

Special City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 23rd August, 2023

HYBRID MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Nic Bhranair (Chairperson);
Alderman Lawlor;
Councillors Canavan, S. Douglas,
Duffy, Flynn, Garrett, Gormley, Lyons,
Maskey, F. McAteer, McCabe, McDonough-Brown,
McDowell, I. McLaughlin and Walsh.

Also in attendance: Councillor T. Brooks.

In attendance: Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development;
Ms. L. Toland: Senior Manager – Economy;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Ms. S. O'Regan, Employability and Skills Manager;
Ms. C. Persic, Development Manager; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor McMullan.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Presentations

Sustrans - Low Traffic Neighbourhoods

The Chairperson introduced Ms. Z. Hawa, Ms A. Madden and Ms. P. Mansour, representing Sustrans, to the Committee and they were admitted to the meeting.

Ms. Madden provided an overview of the work which had been undertaken by Sustrans in relation to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN).

She advised that the Connectivity, Active, and Sustainable Travel Working Group draft action plan, which was currently out for consultation, included co-design, place based active travel initiatives to encourage walking, wheeling and cycling, together with a goal to develop and implement two exemplar initiatives in line with the Eastern Transport Plan (previously the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan).

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She highlighted that Belfast regularly appeared in the top 5 most congested cities in the UK, costing the Belfast economy £102m in 2022, and more than a third of Belfast households did not have a car, yet suffered the impact of air and noise pollution, road safety concerns and pavement parking in their neighbourhoods.

She outlined the transformative powers and benefits of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods in creating modal shifts, via:

- An alternative, holistic approach;
- Local trips would be walked instead of driven;
- Every property could still be accessed by car, but they might have to travel a bit further;
- Multiple modal filters would make it impossible to drive straight through the area, as each property accessed from 1 boundary road. Lots of streets would become quiet and safe to walk / cycle, traffic stays on main roads, which were designed to manage flow and driving short trips becomes less convenient; and
- A public health tool.

Ms. Hawa and Ms. Mansour described how Belfast could approach LTN design through: Street classification; Cell Definition; Filter Placement; Considerations; and Boundary Road Measures but that this must be done in tandem with the Department for Infrastructure, and that DfI will ultimately have the statutory authority to approve, and to deliver LTN's. Ms. Mansour pointed out that Sustrans was undertaking a demonstration project area in the Holylands, working with the residents to redesign the area in a street led survey and a co-design workshop, culminating in a street closure day in September with cycling and walking related activities and installation of temporary design solutions with the community.

The representatives explained the key elements of LTN delivery and highlighted that the success was dependent on looking beyond boundary roads and complementary measures, deep engagement, robust monitoring and communication, prioritising need, and political will.

During discussion, the representatives answered a range of questions in relation to consultation with the Department for Infrastructure and businesses, funding and the process to implement LTNs and its link to the Eastern Transport Plan, the need for buy-in from road users for LTNs to be successful, and the health benefits, together with the need for a school streets initiative in Northern Ireland,

Ms. Madden highlighted the resource research links within the presentation slides and advised that they would welcome any further questions and opportunities to present to the Council on the issue.

The Director of City Regeneration and Development advised that public engagement for the Eastern Transport Plan, which had been presented to the Committee

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in June, would commence on 4th September and Members might wish to provide feedback to the Department for Infrastructure.

She pointed out that the Connectivity, Active, and Sustainable Travel Working Group had been established under the City Development Board of the Belfast Agenda.

She reminded the Committee that the issues raised could be discussed further at the forthcoming All Party Round Table on Connectivity, Active and Sustainable Travel.

After discussion, the Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

European Social Fund Peer Group

The Senior Manager – Economy introduced the item and advised that the European Social Fund (ESF) had been replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). She highlighted the importance of partnership working with the employability and skills service providers across Belfast and confirmed that structures were already in place to support this.

The Chairperson welcomed Mr. A. Irvine, CEO of East Belfast Mission, and Ms. J. Kinnear, CEO of Ashton Community Trust, representing Belfast Works, to the Committee as the ESF Peer Group was no longer operating.

Mr. Irvine provided an overview of the work which had been undertaken by the European Social Fund Peer Group. He advised that, through the UK's membership of the EU from 2014 until 2024, Northern Ireland had received ESF funding (+35% match funding from the Department for the Economy as well as other match funding, including other government departments and local councils) and this funding had enabled the organisations to support over 17,000 local people who were among the most vulnerable in society with support for:

- The unemployed and economically inactive;
- Disabled people;
- Those not in employment, education or training; and
- Community and family support.

He highlighted that the overall strategic aims of the NI ESF Programme 2014 – 2020 were to combat poverty and enhance social inclusion by reducing economic inactivity and increase the skills base of those currently in work and future potential participants in the workforce.

He stated that Grant Thornton's Impact Evaluation of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 reported that 91.5% of respondents had said that the NI ESF had increased their chances of finding employment / undertaking training or education. It also stated that:

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- The NI ESF Programme delivered added value through offering a “wrap around” support approach to cohorts of unemployed people who are particularly distant from the labour market and who have complex needs;
- With 11,690 participants having gained employment, a conservative estimate suggested a wage impact of £212 million across one year; and
- For every €1 of NI ESF funding, an additional £0.77 had been generated in wages in a year.

Mr. Irvine highlighted that the reduction in funding from the ESF Funds 2022/23 (52m) to the UK SP Funds for 2022/23 (25m) was 27m. He described the impact this would have on the sector and the concern that the services would dissolve, impacting 17,168 service users and 1,600 members of staff who provide the support. Further concerns included:

- Competition from Local Authorities moving into ‘Delivery’ rather than supporting Community Programmes;
- UKSPF need to raise their Revenue Funding; and
- NI Assembly needed to ‘enter’ this work which is critical to NI economy.

Ms. Kinnear highlighted the experience of the groups delivering the services such as Ashton Community Trust, East Belfast Mission, Upper Springfield Development Trust, Impact Training and GEMS. She stated that the Groups and the Council needed to work together in partnership to carry out employability and skills services in a co-ordinated way.

She suggested that the Council could play a convening role for UKSPF projects to stop duplication and ensure discussions could happen beyond the first round of UKSPF which ended in March 2025.

She also advised that Belfast Works partners, delivering the Shared Prosperity Fund, would like to be involved with the relevant City Deal discussions, as their funding bid covered the City Deal area.

During discussion, Members raised concerns in relation to the lack of funding for the sector and welcomed further partnership working with the service providers.

After discussion, the Chairperson thanked Mr. Irvine and Ms. Kinnear for their attendance and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Chairperson