

All-Party Working Group on the City Centre

Friday, 8th September, 2023

MEETING OF THE ALL-PARTY WORKING GROUP ON THE CITY CENTRE HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor de Faoite (Chairperson); and
Aldermen McCullough and Rodgers; and
Councillors Groogan, Maskey and Long.

In attendance:
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and
Development;
Mr. S. Leonard, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;
Mr. J. Uprichard, Business and Research Development
Manager ; and
Ms. C. Donnelly, Democratic Services Officer.

Election of Chairperson

The Working Group noted that it was required to elect a Chairperson for the coming year.

Moved by Alderman McCullough,
Seconded by Councillor Maskey, and

Resolved – that Councillor de Faoite be elected to serve as Chairperson to the All-Party Working Group on the City Centre until the date of the Annual Meeting.

Apologies

No apologies for inability to attend were reported.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 3rd March, 2023 were agreed.

Future City Centre Programme

The Working Group considered the undernoted report:

“1 Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with background information on the revised Future City Centre Programme and outline the proposed objectives and measures of success for the city centre.

2. Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- **note the contents of the report;**
- **consider and identify any further objectives that the enclosed Future City Centre Programme needs to address; and**
- **note that the proposed refreshed FCC programme and accompanying monitoring framework will be brought to a future meeting of the City Growth & Regeneration Committee.**

3. Main Report

Belfast remains the economic driver for the region. The Regional Development Strategy 2035 further recognised the need to enhance the distinctive role of the City Centre as the primary retail location in Northern Ireland. The Belfast Local Development Plan highlights that Belfast city centre plays a significant role in the regional economy serving a wide catchment area beyond its plan area boundary.

The city centre is also a regional centre for commerce, culture, tourism, recreation, entertainment, learning and employment. It is the showcase for the city of Belfast and the regional gateway for Northern Ireland, supported by the major transport hubs serving the region.

Our evidence shows that the diversification of the city centre in creating a point of difference by attracting a unique mix of brands, encouraging independents to flourish, providing environments and experiences not replicated elsewhere will attract more frequent day visits and increase dwell time through increased leisure uses and attract new to market/island brands at various price points, despite challenges posed by the pandemic, Belfast continues to attract notable new retail additions including Anthropologie, Mint Velvet and Vans with new leisure /cultural uses such as 2RA, The Avenue Cinema (Castlecourt) etc being key in making significant strides to help the attractiveness of the city centre as a destination.

It is worth highlighting that independents in Belfast city centre as a proportion of total retail units has increased from 51% in 2018 to 57% in 2021. The Council's Vacant to Vibrant scheme provides a clear demonstration to the public, business community and target applicants of the Council's willingness to both address issues of vacancy in the city centre and support start-ups, independents and social enterprises.

The relocation of Ulster University to the city centre has also been a catalyst in terms of how the city centre functions and there are a number of other key game changers that will further support the diversification and sustainability of the city centre. A design team is to be appointed shortly for the Belfast Stories major visitor attraction in the city centre and plans are moving ahead to create more inclusive city centre housing which includes making use of Council and wider public sector lands, as well as other private sector led residential proposals. Work is underway to progress a new public park at Cathedral Gardens, as well as ongoing revitalisation schemes across the city centre including completion of the award-winning Entries Programme. There are also exciting plans for a year of culture and entertainment in 2024 with a focus on both local communities and the city core.

Members will be aware that whilst the city has experienced a positive trajectory in terms of regeneration and investment, there is still more work to be done to achieve the ambitious targets as set out within the Belfast Agenda, and importantly unlocking the wider inclusive benefits of such investment and, ensuring these reach every part of the city. This will require significant private and public sector investment. To give members a sense of investment required, the Belfast Agenda indicates the need for a total investment in the region of £7.5 billion by 2035. This includes the requirement to deliver 31,600 new homes for and development of 550,000 sq m of employment floor space to support the additional jobs. As highlighted earlier within this report the city centre plays an important role for the city and indeed the wider region as a hub of commerce, tourism, learning, recreation, entertainment and employment, city centre jobs represent 32.7% of all Belfast jobs and 9.6% of all jobs in Northern Ireland.

A report was brought recently to the City Growth & Regeneration Committee on the Regeneration Tracker which provided an overview of regeneration and development activity which took place across the city during 2022, as aligned to the Belfast Agenda and the eight policies set out in BCCRIS. There was positive progress across the range of asset classes throughout 2022, which is expected to continue through 2023 given the scale of schemes commencing or planning to commence. In 2022 / 2023 there was a 2% growth in rates base (arising from additional development), which resulted in additional rates growth of £3.3m every year.

Social perceptions of the city centre are integral to its success and Council's core role in supporting this. Council have delivered new on-street recycling bins over the summer, brought in more resources in staff and machinery to maintain cleaning standards and are working with commercial premises on how best to present bins for collection to help keep streets tidy and clear from obstacles, and prevent litter build-up. Partnership working with stakeholders is key to this, the three BIDs are also supporting Council cleansing schedules with additional resources in high footfall areas and a public consultation will open this autumn on bye-laws to address noise and other issues.

However, a number of issues remain including attracting further major higher-end retailers alongside independents, SME's and the third sector; increased mixed use culture /leisure developments to serve a growing population; a low city centre population and the supporting community and social infrastructure; a quality city living environment founded on the Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe plans; improved connectivity and public realm; the night time economy; embedding sustainability and maximising digital and innovation capabilities across all sectors and activities.

3.1 Future City Centre Programme

Members may be aware that in February 2020, the Future City Centre (FCC) Programme was initially developed following key recommendations in the Pragma Consulting 'Ltd retail analysis report (an updated report has recently been completed). However, given the significant challenges brought about by the Bank Buildings fire, the Covid-19 pandemic and stakeholder feedback, as well as best practice advice and recommendations (from the Institute of Place Management, High Street Task Force etc.) The FCC Programme has been revised to address the pertinent issues impacting on the city centre today.

It is important to note that the attached FCC framework is a result of a comprehensive programme of research and engagement. It specifically reflects feedback from members of the City-Centre All Party Working Group during meetings held late 2022 and early 2023. Of note at the last meeting on 03 March 2023, members requested clarity on the city centre priorities, how they would be measured and what actions were being delivered and/or planned. In addition, it was further stressed that these should reflect wider stakeholder views raised as part of community planning and articulated in the refreshed Belfast Agenda. Internally officers have engaged extensively cross departmentally to ensure the emerging framework was reflective of corporate objectives and priorities. The revised FCC Programme is aligned to the longer term ambitions of the refreshed Belfast Agenda and Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy.

Responding to the comprehensive research and engagement, including members' feedback, the revised FCC framework is

attached at appendix 1 and can be summarised as follows: The draft vision of the FCC programme is to create:

“A vibrant, unique and thriving place where people spend time, live, work, visit and invest”.

This is supported by eight programme objectives, measured by 14 strategic indicators and underpinned by five pillars:

1. **Regeneration and Connectivity**
This pillar seeks to deliver the physical built environment from a placemaking perspective to help create vibrancy, diversification of use including increased city centre living and enhanced connectivity.
2. **Business and Investment proposition**
This pillar aims to support and sustain existing and new businesses; and attract new brands and investment to the city centre.
3. **Animation and distinct offering**
This pillar is focused on vitality, vibrancy and increasing city centre footfall levels by maximising our cultural and tourism offering.
4. **Clean, Green, Inclusive & Safe**
This pillar is focussed on enhancing the city centre experience by providing a clean, attractive, safe and pleasant environment. City and Neighbourhood Services Department lead on the delivery of the Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe Action Plan for Belfast City Centre.
5. **Vulnerability**
This pillar addresses the important issue of vulnerability in the city centre, namely those with addiction issues and/or rough sleeping.

3.2. **City Centre Governance**

In August 2022, the SP&R Committee approved the establishment of the City-Centre All Party Working Group. The overarching role of the Working Group is to identify and prioritise issues and opportunities to address specific needs with the aim of regenerating and improving the vibrancy of the city centre, linked to the council’s growth aspirations outlined in the Belfast Agenda. Specifically, the Terms of Reference outline that the group will:

- Act as a reference panel for the wider development and regeneration of the city centre;
- Collectively identify opportunities and challenges and consider actions, partnership

working and opportunities which may be subsequently brought forward via the Council Committee process;

- Consider the city-centre dimension of key strategic plans and projects such as the Belfast Agenda, Bolder Vision, cultural strategy, tourism plan etc – including developing a sustainable and inclusive city centre which will attract a residential population, retain and attract talent and inclusive investment;
- Consider the Clean Green Inclusive & Safe Action Plan;
- Consider the future of the city centre’s nightlife and the immediate challenges posed in the city between 6pm and 6am in collaboration with relevant partners to drive forward a vibrant, diverse and sustainable nightlife to support the objectives of the Belfast Agenda including encouraging city centre living and creating a vibrant, well – connected environment for people to enjoy;
- Take an innovative, evidence-based approach to providing advice to inform and enhance policy, interventions, delivery of services, projects and plans;
- Participate in and facilitate engagement and communication activities associated with connected communities; and
- Strengthen relationships with external stakeholders including residents, businesses, development community and wider agencies

Wider City Centre Governance

In response to the emerging city centre issues during 2022 a review was undertaken of existing mechanisms for engagement and improved governance to bring together the various city centre related facets and ensure synergy whilst avoiding duplication and silo approaches. Members will note that the governance is aligned to the revised FCC framework and seeks to give focus to each of the city centre priority areas or pillars. These structures include:

(i) Future City Centre Leadership Group – a sub-group of the Belfast Agenda City Development Board:

The FCC programme is led by Council but is linked to the wider ambitions of the Belfast Agenda and the Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy. The FCC Leadership Group focuses on ensuring that issues are raised, and solutions achieved relating to the priorities for the Future City Centre Programme. The group is anchored within the Community Planning Partnership governance arrangements and is co-chaired by the Council’s Director of City Regeneration and Development and the Belfast Chamber Chief Executive. Membership consists of representatives

from a number of partners including BCC, city centre stakeholders including private sector, central government agencies, anchor institutions, Visit Belfast and BIDs and representation from the VCSE panel.

(ii) Strategic Leadership Group – Complex Lives

A strategic and proactive partnership and multi-agency approach has been established which brings together the NIHE, Public Health Authority, the Health and Social Care Board, Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Council, along with voluntary agencies. A Strategic Leadership Group (CEO level commitment) is established under the auspices of Community Planning and is chaired by the Council's Belfast Chief Executive. This is supported by a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) which meet on a weekly basis to understand the specific needs and to develop an individual support plan for the vulnerable person.

(iii) Multi Agency Operational (tasking) Group:

The core focus of this group seeks to address Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe (CGIS) issues and overseeing the implementation of a CGIS action plan. The group is chaired by the Council's Director of City and Neighbourhood Services and includes representatives from relevant government departments, PSNI Belfast Chamber, the city's three Business Improvement Districts and the NIHE.

3.3. Strategic Indicators

As part of the recent engagement, officers have identified a range of strategic indicators which will be used to track the progress of the FCC programme objectives over the longer term. Work is ongoing to collate this data and will be presented to members at a future meeting. An initial technical report has been included at Appendix 3 which provides further information on each of the indicators including its definition and source.

3.4 Financial & Resource Implications

The revised Future City Centre Programme only identifies existing programmes and workstreams that are already covered from existing budgets.

3.5 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

Each workstream and/or programme and project will be separately equality screened as per our statutory requirements."

Noted.

Feedback from Members and Focus of Future Meetings

A presentation was given by officers on the key elements of the revised Future City Centre Framework including the dashboard approach to measurement of strategic indicators and operational performance indicators. The Working Group engaged in discussion and highlighted the following areas for consideration:

- Agreed that it would be helpful for external parties to come into the Working Group on a scheduled basis, including representatives of the business sector, developers, statutory agencies, PSNI etc.;
- Building on work of the Multi Agency Operational Task Force, seek to work with partners through Complex Lives / Strategic Leadership Group to quantify and track the numbers of vulnerable individuals within the city centre, including roles and responsibilities and funding;
- Engagement with Amy Lame (following visit to Belfast in January 2023), with regard to identification of any key indicators not already picked up via Council's dashboard approach
- Amplify the positive aspects of the city centre, by emphasising many of the good things taking place and work underway to address the negative issues.
- Engagement with the nighttime economy and music industry in Belfast; and
- Following further development and due diligence, a Future City Centre dashboard of strategic indicators and operational performance measures to be presented to forthcoming meetings of the Working Group, with consideration to be given to the frequency of reporting of certain indicators.

The Working Group agreed that it would meet on a bi-monthly basis.

Chairperson