

# All-Party Working Group on the City Centre

Friday, 1st December, 2023

## MEETING OF THE ALL-PARTY WORKING GROUP ON THE CITY CENTRE

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

In attendance: Ms. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and  
Development;  
Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development;  
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;  
Ms. D. Kelly, Programme Manager;  
Mr. J. Uprichard, Business and Research Development  
Manager;  
Mr. S. Leonard, Neighbourhood Services Manager; and  
Ms. C. Donnelly, Democratic Services Officer.

### **Apologies**

An apology for inability to attend was reported for Councillor Groogan, Councillor Smyth attended on her behalf.

### **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were reported.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 8th September, 2023 were agreed.

### **Proposed External Presentations to Future Meetings of the Working Group**

The Director of City Regeneration and Development outlined the following proposals for receiving external parties into future meetings of the Working Group:

- Cross Cutting Enablers: Purple Flag Steering Group;
- Business and Investment Proposition: Belfast City and Region Place Partnership focusing on pillared programme and alignment to Council objectives; and
- FCC Programme: Business Improvement Districts focusing on their annual business plans and alignment to Council objectives.

She explained that, given the change in the meeting schedule from November to December, and the need to ensure timely updates to the Working Group, it was proposed that the 2024 meetings schedule would be updated, and that the next meeting would take place at the end of January, followed by a meeting at the end of March, and another at the end of May, 2024.

Members of the Working Group suggested that officers consider additional organisations to invite to a future meeting, including Belfast Chamber, city centre welfare and homelessness organisations.

The Working Group agreed to the proposals for external parties to attend future meetings of the Working Group and that consideration of extending invites to external groups would be a standing item on the Working Group's agenda.

The Working Group further agreed that it would meet on a monthly basis, until the annual meeting of Council, July, 2024.

### **Updates from Governance Groups**

The Director of City Regeneration and Development and the Neighbourhood Services Manager provided the Working Group with an update on the following three city centre governance groups:

- Future City Centre Leadership Group (Future City Centre Programme);
- Multi-Agency Operational (Tasking) Group (Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe)
- Strategic Leadership Group (Complex Lives/Vulnerability)

The Director of City Regeneration and Development explained that, given the nature and focus of the governance groups, and consideration to the longevity of some of the priorities and issues, that future updates would be brought to the Working Group on a six monthly basis.

The Working Group noted the updates from across the three city centre governance groups.

### **City Centre Market Update**

The Director of City Regeneration and Development delivered a presentation to the Working Group to provide an update on the city centre retail market. She highlighted the following key issues:

- **First to island brand openings:** Deichmann (The Keep), Accessorize (Donegall Place), River Island's concept store 'River Studios' (Donegall Place)
- **First to market (NI) brands opening:** Dylan Oaks' (Castle Lane), Sculpted by Aimee (Victoria Square), The White Company (Victoria Square)
- **Brands relocating:** H&M (The Keep), Rituals (Victoria Square)

- **Expansions:** Bread Street Bakery Café (Great Northern Mall), Bob and Berts (Ann Street)
- **General performance:** a number of stores were reportedly performing particularly well against their UK counterparts including Belfast's Rolex store, JD Sport, Stradivarius and Lush, with a number of large fashion retailers indicating interest to expand/extend their store space/offer.
- **Market demand:** There was significant demand for space from hot food/cafe/restaurant offers and it was reported, vacant units that were “turn key”, with planning permission for hot food would receive immediate interest from this market.

She referred the Working Group to the city centre footfall figures and reported that, in comparison to the previous year, 2023 figures had shown a 7.5% increase in footfall and that the average weekly footfall had increased by 50,000 since 2022.

She referred the Members to a map which illustrated the footfall change between September/October 2023 compared with the same period in 2022 and highlighted the ongoing trend that the city centre had been attracting more visitors from neighbouring communities, with an average increase of 80% more visits from areas within a 2km radius.

The Working Group noted the update.

## **Future City Centre Programme**

### **Regeneration and Connectivity**

The Senior Development Manager provided an overview of the undernoted report, together with a short presentation:

- “1.0 **Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues**
- 1.1 **To provide the All Party Working Group with an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme.**
- 2.0 **Recommendation**
- 2.1 **The All Party Working Group is asked to:**
  - I. **Note the update in relation to the city centre Vacant to Vibrant Programme and that a short presentation will be provided with an overview on successful Vacant to Vibrant applicants to date.**
- 3.0 **Main Report**
- Vacant to Vibrant Background**

- 3.1** Following the successful Expression of Interest stage in early 2022 for the Vacant to Vibrant Capital Grant Scheme, the City Growth & Regeneration Committee in April 2022 agreed to open the grant application process. The grant scheme, a key project within the Future City Centre Programme and in response to the high levels of vacancy in the city centre, opened in July 2022 to incentivise both property owners and potential occupiers to bring vacant Belfast city centre spaces back into use while supporting the city centre's revitalisation and in the context of the need to ensure sustainable rates growth.
- 3.2** It is worth noting that the Council received £47m from the city centre in non-domestic rates in 2022, £10.2m of this was from the retail sector. The Vacancy Rate has seen on average a 2% increase within the Primary Retail Core (PRC) every year since 2019, and in 2021 the analysis provided a PRC vacancy rate of c24%, with the rest of the city centre (outside the PRC) currently at 22%. This level of vacancy would be considered significantly higher than the UK average vacancy rate of 14.5% and has a wide-ranging impact on the city as a whole. The Institute for Place Management considers a vacancy rate of 25% as a critical tipping point in terms of the sustainable viability of a vibrant city centre. It should be noted that Belfast City Centre's vacancy rate is also 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. Positively, recent findings from the Council's Retail Study (July 2023) show that the vacancy rate is currently 21%. This can be attributed to the opening of the Ulster University, new entrants to the market and the impact of the Vacant to Vibrant Scheme.
- 3.3** The Institute of Place Management provides strategic advice to government on supporting sustainable place making models and developing internationally recognised standards on the performance of place management. On review of the Vacant to Vibrant Programme IPM identified that the scheme is an exemplary project in terms of its inception, design and delivery. In April this year, IPM worked with Officers to publish the Vacant to Vibrant Programme within a High Streets Task Force Best Practice Case Study for the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Members can access the case study for further details:  
<https://www.placemanagement.org/news/posts/2023/april/ipm-case-study-belfast-city-council-vacant-to-vibrant-pilot-capital-grant-scheme/>
- 3.4** Council approved £1million of capital funding to the Vacant to Vibrant programme to support SME's, independent retailers, social enterprises and cultural and voluntary organisations to make our city centre offering more diverse and to transform vacant spaces to become vibrant once again. The grant is also designed to sustain jobs, help create new employment opportunities, improve individual properties, contribute to higher quality streetscapes, add to the vibrancy of the city centre and assist with issues of

safety and ASB, and help protect heritage buildings. The programme also offers wrap around support services to assist applicants to develop business plans, social media and marketing training and advice through linking businesses with potential units. A short presentation will be provided to Members with an overview of some of the successful applicants to date.

### **3.5 Vacant to Vibrant Update**

Promotion of the Vacant to Vibrant scheme has received significant coverage across both print and social media platforms since it was first launched and has been picked up by a number of business support websites and online resources. Further coverage of the scheme has been highlighted in the media by successful applicants that have used (or are using) the grant to regenerate vacant premises and bring forward unique offers for the city centre. To date, the scheme has received over 300 requests for applications with a number of applicants currently receiving support from Officers and the wrap around business support services to develop their proposal, find suitable locations and to advance through the grant process.

- 3.6** The grant is being allocated across three main categories, up to £2.5k of support for pop-up ground floor use (over 4mths), up to £15k for active floor usage of up to 150sqm, and up to £25k for active floor usage over 151sqm.
- 3.7** It should be acknowledged that providing the level of detail required for the application evaluation process represents a significant time and effort investment from the applicants and can take over 3 months to gain agreement with landowners and to acquire the relevant quotes and business plan information. The assessment process also includes a detailed assessment of the applications in conjunction with an independent, expert business case analysis prior to officers making recommendations to CGR Committee to approve funding.
- 3.8** Appendix A of this report provides an overview of the status of current applicants in the system including the 15 (1 pending Council ratification 4 December) applicants who have previously been approved. These 15 applications represent a capital grant investment of £286,136.25 to date (with a number of additional applications ongoing) resulting in approximately 56 employment opportunities, and an estimated Rates Value of £ 808,769 (subject to LPS assessment) over the course of the lease periods. This means that for every £1 invested in the grant, at least £2.80 will be returned in rates income due to the activation of vacant properties.
- 3.9** In addition, the 15 applications as above represent 56 additional employment opportunities created in the city centre, providing an estimated Full-Time Employee Uplift of £1.56m per annum. Of the projects led by occupiers, the assessment of their business plan was an integral element of the wider application assessment. The total output of businesses/organisations through the scheme

(based on sales for Year 1 and Year 2) is £6,627,344.50 which will be a significant boost for the local independent businesses and organisations coming through the scheme that are investing in the city centre, and will also have a significant impact on the wider supply chain and city economy (with an estimated Direct & Indirect Impact of £9.7m), strengthening the attractiveness of Belfast as a place to invest, live and visit.

3.10 The grant scheme is also designed to encourage the reactivation of historical buildings and buildings of interest. Of the 15 applications as above, 75% are for properties that are historic buildings or considered to be a building of interest.

3.11 The grant scheme primarily targets the occupation of ground floor units in the city centre however, of the 15 applications as above, over half of these will activate not only ground floor, but upper floors as well, adding additional vibrancy to the area and bringing whole properties back into use.

3.12 Appendix A also provides details of further applicants that are currently at the pre-application stage and who actively engaging with Officers to finalise their applications with an expectation that these will be submitted in the coming months. These are classified as applicants that are working towards elements of the application such as securing an agreement for their proposed premises, developing their business cases for submission, gaining quotes for the capital works, and developing their financial plans for independent expert assessment, with an expectation that these applications will progress through the assessment process with future recommendations to be brought to CGR Committee. Following recent comms and promotion of the scheme there has been a renewed uplift in interest for the scheme with a number of businesses following up with Officers to enquire and request further information of the programme.

3.13 **Matchmaking Service**

To support the wider vacancy programme and to complement the capital grant scheme, officers are also delivering a 'Matchmaking' service, with the assistance of a commercial agent, Frazer Kidd. The 'matchmaking' service includes identifying and collating a database of vacant units that exist within the city centre. This will help to identify possible units To Let to assist new and emerging businesses to source the right property for their needs.

3.14 This work also includes a detailed analysis and monthly updates of the city centre ground floor vacancy levels as well as insights into the movements or relocations within the market. A monthly database of vacant units/properties is provided, alongside market knowledge of new occupiers, property interest and occupiers relocating or expanding. This helps us to understand the vacancy picture within the city centre by identifying units that may be eligible for the Vacant to Vibrant scheme as well as properties

earmarked for redevelopment that will hopefully become occupied at a later date once development is complete.

- 3.15 At present, the matchmaking service is currently supporting 8 applicants to find properties eligible for their unique needs. As part of this service, it includes advice by the commercial agent on lease negotiations and the provision of support available to the applicant when liaising with landlords, and engagement with landlords and developers to support occupation of both long term and meanwhile use opportunities.

4.0 **Financial and Resource Implications**

None

5.0 **Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment**

Equality, Good relations implications / rural needs assessments are ongoing.”

During Discussion, the Director of City Regeneration and Development agreed to explore the possibilities of short-term alcohol licences that would enable pop-up art venues to sell alcohol, and report back to the Working Group.

The Working Group noted the update.

**Animation and Distinctive Offering**

The Director of Economic Development outlined the undernoted report to the Working Group:

“1.0 **Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues**

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update on Christmas animation to date.

2.0 **Recommendation**

- 2.1 The All Party Working Group is asked to:

I. Note the update on Christmas animation.

3.0 **Main Report**

3.1 **Let’s Glow Belfast**

The Let’s Glow Belfast Christmas Lights Switch-On event successfully took place on Saturday 18 November, with a celebration of local music, theatre and dance, compered by the Cool FM Breakfast Team with Lord Mayor and special invited guest Dáithí Mac Gabhann officially switching on the lights. In excess of 10,000 citizens and visitors gathered to enjoy the event. The City Events Team engaged extensively with stakeholders to coordinate

the build, event delivery and de-rig with as minimal impact as possible to normal business.

The event passed off without major incident. Stewarding provision and Traffic Management Plan worked well, with no event related medical incidents. Feedback from stakeholders on the planning has been positive. To date there has been one complaint. The City Hall Christmas Market opened at 12 noon the same day.

### **3.2 Winters Den at 2 Royal Avenue**

The Winters Den will operate at 2 Royal Avenue from Saturday 18 November 2023 to Sunday 7 January 2024. The Winters Den season features a selection of free entry festive activities including twilight, pottery and craft markets, family-friendly performances, tea dances, silent discos, sustainable Christmas craft activities and even a doggie fashion show. On Saturday 18th, outdoor animation was provided by Firepoise. Also returning to 2 Royal Avenue is the popular Belfast One Santa Post Office.

### **3.3 City Centre Festive Lighting Scheme**

The City Centre Festive Lighting Scheme and City Hall lighting went live on Saturday 18 November. The 2023 scheme largely replicates previous years, with the addition of Ann St. However, a small number of cross street features could not be erected due to construction in Castle Lane.

A full Christmas debrief will be reported to City Growth and Regeneration Committee in January 2024.

### **4.0 Financial and Resource Implications**

None

### **5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment**

Equality, Good relations implications / rural needs assessments are ongoing.”

The Working Group noted the update.

## **Cross Cutting**

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Working Group with an overview of work that had been undertaken and progress in the following key areas:

- Regeneration and connectivity;
- Business and investment;
- Animation and distinctive offering;
- Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe; and
- Cross-cutting enablers.



She highlighted that the Council was seeking a development partner to boost the city population through £630million housing led regeneration opportunity, four new hotels were being created to meet market demand, Belfast Harbour was commencing work on £3million first phase of City Quays Gardens, Belfast had received an A rating on its climate action work for the second year in a row and that the Council had announced proposals for a Smart District that would harness digital innovation to support the transformation of Belfast city centre.

The Working Group noted the update.

Chairperson