

Pragma Report 2022:

Background & Recommendations

Following a previous (2018) Retail and Leisure Performance and Strategy developed by Pragma for Belfast City Council, and in light of the rapidly changing environment during, and following, the Covid-19 Pandemic, Pragma recently undertook a further review of this Retail & Leisure Performance Assessment and the performance of the city centre. They outlined a number of high-level recommendations to address the changing challenges and opportunities that impact on the city centre to help ensure that Belfast offers a dynamic and experiential destination for visitors and residents.

The Key Findings are outlined below.

- 1. Catchment and footfall:** Post pandemic, Belfast's footfall recovered faster than other UK cities but still remain below the 2019 levels. The opening of the Ulster University Campus has been the largest factor in the increase of footfall however dwell times in parts of the city were down impacting spend and vibrancy.
- 2. City Centre Provision:** Despite lockdowns, a growth in online shopping and the loss of several major brands, the city centre has seen continued transition with a number of new retail outlets (Anthropologie, Rolex, Gucci etc) and a number of new leisure outlets (The Avenue Cinema, 2 Royal Avenue).
- 3. Vacancy:** Vacancy rates reached approx. 25% in 2021 and were significantly higher than the UK average of 14.5%. However, this rate improved in 2023 to 21% as a result of new entrants to the market and the Council's Vacant to Vibrant scheme. It should be noted that Belfast's vacancy rate is heavily influenced by those vacancies which are considered 'persistent' and associated with stalled regeneration schemes, many of which have planning but have yet to progress.
- 4. City Centre Performance:** Belfast city centre's catchment gap has increased from £55m in 2018 to £122m in 2021 as it accounts for lost shoppers during the pandemic. The degree to which this gap can be realised will be dependent on the strength of the offer Belfast can provide.
- 5. Key Trends:** A demand still exists for bricks and mortar shopping and leisure experiences. As habits change from purchase-driven to experience-driven, the hosting and marketing of varied, quality events are a key enabler in driving visits.
- 6. Independents** in Belfast city centre as a proportion of total retail units has increased from 51% in 2018 to 57% in 2021.

7. **Physical environment** of the city needs to be improved in order to attract brands e.g. investments/interventions to the public realm, premium signage and wayfinding, improving the cleanliness of the city, and improving the appearance of vacant units.
8. **2 Royal Avenue:** as part of the FCC, direct control of this key asset presents opportunities for Council to secure a regular market rent and/or funding. The upsurge of interest from retail and leisure occupiers in the space in Royal Avenue and Donegall Place would indicate a commercial use should play a role in the buildings asset strategy to enable further investments made by Council in testing space in the city centre for a variety of uses.

Recommendations

Pragma outlined a number of high-level recommendations and opportunities to address these challenges and to ensure the retail sector offers a dynamic and experiential destination for visitors and residents.

1. **City Centre Living:** A vital element in driving city centre performance is building sustainable and balanced communities within the city centre itself. A diverse mix of quality accommodation will be required to generate multigenerational city living, requiring residential-led regeneration of parts of the city centre. Successfully realising this aim will require connecting communities, so no one is left behind, through SMART placemaking principles objectives and the delivery of A Bolder Vision which necessary to build thriving city centre communities.

Update on Actions:

Promoting City Centre Living through the lens of A Bolder Vision and via the following key aspects;

- Strategic Site Assessments including concept regeneration plans to maximise the potential of area-based interventions brought through to PAD stage
- SSA Phase 1 resulting in the recent launch of a Competitive Dialogue process seeking a developer/ investor partner to take forward housing led regeneration at scale.
- Progressing the Inner North West Development Brief for BCC and DfC lands as recently reported to Committee September 2023.

- Work is ongoing in respect of other Council owned lands within the city centre for potential housing led regeneration (including Dunbar Link, Seymour House, Ravenhill Reach etc) , as well as lands outside the core city centre .
 - Continued partnership working through the Housing Led Regeneration Group under community planning with other public sector bodies for other city centre opportunities.
 - Planning system and LDP process, a number of planning approvals and applications underway inc those as reported to CG&R in March with the Regeneration Tracker Update; inc 94 social & affordable units at Gasworks Northern Fringe lands, 48 social & affordable units in College Sq North, the commencement of the mixed tenure Loft Lines scheme which will see a significant acceleration in city centre /TQ with 778 residential development including 151 social and affordable housing and planning submitted for 70 social and affordable units in Sailortown.
2. **Environmental quality:** To both facilitate city centre living in the long-term and improve city centre performance in the short-term, improvements to the quality of environment in the city centre are required. These measures should include strategies for enhanced cleansing, improving the appearance of vacant units, encouraging community engagement through hosting events and improving wayfinding and the public realm. Increased pedestrianisation would bring significant improvements to the quality of the city centre environment, creating opportunities for much-needed green and open spaces.

Update on Actions:

- Clean Green Inclusive & Safe: Delivery on the CGIS Action Plan under revised governance. Council have delivered new on-street recycling bins, 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 the three BIDs who 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.
- A Bolder Vision Update: seeking final agreement on overall ABV & Action Plan to ensure effective design of public spaces focused on providing people places, and to inform and direct the Eastern Transport Plan to ensure reducing the severance

to communities, while promoting city centre living and addressing the Climate Emergency

- On going delivery of quality public realm and better use of space through The Entries Programme, tactical regeneration in Great Victoria St; utilising developer contributions for catalyst public realm schemes including 5Cs, Little York Street / Little Patrick Street and Blackstaff Square; the implementation of Pavement Café licences; Note that significant environmental and public realm improvements including Belfast Streets Ahead 3 and 5 are undergoing review pending the outcome of the Eastern Transport Plan and multi-year budgets to enable delivery..
- Events and programming provide a major element of the fabric of the Belfast Environment and includes rolling events programme including at seasonal peak times such as St Patricks Day, Easter and Christmas; the attainment of UNESCO City of Music status, and the recent hosting of One Young World Conference and the pending 2024 Programme all contribute to the vibrancy and attractiveness of Belfast. Members will note update on Committee Plan in respect of the Council delivered events but also the work alongside partners including the Business Improvement Districts.

3. **Governance:** Despite the Council facing limitations in its ability to facilitate change, it has taken a lead role in the formation of the Future City Centre Programme, which sets out the good work the Council are undertaking in the city centre, from small scale changes in tactical regeneration to the targeted acquisitions. However, there is a need for Council, alongside wider public sector and other partners and stakeholders to press forward with plans for investment and regeneration, which could include the Council (or other public sector bodies) actively investing in further key strategic sites to directly facilitate change and improvement, enable city centre living through residential-led development and implement A Bolder Vision to ensure connectivity and environmental needs are met.

Update on Actions:

- City Centre governance approved by SP&R in August 2022, including the establishment of an All-Party Working Group for the City Centre (governance schematic attached at Appendix 1).
- Update as per recommendation 1 on A Bolder Vision and city centre living including BCC taking a leading role on bringing forward significant investment at scale

through the Launch of the Competitive Dialogue process to seek an investment/development partner to deliver Housing Led Regeneration

- Targeted strategic acquisitions by Council of a number of historical city assets and strategic sites including;
 - 2 Royal Avenue to provide a culturally significant hub in the city centre;
 - the Belfast Region City Deal flagship Belfast Stories on Royal Avenue,
 - lands at Corporation Street for housing led regeneration,
 - Commission House as part of the Dunbar Link,
 - former Belfast Telegraph building as part of a Joint Venture

4. **Long term opportunities:** Potential interventions available to the Council (and other public sector bodies/partners) include long-term, substantive interventions including investments in environment, subsidies and direct investment in property. Around these, tactical interventions such as marketing and events have the potential to drive more immediate improvements to environment, perceptions and performance. Noting also that Council have a role in promoting, influencing and shaping wider public and private sector investment aligned to the FCC Update.

Update on Actions

- Progress with Belfast Stories via BRCD – site secured, design delivery teams to be announced shortly.
- Strategic Targeted Acquisition as per update at recommendation 3.
- Delivery of events and programming as per update at recommendation 2.
- Delivery of opportunities through the Innovation City Belfast and Council's Innovation team ongoing.
- Delivery significant game changers such as
 - Belfast Region City Deal Programme & Projects
 - Transport Hub and the wider Weavers Cross scheme ongoing with the Transport Hub under construction and a development partner appointed for WX,
 - Waterfront development prioritised through the Waterfront Promenade Framework as agreed through Council in October 23,
 - Unlocking other major regeneration & development schemes within the city centre noting the 2022 Belfast Regeneration Tracker update provided to Committee in March 2023.

- Major Tourism & Events inc 2024 Programme
 - Lobbying work in progress for equity of specific regeneration funding inc city/town centre and High St funding, acknowledging the disparity of funding applied to other UK cities that do not apply to NI eg High St Fund, Better Towns Fund, fully funded High Street Task Force etc. If funded in this Region, this would act as a strong catalyst for the regeneration of the high street, increase city competitiveness and support sustainable businesses growth.
5. **City Centre Performance:** Belfast city centre needs to provide a compelling reason to visit. This can be delivered by providing first to market and first to island retail brands, leisure pursuits and experiences that are, if not world class, then significantly better or unique to that than can be found elsewhere in Ireland. Other key recommendations include direct investment in properties by the Council to create opportunities for the Council to directly influence the attraction of first to island and leisure brands, the implementation of the Bolder Vision and targeted support for independent brands through the provision of subsidies, support and grants to businesses to cultivate the city centers offer.

Update on Actions:

- Vacant to Vibrant scheme ongoing to support local SME's & independent retailers to establish unique offerings within vacant units as point 7.
 - notable new retail additions within the city centre including first to region and first to island brands including Anthropologie, Mint Velvet and Vans
 - The delivery of new leisure /cultural uses such as 2RA, The Avenue Cinema (Castlecourt) and note the anecdotal summary provided by the Match Making Agent under the Vacant to Vibrant report which is being presented to Members on a separate Agenda item.
6. **Compelling reasons to visit:** Belfast city centre needs to provide a compelling reason to visit. This can be delivered by providing first to market and first to island retail brands, leisure pursuits and experiences that are, if not world class, then significantly better than can be found elsewhere in UK/Ireland.

Update on actions: as above in point 2 and 5 and also the landmark Belfast Stories tourism led regeneration project via the BRCD.

7. **Supporting Independents:** Targeted support for independent brands through the provision of subsidies and grants to businesses provides a route for the Council to support and cultivate the city centres offer. The need to ensure complete fairness and transparency in the awards of grants is clear, but the Council must ensure tangible action is delivered off the back of such schemes.

Update on Actions:

- Council's Vacant to Vibrant Pilot Capital Grant Scheme is currently open with up to 15 independent traders/SME's or cultural organisations supported to date to take up vacant space in the city centre, providing employment, vibrancy, activation of vacant space and animation. Note detailed update is provided to this Committee Meeting on a separate agenda item.
 - On going high demand and support for Council managed Markets at St Georges and Smithfield.
 - Ongoing support for business through the Go For It programme.
8. **Creating an investable proposition:** Extending trading hours, improving the streetscape, optimising connectivity between areas and attractions, being creative with space and ensuring the city is a safe, navigable and pleasant place to be will all help strengthen the city's position to recover and grown shopping numbers.

Update on Actions:

- Strong city marketing and communications continues to be rolled out for specific programmes and projects and a new Marketing & Comms plan is to be developed alongside Corporate Communications to amplify the positive stories and messaging, working also with city partners.
 - Invest in Belfast website developed and an Investment Prospectus highlighting opportunities for investment.
9. **Infrastructure and Connectivity:** It is important for the future of a thriving city centre that A Bolder Vision is fully implemented, as it will provide for the delivery of key infrastructure and regeneration projects including major capital investment schemes such as Belfast Streets Ahead Phases 3 and 5, Belfast Rapid Transit Phase 2 and the Inner Ring Road Gateway Public Realm schemes, as well as establishing a longer-term capital and policy prioritisation to help to inform the development and integration of prioritised sustainable and active travel in the city centre. An agreed joint working

structure between statutory and city partners would enable a more agile approach in terms of decision making on the funding, delivery mechanisms, implementation and management of ABV projects, programmes and interventions.

Update on Actions:

- A Bolder Vision Update as per previous points including noting that major infrastructure and connectivity are significantly important for Belfast's continued growth, but powers and funding for the delivery of these rest outside of Council. The lack of multi-year budgets and the absence of up-to-date Transport Planning has limited the ability to deliver capital infrastructure of scale to improve the landscape and provision of quality infrastructure of the city. This is further compounded when considered in conjunction with the disparity of regeneration funding applied to Belfast City Centre as other UK Towns and Cities as point 4 of this report. Further work is required to enable the delivery of multi-year budgets along with the provision of parity of funding with other UK Towns and Cities.
- Further work is required to update the Metropolitan Transport Plan

Appendix 1B – City Centre Governance Schematic



City Centre Governance

