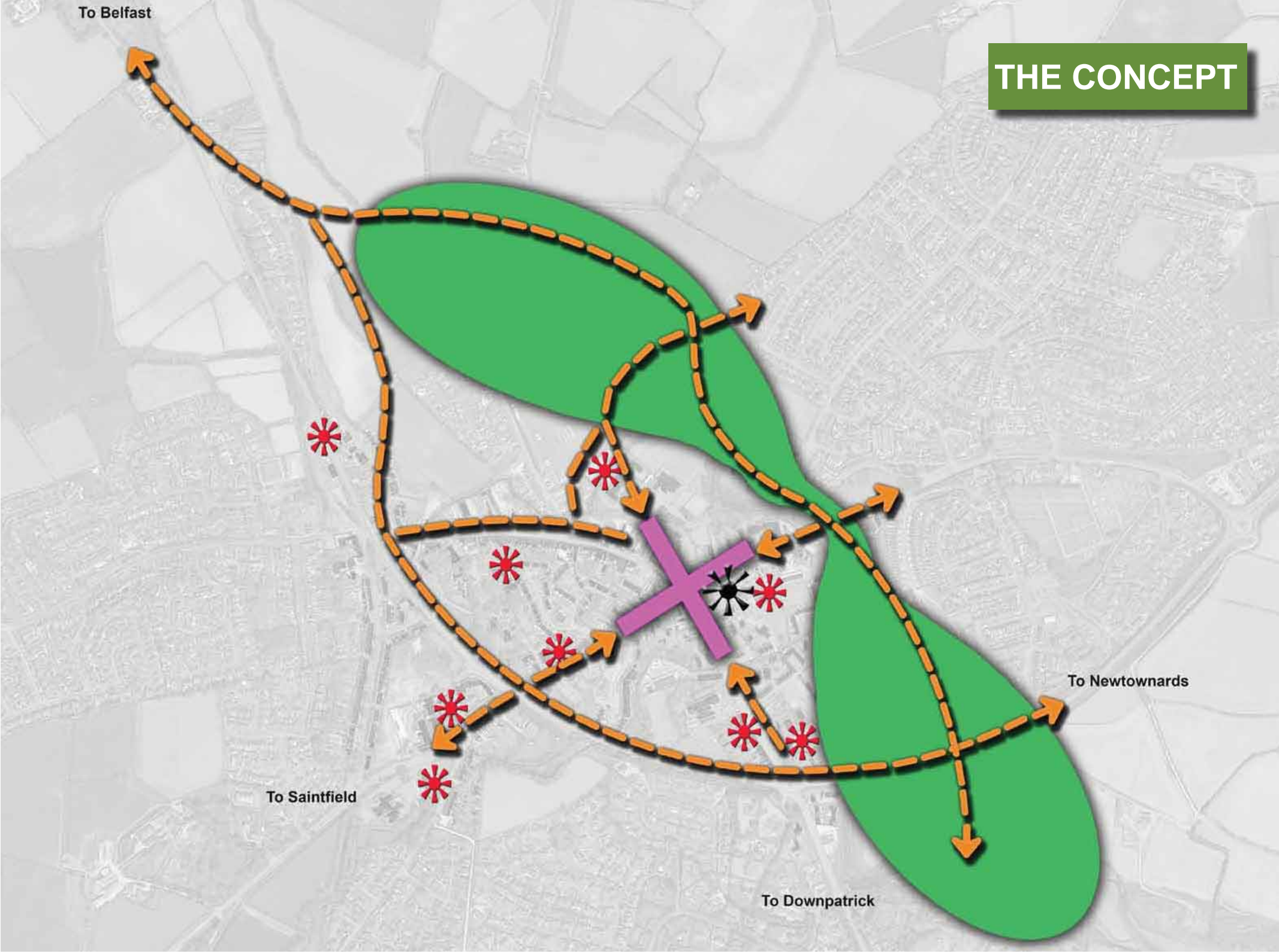
4. VISION, CONCEPT AND REGENERATION OBJECTIVES

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

Comber has also built upon it’s rich cultural heritage with The Square providing the focal point for activity.

(Masterplan Steering Group)

THE CONCEPT



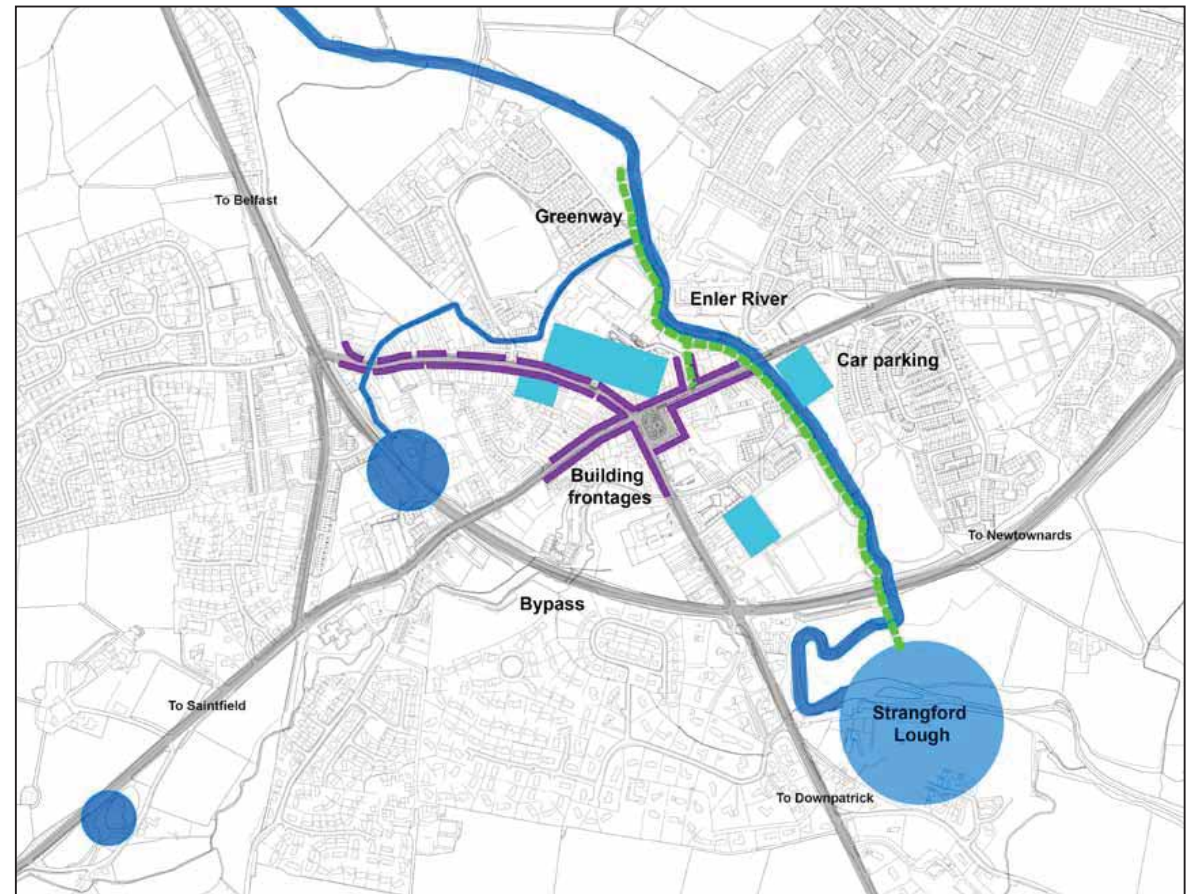
Regeneration Objectives - How do we get there....?

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

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

Key Initiatives:

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



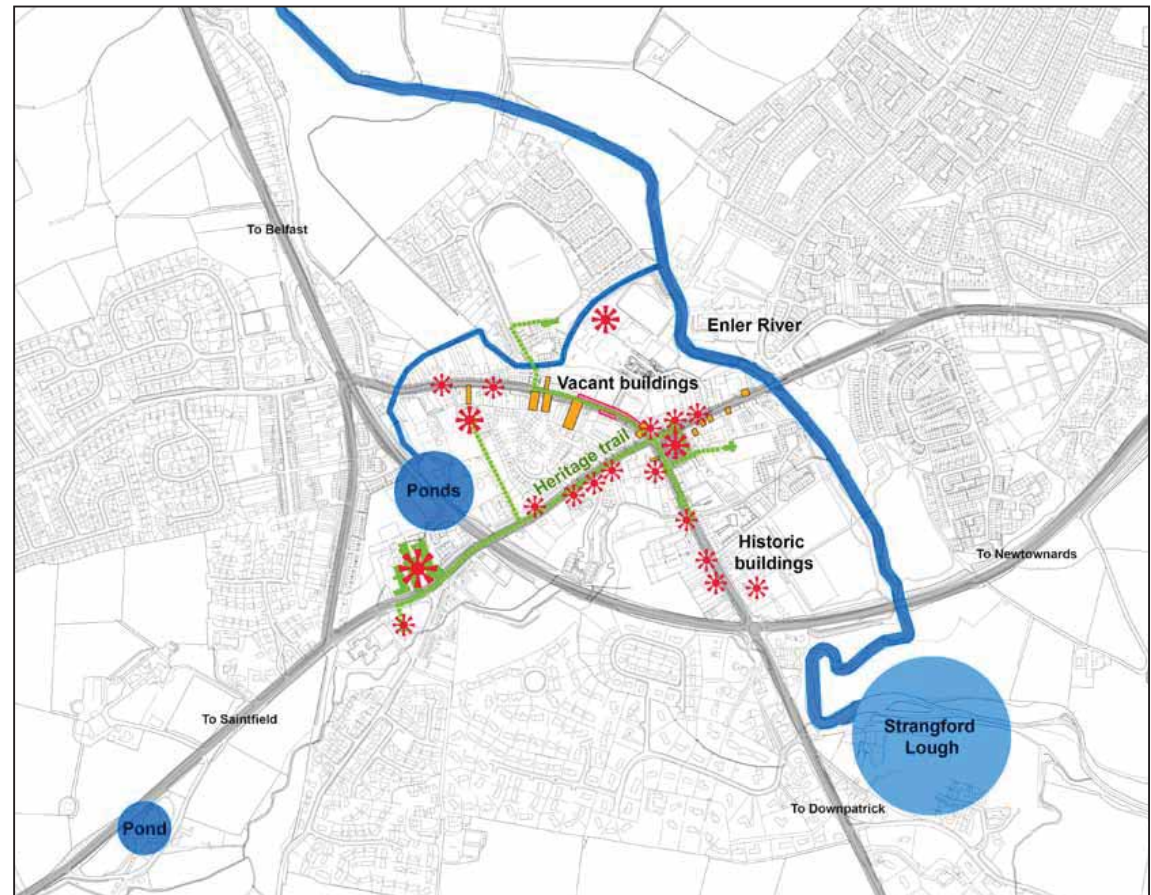
Comber Town Centre Concept

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

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

Key Initiatives:

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



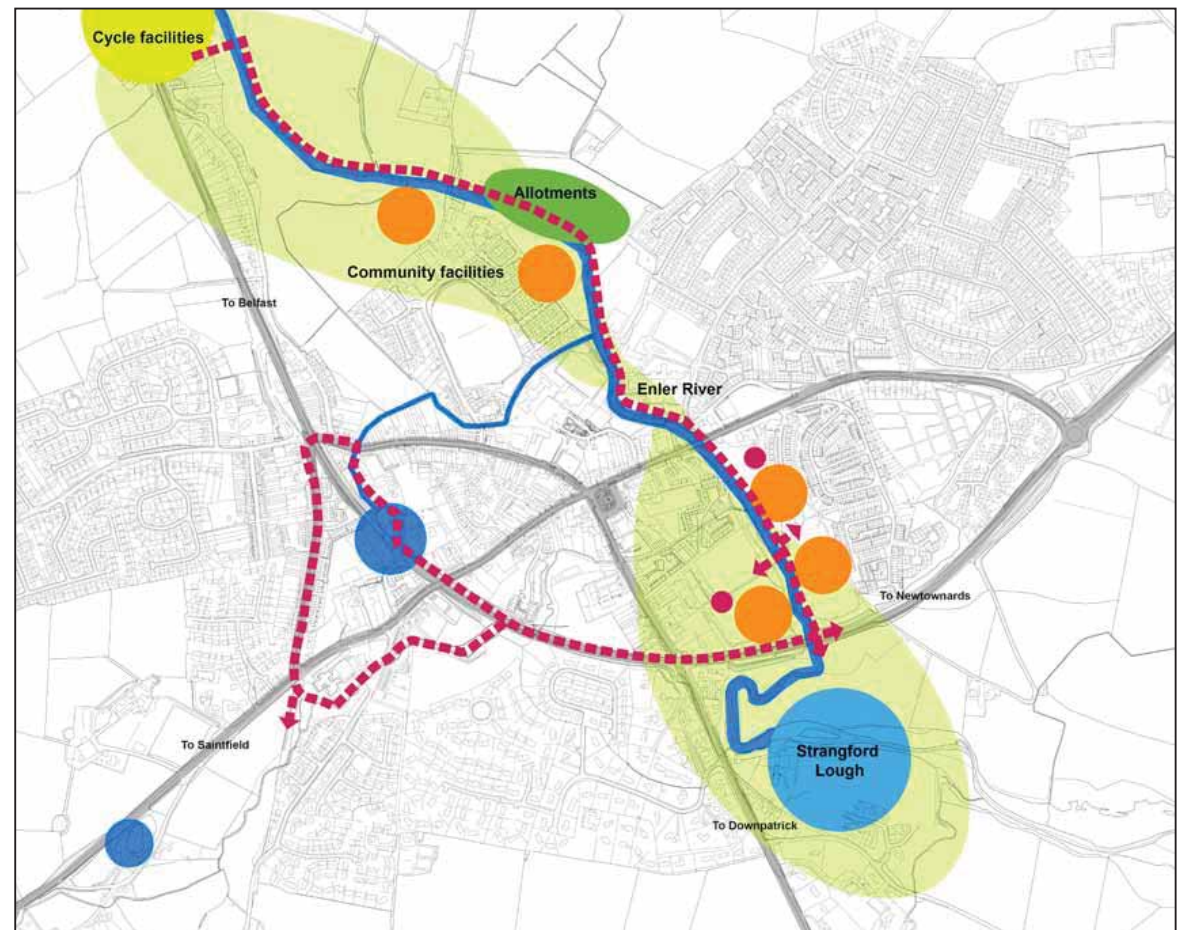
Comber Heritage Concept

3. Improve community, leisure and recreation services and facilities

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

Key Initiatives:

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



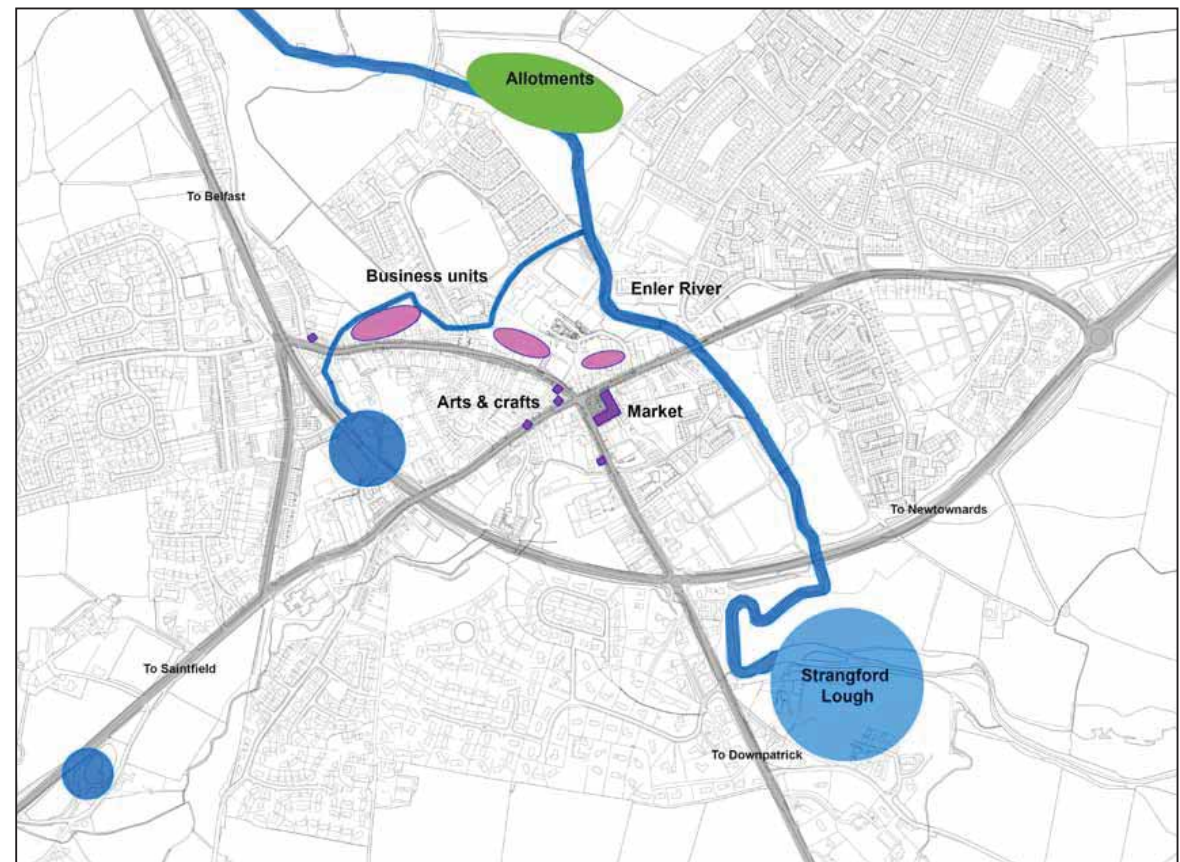
Comber Leisure and Recreation Concept

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

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

Key Initiatives:

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



Comber Quality Local Goods Concept



Comber Farmers Market

5. MASTERPLAN PROPOSALS

When the regeneration objectives are expressed visually, and consolidated, they provide an exciting illustration of how various individual enhancements can create a hive of activity within the town. It also illustrates how projects can benefit the realisation of more than one regeneration objective, highlighting the inter-relationship between many of the objectives.

The backbone of the Comber Masterplan is the creation of a new linear park running through the town, from the current Comber Greenway through to Strangford Lough, with a range of projects and initiatives being encouraged along the way. For the purposes of the Masterplan, this park is being called the 'Enler River Park' and includes several very distinctive sections, which will provide a unique and exciting attraction to both communities and visitors within Comber.

The Masterplan which follows focuses on the key sections as follows:

Town Centre

Enler River Park (Country Section)

Enler River Park (Urban Section)

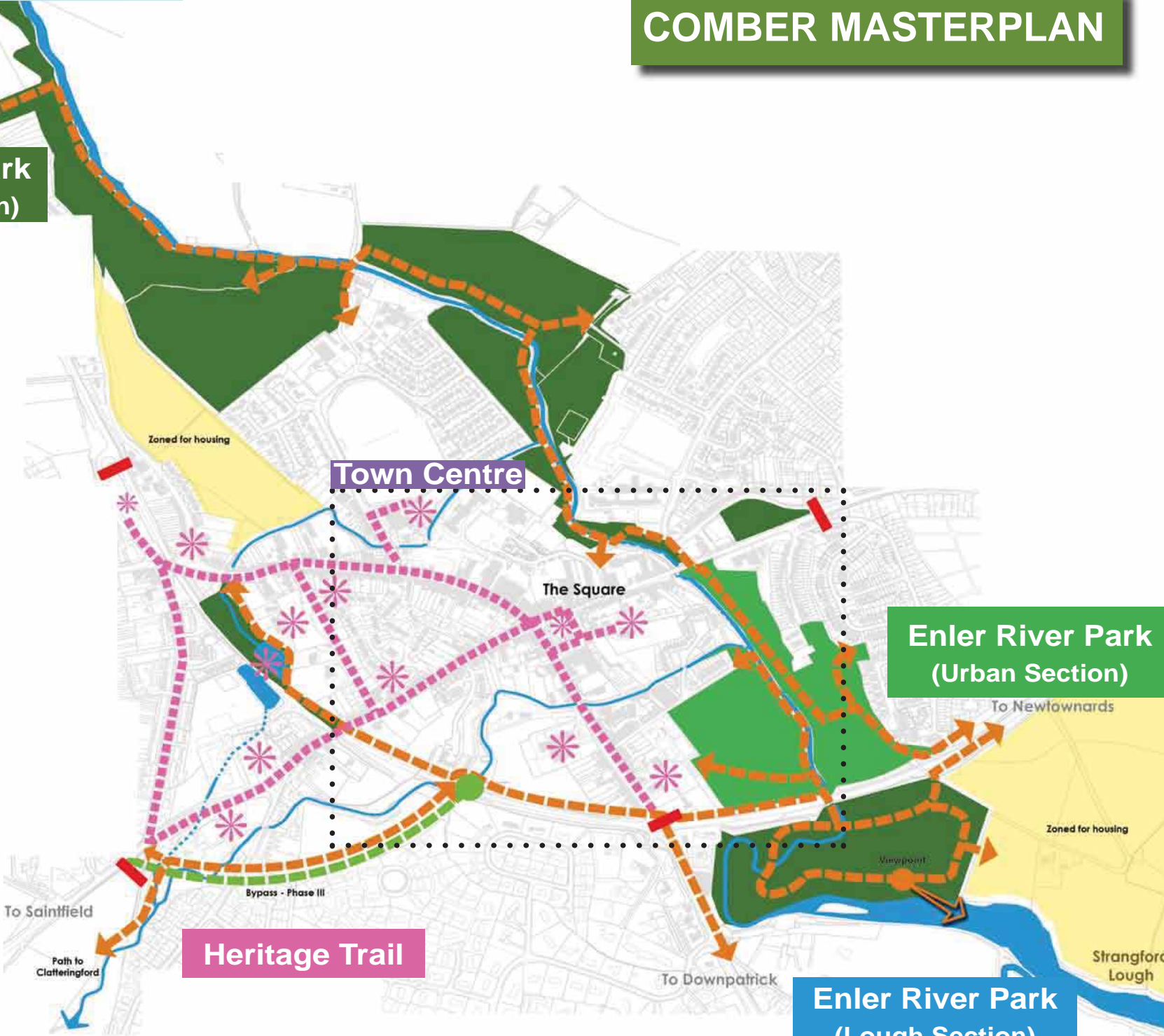
Enler River Park (Lough Section)

COMBER MASTERPLAN

Greenway
To Belfast
Park & Ride

Park and Ride

Enler River Park (Country Section)



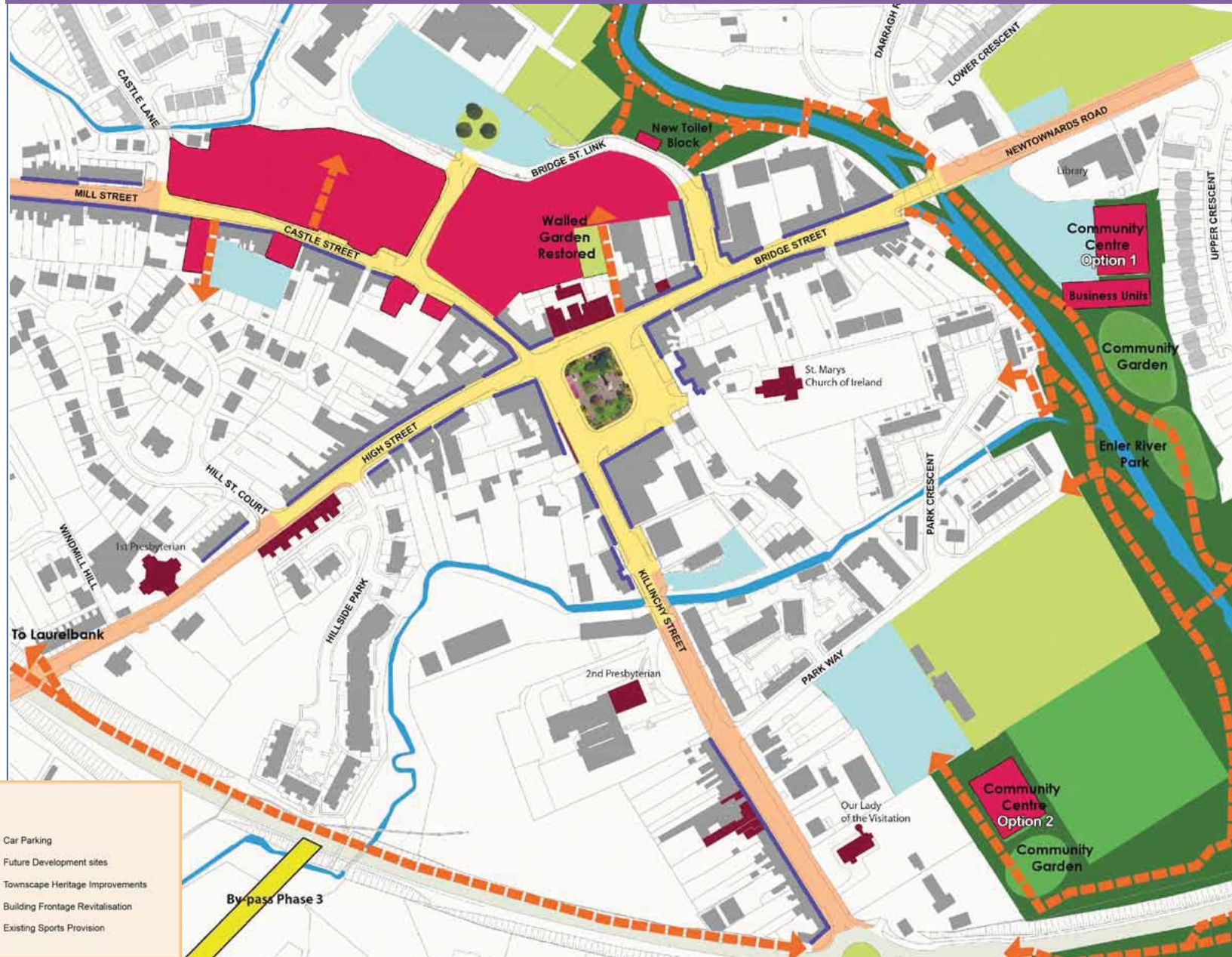
Key

- Town Gateways
- Heritage Trail
- Pedestrian / Cycle Linkages
- Bypass - Phase III

Heritage Trail

Enler River Park (Lough Section)

Town Centre



Key

- | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| | Public Realm Phase 1 | | Car Parking |
| | Public Realm Extended | | Future Development sites |
| | By-pass Phase 3 | | Townscape Heritage Improvements |
| | Pedestrian / Cycle Linkages | | Building Frontage Revitalisation |
| | Enler River Park | | Existing Sports Provision |
| | Community Space | | |

Town Centre

The Town Centre is the heart and soul of Comber. The primary aim is to create a town centre that is visually attractive to residents, businesses and visitors, whilst also improving the overall accessibility to everyone. Building on the positive qualities of the Town Centre, the Masterplan presents a range of measures which will help create a viable town centre with successful retailers, busy cafes and a sense of heritage and character which will be unique to Comber.

Key Elements:

Enhancing the townscape quality

1. The current public realm and town centre Wi-Fi enhancements will act as a regeneration catalyst and improve the vitality of the Town Centre. This is great starting point for the Masterplan to build upon.
2. Shop/building frontage revitalisation scheme to complement the improvements to the streetscape. This will improve the physical appearance of fatigued buildings along the main routes. Although Comber has not been designated as a Conservation Area, it does have a very strong character, which has been recognised by the designation of two Townscape Character Areas. It is important to retain and enhance the historic character and funding should be explored to preserve and enhance assets of architectural and historic importance.

Utilising Comber's cultural and historical character

3. Comber currently has a Heritage Trail, however there are many more features that could be promoted. There may be the potential to create a number of heritage trails which focus on different aspects of the historical and cultural heritage, which should include areas such as the Comber Dams. This could involve the inclusion of interpretation panels and historic imagery throughout the route(s). Indeed the natural heritage could be explored in conjunction with the creation of the Enler River Park Lough Section.
4. A strategy should be implemented to improve the sense of arrival in Comber through inclusion of improved entrance/welcome signage.
5. Laurelbank and Comber Dams have great potential to provide a quality space for both visitors and local people. These areas should be restored and used to enhance Comber's cultural heritage.
6. Restoration of the walled garden to the rear of The Georgian House.

Parking and Accessibility

7. Town Centre Traffic Assessment – Traffic management was a key issue identified throughout the masterplanning process. A further dedicated study or review of the 2013 Traffic Management Report (prepared by URS on behalf of Ards Borough Council) will be required to develop a strategy which rationalises traffic flow through the Town Centre, particularly at Castle Street and The Square.
8. Development of backland sites - The Masterplan would encourage development to take place on Castle Street to further utilise the lands to the rear of the shop units. This mixed use scheme could include a range of uses from commercial to residential. This would also provide the opportunity to create wider pedestrian footpaths along this section of Castle Street.
9. Increased car parking provision by including additional parking at the major development sites. Shared car parking should be encouraged between public buildings such as the future community centre, as this is likely to be in close proximity to the Town Centre core. A parking strategy should be prepared to the requirements and strategy for future car parking. This is likely to become even more important given the potential for Comber's population to increase and also the envisaged increase in use of the Town Centre. Pedestrian connections and signage to/from the car parks should also be addressed in this strategy.
10. Implementation of the Comber by-pass Phase 3 - This will reduce the need for traffic to enter the Town Centre when travelling from the Saintfield/Carryduff area through to Newtownards, reducing congestion in the Town Centre.

The vision for the Town Centre



Westport, County Mayo



Artist's impression of Comber public realm enhancements

* Indicative images

Enler River Park (Country Section)

One of the core themes of the Comber Masterplan is the creation of a linear park, stretching from the current Comber Greenway through the Town Centre and on to Strangford Lough. This will require the extension of the Comber Greenway to the Town Centre and beyond. This park will pass through several distinct sections which will be brought to life through innovative lighting, public art/sculptures and enhanced by a variety of recreational and community uses.

The Country Section of Enler River Park will run from the end of the Comber Greenway to Comber Town Centre, utilising the existing pedestrian walkways alongside the Enler River, as it enters the Town. This section of the River Park is rural in character with a large part of the land lying outside the settlement limits. Therefore, it is important to encourage future projects and initiatives which are sensitive to this environment. The following package of projects and initiatives would help form this part of the Enler River Park:

Key Elements:

1. Extension to the Comber Greenway from its current terminus through to the Town Centre. Early engagement with landowners and a feasibility study have been conducted with regards to a provisional route. The suggestion is to stick closely to the banks of the River Enler. The pathway would be designed for safe shared use by pedestrians, cyclists and anglers. The next action is to continue negotiations with landowners and delivery agencies/funders.
2. Construction of a Park and Share facility at the current entrance to the Greenway. This facility would negate the problem caused by commuters parking in the Town Centre, freeing car parking capacity for shoppers and visitors. This new facility would double as a car park for those using the Greenway and also provide services such as toilets/ cycle parking and potentially, bicycle rental.
3. Implementation of a range of community initiatives including community woodlands, allotments, polytunnels, rustic play areas and fishing stands. This area should be guided by a site specific masterplan which would be developed through engagement with local communities and potential user groups.

The vision for the Enler River Park (Country Section)



Woodland walks



Community allotments



Fishing stands



Natural play parks



Nature trails

* Indicative images

Enler River Park (Urban Section)

The Urban Section of the Enler River Park is largely made up of the lands between Newtownards Road and the Comber by-pass, which includes the area known as ‘The Muckers’. The aim here is to ensure that a linkage is created through the vacant lands adjacent to the Enler River, which would instantly improve accessibility between this part of the River Park and the Town Centre. This linkage should be encouraged in any future development scheme for this site and ideally would be utilised for a new community centre with the potential for additional business/start up units. This area would be enhanced as the community hub of Comber, with the Library and Leisure Centre already located there. Moving southwards towards “The Muckers”, the community aspect is continued by providing a range of leisure and recreation facilities to accommodate a range of age groups. The western side of the Enler River includes the sporting facilities, which should be upgraded to provide all-weather facilities. It is important to fully exploit the potential for walkways and cycleway throughout this area, to encourage wellbeing, but also to provide an accessible community area.

Key Elements:

1. Provision of community centre - there are several sites which have the potential to accommodate a new community centre. A site selection and feasibility study should be prepared to guide this project
2. A site specific masterplan should be prepared to guide the future development of this area. This would require engagement with a range of stakeholders to ensure that the required mix of facilities is identified. The mix of the following components should be considered: community garden, outdoor gym, walking/running trails, BMX/Skate Park, improved sporting facilities

The vision for the Emler River Park (Urban Section)



Newlands Community Centre, Wellington, New Zealand



Modern play equipment



Nature lookouts



BMX/skate facilities



High quality play parks



Community garden

* Indicative images

Enler River Park (Lough Section)

The third section of the Enler River Park is being described as the Lough Section and extends from the Comber by-pass towards Strangford Lough. Creating better linkages to this area will help establish Comber as the 'Gateway to Strangford'. This area has a strong natural heritage and has great potential to showcase the nature which lies in close proximity to Comber Town Centre. Any interventions in this area will need to be extremely sensitive to the natural heritage, as Strangford Lough is protected by European designations.

Key Elements:

- Inclusion of a small harbour to enable boats to interact with Strangford Lough – possibly nature or tourism related. The development of this project would need to give due consideration to the tidal nature of the area
- Implementation of a site specific masterplan for the wider Enler River Park Lough Section, to include the following components could be incorporated within the area: connections to the new development, lookout points, sculptures, nature areas, boardwalks, picnic areas, trim trails and interpretation panels

The vision for the Enler River Park (Lough Section)



Network of lough side walking routes



Boardwalks



Bird watching on Strangford Lough



Exploit the stunning natural assets of Strangford

6. IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

The Masterplan sets out a comprehensive programme of proposals and improvements that will transform the prospects for Comber over the next 15-20 years. Private sector investment needs to be encouraged and it is essential that statutory bodies and the Council play their part, by seeking the right mix of development and by securing the high quality development expected by the Masterplan.

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

Management

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

This Masterplan is being published during a unique period of transition for Local Government in Northern Ireland. The new Council will have much wider

powers including regeneration, community and spatial planning and off street parking, which establishes the Council as the key delivery agent for the vast majority of projects. However, the Council will need assistance from other statutory bodies, the business community and the community/voluntary sector. Each of these stakeholders must support the regeneration objectives for Comber and work together to see them delivered. There is a need for an emphasis on public services and resources being focussed and prioritised in a co-ordinated way in improving the physical, social and economic well-being of the community. Therefore, all bodies should be working in partnership towards achieving an overarching regeneration agenda set by the Council with reference to the Masterplan. The Comber Town Masterplan is a working document and should be reviewed on a five yearly basis, to re-examine the ongoing regeneration needs of the Town Centre.

Key stakeholders

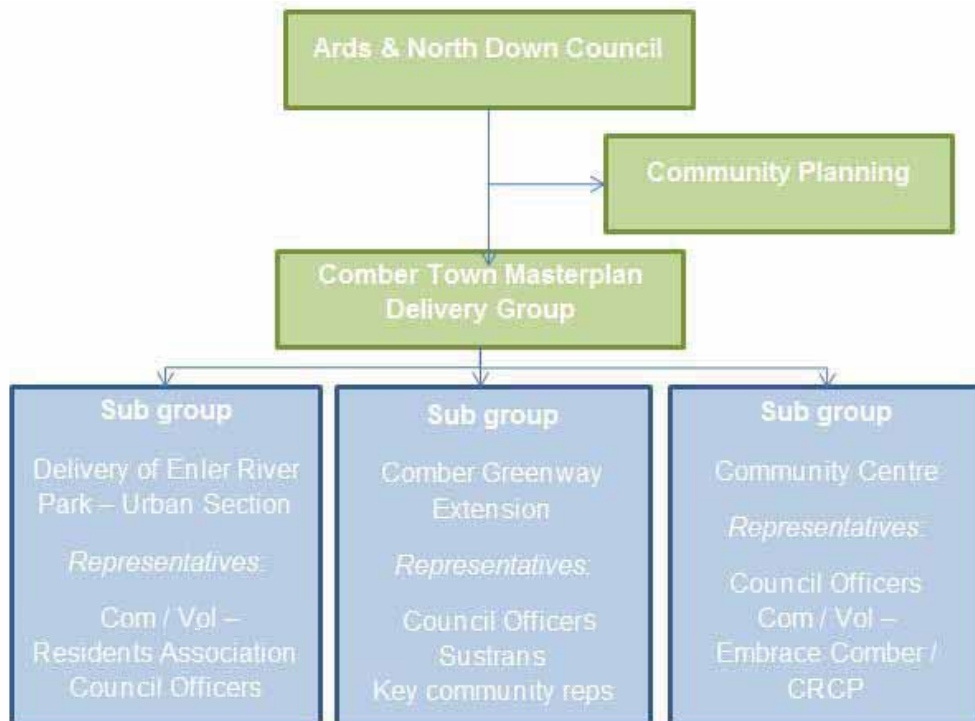
The Comber Town Masterplan Delivery Team led by the Council, will take ownership of the Masterplan. The following stakeholders will act as a driving force:

- Ards and North Down Council will play a key role in the delivery of the Masterplan, particularly when the role of urban regeneration and community development passes to local government
- DRD Transport NI is the sole road authority in Northern Ireland. A function of Transport NI is to ensure that the public road network is managed, maintained and developed. There are significant enhancements to the public road network within this Masterplan. Transport NI must be fully consulted and assist with its implementation
- The Business Community will be important partners in both the delivery and success of the Masterplan, therefore it is important that Council and all government bodies work closely with them
- Community and Voluntary Sector: Comber has several community and voluntary organisations who have a continued interest in the regeneration of Comber, who's

input could be beneficial in the successful delivery of this Masterplan

- Other specialist agencies – Sustrans for example, could fall into this group of stakeholders as their interest is very specific to walking and cycling. They could play a key role in the delivery of the Comber Greenway extension
- Private developers/landowners will be key partners in the delivery of many of the proposals within the Masterplan. The Council and all government bodies will continue to work closely with private developers to ensure the implementation of the Masterplan

Below is an indicative structure, including stakeholders which could be utilised as a delivery mechanism for the Masterplan.



Funding

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

Action Plan and timeframes

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

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

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

All proposals contained within the Action Plan, will be subject to **further consultation, design and refinement.**

7. ACTION PLAN

NIEA	Northern Ireland Environment Agency
TNI	Transport NI
NITB	Northern Ireland Tourist Board
DOE	Department of the Environment
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Key Projects and Proposals		Priority Level	Timeframe for Delivery	Key Stakeholders and Delivery Agents
1	THE TOWN CENTRE	High	Short	
		Medium	Medium	
		Low	Long	
<i>Townscape Improvements</i>				
1a	Townscape Heritage Improvements and building frontage revitalisation scheme	High	Short	Local Council, DOE, Private Investors
1b	Public realm enhancements	High	Short	Local Council, Private Investors, TNI, DOE
1c	Redevelopment of key opportunity sites/encouragement of business/start-up units	High	Short - Long	Private Investors
1d	Heritage Trail and Gateway Strategy	Medium	Short	Local Council, Community/Voluntary Sector, NITB
1e	Extending and improving the heritage trails to exploit the abundance of built and natural heritage	High	Short – Long	Local Council, NIEA, NITB, Community/Voluntary Sector
1f	Restoration of walled garden	Medium	Medium – Long	Local Council, Private Investors, NIEA
1g	Restoration of Laurelbank and review of the requirement for a feasibility study of the dams	High	Short	Local Council, NIEA
<i>Accessibility and Movement</i>				
1h	Town Centre traffic assessment	High	Short	TNI, Local Council
1i	Town Centre car parking strategy	High	Medium	Local Council, TNI, Private Investors
1j	Improved cycling and pedestrian links in and around the town exploiting the benefits of the new linear greenway through the town	High	Short	Local Council, Sustrans, Community/Voluntary Sector, TNI
1k	Implementation of the Comber By-Pass Phase 3	High	Long	TNI

Key Projects and Proposals		Priority Level	Timeframe for Delivery	Key Stakeholders and Delivery Agents
2 THE ENLER RIVER PARK (COUNTRY)		High	Short	
		Medium	Medium	
		Low	Long	
2a	Comber Greenway extension to town centre	High	Short	Local Council, Sustrans, Community/Voluntary Sector, TNI
2b	Promotion of community woodland planting, allotments, polytunnels, rustic play areas and fishing stands to help create the riverside park environment (conceptual masterplan and feasibility study would help guide the future development of this area)	High	Medium	Local Council, Community/Voluntary Sector, Private Investors
2c	New park and ride facility to include parking, bicycle rental and services.	High	Medium	TNI, Local Council, Sustrans
3 THE ENLER RIVER PARK (URBAN)				
3a	Creation of an urban park to include a range of facilities and attractions for visitors and local communities – to include BMX track, new outdoor fitness facilities and walking/cycle trails to help create the riverside park environment (conceptual masterplan and feasibility study would help guide the future development of this area)	High	Short	Local Council, Community/Voluntary Sector, NIHE
3b	Provision of new community centre and garden – site selection/options appraisal and feasibility study	High	Short	Local Council, Community/Voluntary Sector, NIHE
4 THE ENLER RIVER PARK (LOUGH)				
4a	Extension of the linear park towards Strangford Lough to include facilities such as a small harbour, look-out points, interpretation boards, boardwalks and trim trails– feasibility study and site masterplan	Medium	Short - Medium	Local Council, DOE, Community/Voluntary Sector
5 PARK & RIDE				
5a	New park and ride facility	Medium	Medium	TNI, Local Council, Sustrans
5b	Links to Comber Greenway	Medium	Medium	TNI, Local Council, Sustrans
5c	Toilets and cycling facilities	Medium	Medium	TNI, Local Council, Sustrans

