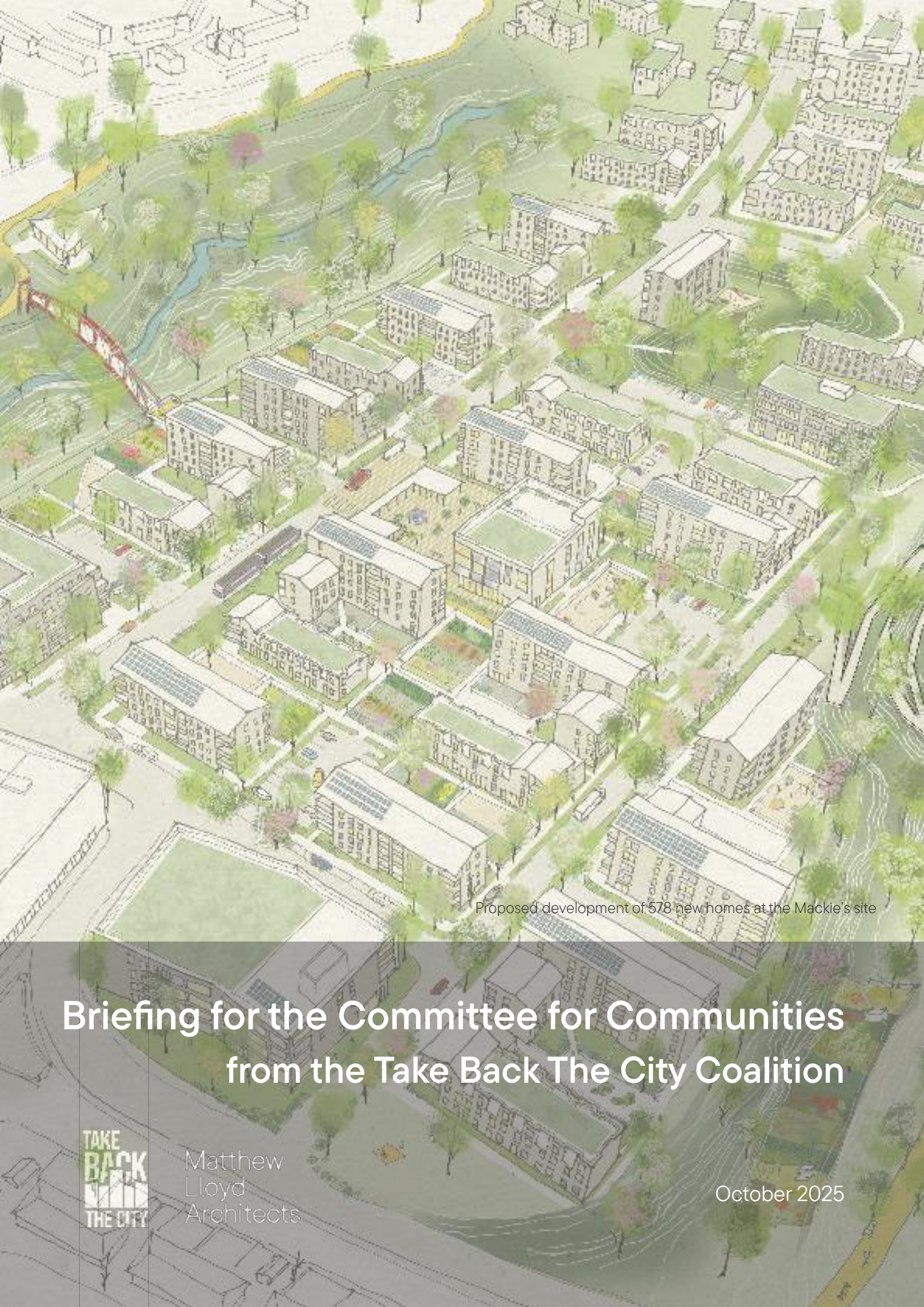




Proposed development of 578 new homes at the Mackie's site

Briefing for the Committee for Communities from the Take Back The City Coalition



Matthew
Lloyd
Architects

October 2025

About Take Back The City



Wild flowers planted by local people at the Mackie's site



PPR and local people have planted seeds across the Greenway



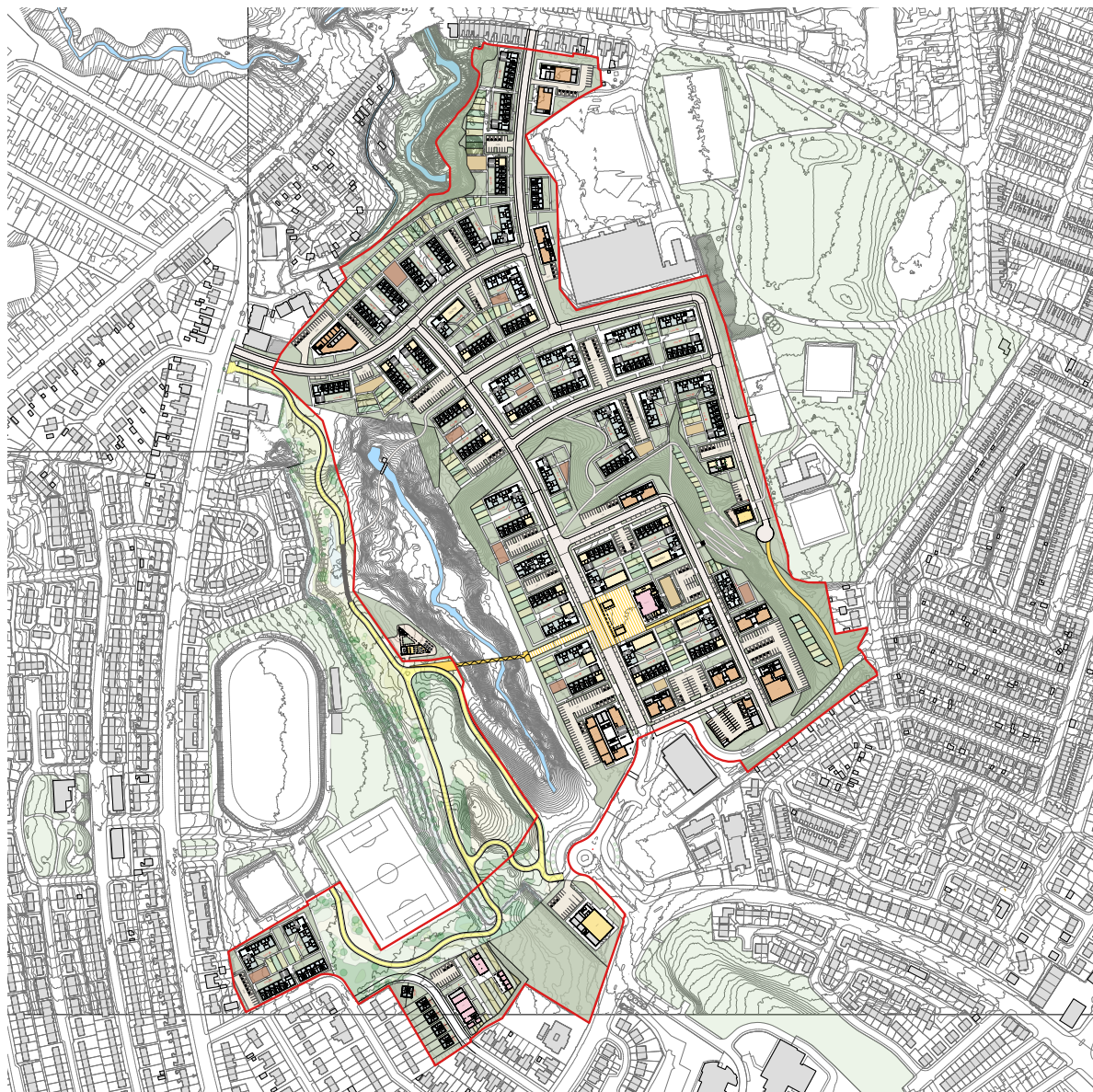
Mackie's event hosted by the Town and Country Planning Association

The **Take Back the City** (TBTC) campaign was formed in 2019 to develop sustainable solutions to Belfast's housing crisis. We are a coalition which includes families in housing need supported by experts in architecture, urban planning, housing policy, technology, communications, permaculture, human rights and equality. We believe we can build a better Belfast - a city that's not divided by barriers, where everyone has a home.

Coalition members include the **Town and Country Planning Association**, **Queen's University Belfast**, Professor Kelvin MacDonald, Director of Studies in Land Economy at Christ's College, Cambridge and Specialist Adviser on planning policy to the **House of Commons Levelling Up**, Housing, Communities Select Committee, **GROW NI**, **Gairdín an Phobail**, **Forthspring Inter Community Group** and a number of developers. The campaign is co-ordinated by Participation and the Practice of Rights **PPR**, a community organising human rights NGO founded in 2007 by the late Inez McCormack. Our work is supported by the Oak Foundation's Housing and Homelessness Fund and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Fund.

Our focus is the use of vacant, publicly owned land to address the continuing political failures which have led to the current housing crisis. We work to address policies and practices in housing which reinforce sectarianism and segregation, worsen climate change, ignore homelessness by massaging statistics and prioritise a 'private sector first' agenda for housing.

Housing Need



Mackie's Proposed Full Masterplan

At present, as the Committee will be aware, there are **49,129 families on the social housing waiting list**, two thirds of whom are accepted as Full Duty Applicants.

In Belfast, at end March 2025 there were 13,524 households (comprising at least 23,488 people) on the social housing waiting list (up 3.5% from 13,060 six months before). 9,975 (74%) Belfast households on the waiting list were officially recognised as Full Duty Applicants. Of these, 23.6% (2,354 FDA households) were in North Belfast, while 35.4% were in West (3,533 FDA households). Belfast's homeless households included at least 6,031 homeless children under 18. **This level of child homelessness is unprecedented in Belfast:** six months before it had stood at 5,780 children.

While the Department for Communities has recently published its Housing Supply Strategy, and the issue of 'more social, affordable and sustainable' housing has been recognised as one of the key priorities within the agreed Programme for Government, it remains the case that only around 950 social homes are built every year, well short of the Department's targets. Over the next few years more than 6,000 social homes are projected to be built in Northern Ireland, but to reach this level, the rate of social house building would need to more than double in a very short space of time. Furthermore, it is not clear over the same period how many social homes will be lost (through e.g. right to buy or demolition), and how many of the total number of projected homes include existing properties in need of refurbishment (rather than new builds).

Separate analysis by PPR of the provision of social housing according to need undertaken using Census Data¹ has shown that there are many deprived areas in Northern Ireland which have a lower level of social housing relative to need than may be expected. Therefore the issue of where social housing is built remains critical, to address objective need in line with the state's legal obligations rather than to accommodate political preference.

¹ [Analysis | A New Look at Housing: Mapping Housing Need Using Census Data | PPR](#)



Aerial View of Mackie's



Birds-eye view of Mackie's from the southeast



Birds-eye view of Mackie's looking north-east

How is Take Back the City working to resolve housing need?



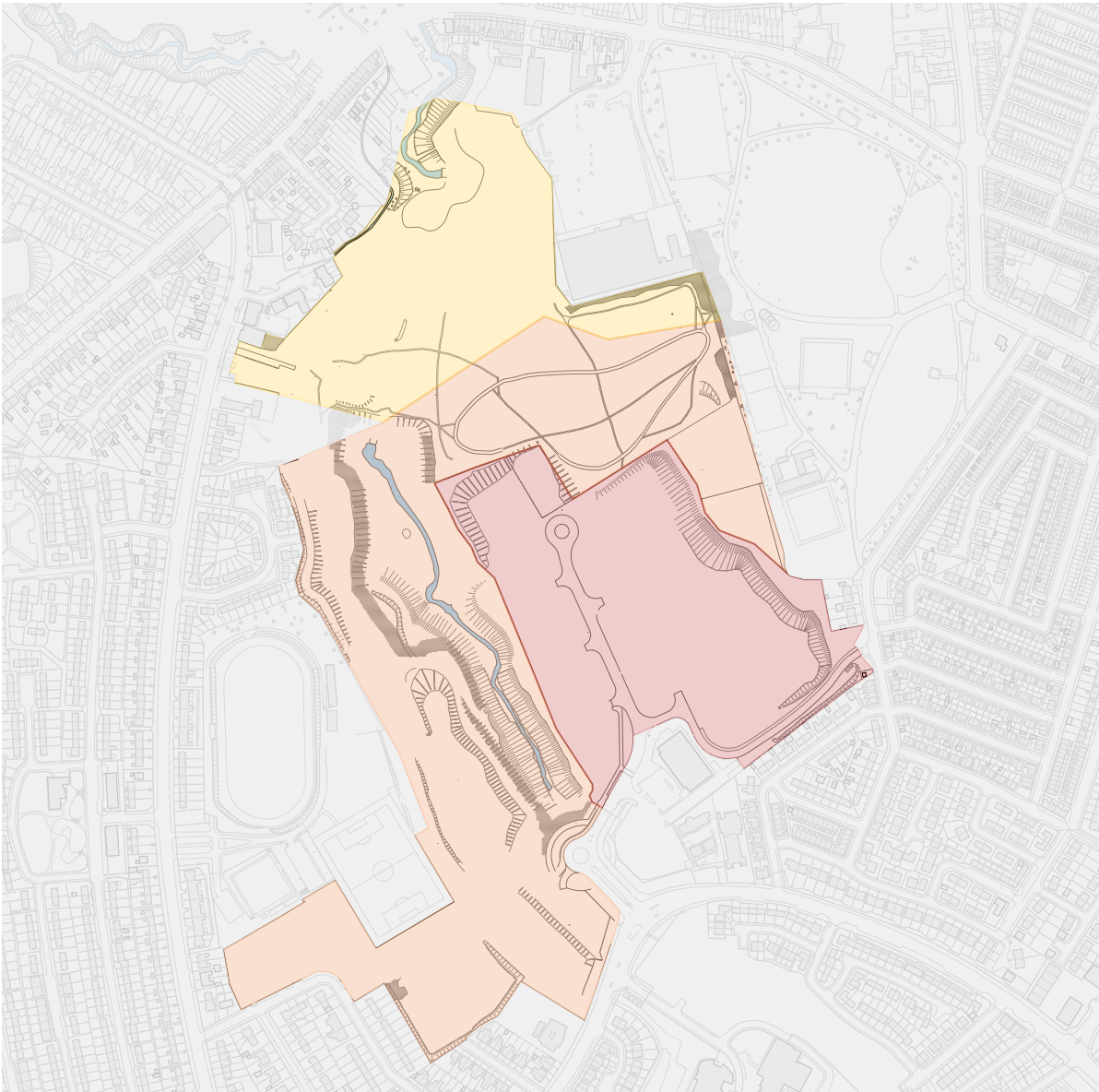
Take Back the City campaigners have always adopted a human rights based approach to the right to housing: one which considers how to secure human rights guarantees in a way which ensures the participation and empowerment of those who are directly impacted by housing rights issues. While the initial focus of housing campaigns was on specific aspects of the right to housing, such as habitability, inspired by activists in South Africa, housing campaigners started to consider land justice and how this informed the availability and accessibility of housing. This approach was supported by the fact that that Article 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) requires all States Parties, including the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (and its devolved governments) to fulfil economic, social and cultural rights to the 'maximum of their available resources', resources being understood to include publicly owned land.²

Therefore in 2019, homeless families began to photomap areas of vacant land, large and small, all over the city of Belfast. This led to a wider project, undertaken with Queen's University Belfast, to identify all the vacant publicly owned land across the City, which was later developed into a publicly available map, available at <https://www.takebackthecity.ie>.

By far the largest and most obvious site for homes, given the levels of need in the nearby areas is the Mackie's site in west Belfast.

² We have recently provided an analysis of these issues to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, to inform his forthcoming report on the relationship between land and the availability of housing. [PPR Library | PPR's response to the UN Special Rapporteur's call for input on land and the right to adequate housing](#)

Why Mackie's?



Current land ownerships at Mackie's

- Braidwater private ownership
- Department for Communities (DfC) Ownership
- Invest Northern Ireland (INI) Ownership

The former Mackie's site in west Belfast is a vacant, majority publicly owned **25 acre site in the area of the highest housing need in Northern Ireland**. Its ownership is currently split three ways between a private company, Braidwater, the Department for Communities and Invest NI. It has **lain empty in the 22 years** since the demolition of the Mackie's factory, while housing need in the area has continued to grow.

In 2022, the Department for Communities and Belfast City Council decided to allocate the land at Mackie's away from housing and rezoned it away from Economy zoning to Parkland to facilitate the provision of a Greenway, funded through PEACE money.

The remaining Invest NI land is zoned for industry. In the last 22 years, there have been 10 expressions of interest in the land at Mackie's, none of which has resulted in the expected provision of industrial facilities or the arrival of big tech. In fact, through Freedom of Information requests, we know that in the last 24 months (as at February 2025), there have been no expressions of interest in the land for industrial use.

In 2022, Take Back the City launched a first of its kind **community-led 'City of the Future' competition** for a masterplan on the Mackie's site, to demonstrate the potential of the land for plugging the gap in social housing. At even a conservative estimate, the land could accommodate up to 950 homes, which represents about a third of the housing need in the local area.



Competition Winning Masterplan by Matthew Lloyd Architects in 2022



Take Back The City winner Matthew Lloyd with local people



Take Back The City Public Consultation Event

Why Mackie's?



The **'City of the Future' competition** brief was designed and developed with the participation of homeless families who identified a set of principles through which the land at Mackie's should be developed and any entries to the competition evaluated. These were: co-creation in design, promotion of local employment and skills, a healthy place, an inclusive place, a sustainable place and self-managed community. TBTC judges shortlisted eleven designs, following which Take Back the City undertook a 6 month consultation on the designs entered into the competition. Voting on designs opened on 18 October 2022, with a weekend-long open exhibition of designs at **The MAC**, Belfast. The full designs were viewable on a dedicated competition page on the Take Back The City website and people were encouraged to rate and comment on them. Overall, more than 3,600 people visited the submissions page, leaving over 1,000 online ratings along with 360+ comments, the vast majority of which were positive.

Throughout winter 2022-23 and spring 2023 social media posts as well as traditional media articles were used to draw attention to the competition, and people were encouraged to engage and vote. The shortlist was introduced at 6 events with around 175 participants, including those in housing stress, where people were encouraged to vote online. At another 3 events with around 70 participants, the full set of shortlist boards (2 per design) were set up so that people could view them close up and comment, either by flip chart or A4 comment sheet. TBTC also had individual meetings with a range of local organisations.

A judging panel consisting of experts in planning, architecture, development, sustainability, tech and homeless families selected London-based **Matthew Lloyd Architects** (MLA) as the eventual winner.

Why Mackie's?

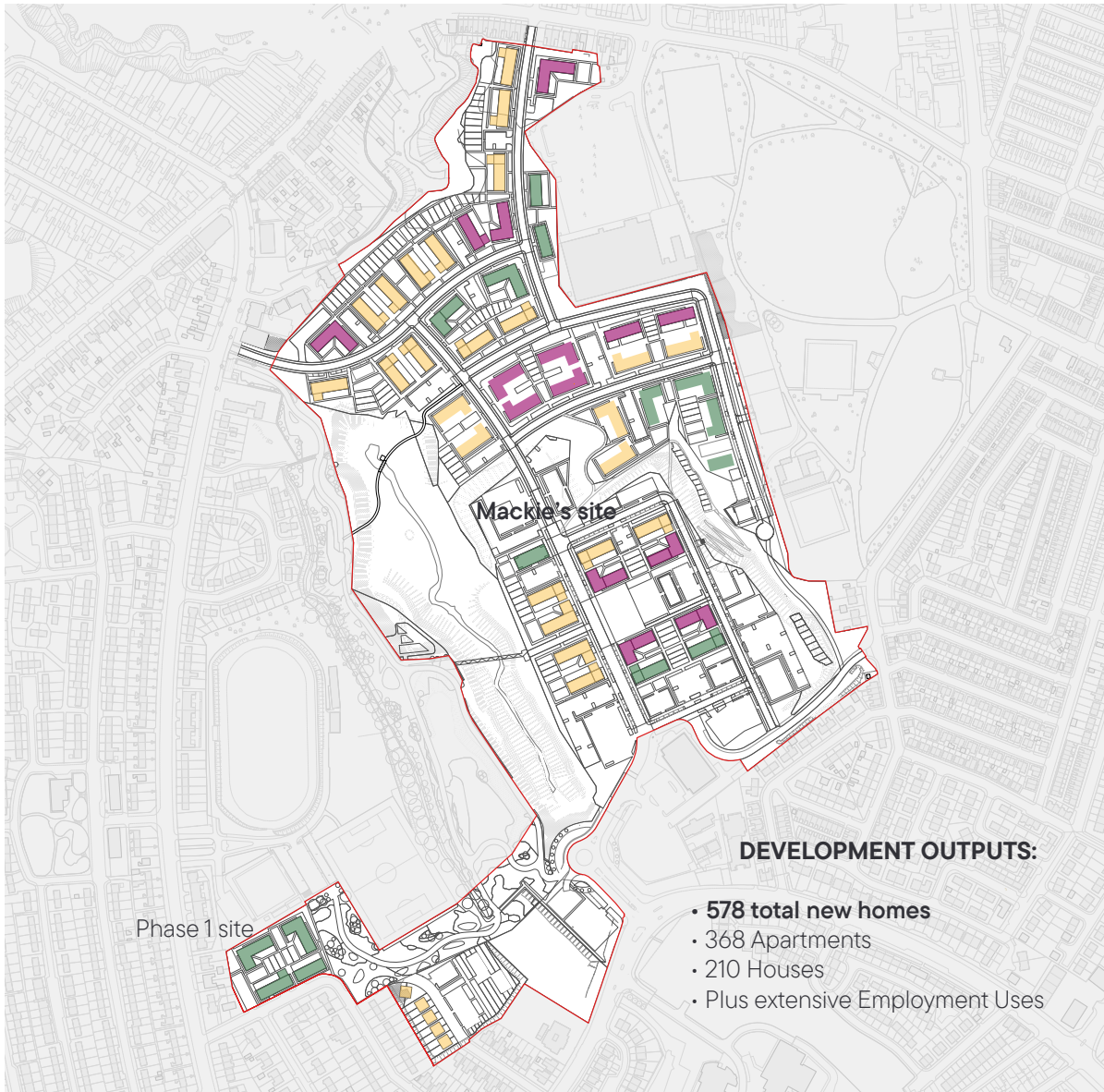


Matthew Lloyd Architects and PPR have subsequently gone on to develop a full masterplan for the site which was submitted to **Belfast City Council's planning service for Pre-Application Discussion**, at which point no objections were received from any statutory consultees, and then moved to **Proposal of Application Notice** stage.

In September 2024, Take Back the City held a full day consultation on the plans, advertised beforehand through local newspaper advertisements, a leaflet drop to 2,800 homes and a door-knocking campaign to reach 500 homes in and around the site. Over the consultation period 1,500 people visited the Take Back the City website to view the plans. 130 people completed a feedback questionnaire on the plans. One person contacted us by e-mail, to express concerns for the bat population. The independently analysed [consultation report](#) found that:

- 91% of respondents thought that the Mackie's site should be developed in some way
- 86% of people thought that the site should be used to address housing need
- 75% of respondents agreed that our Take Back the City masterplan should be developed, with the majority of people supporting the housing mix in the proposal as well as the space allocated for employment space.

We currently have 1,200 signatures in support of zoning the entire Mackie's site for housing.



A viable mix of housing tenures proposed at the Mackie's site

- Shared Ownership or low-cost starter homes
- Social Housing - Affordable Rent
- Private Sale

How has Take Back the City engaged with public bodies & elected representatives?



Proposed **Phase 1** Site Plan at Springfield Parade



Proposed **Phase 1** overhead axonometric view



Proposed **Phase 1** Ground Floor Plan

An initial **Phase 1** plan for the development of a small section of the south-western part of the Mackie's site is now also underway, with the possibility of accommodating **35 brand new homes**.

Over the course of the campaign, homeless families involved in the **Take Back the City** campaign have engaged and attempted to engage with multiple public bodies, departments, Councillors, MLAs and Ministers. Since 2023, homeless families have met with elected representatives of Alliance, PBP, SDLP and Sinn Féin. We were not able to secure a meeting with the Greens, UUP or DUP. We have also met with NIHE, Belfast City Council and NIFHA.

We have provided information on the Take Back the City Masterplan to Invest NI, DfC and DoE and requested to meet both with Permanent Secretaries and Ministers, depending on the status of Stormont.

The incumbent Minister for Communities has twice declined to meet with homeless families, most recently in January 2025. The previous Sinn Féin Minister for Communities also declined twice to meet with homeless families.

The current CEO of Invest NI has declined to meet with homeless families to discuss the Take Back the City Masterplan. The previous Minister for Economy, Conor Murphy declined twice to meet with homeless families.

During the summer 2024 Proposal of Application Notice consultation which requires planning applicants to contact local elected representatives, the PBP expressed their support for the plans. The DUP responded in writing that they "were totally opposed to homes on Mackie's." Alliance, Sinn Féin, and SDLP did not respond. It should be noted that the UK General Election was called at the time that TBTC requested comment.

How has Take Back the City engaged with public bodies & elected representatives?



'Home' Phase 1 concept drawing

We would be pleased to provide the Committee with any further information as required. We would ask the Committee to consider the following next steps:

- hearing directly from homeless families in the Take Back the City campaign about why they support the use of vacant public land for social housing and why the masterplan for Mackie's makes practical sense;
- asking the NIHE, Department for Communities, Belfast City Council, Department for Economy and Invest NI to provide information on their engagement with the Take Back the City campaign;
- requesting a response on the Take Back the City Masterplan from both the Ministers for Communities and Economy respectively, as the Departments holding – or sponsoring those who hold vacant land on Mackie's in a housing crisis;
- asking the Ministers for Communities and Economy to meet with homeless families alongside Committee members and members of the Take Back the City coalition to hear more about their plans for the Mackie's site;
- asking the Ministers for Communities and Economy why they have failed to take into account the views of homeless families and 1,200 people who support the Take Back the City campaign as to the disposal of a public asset for public good.

