

All-Party Working Group on the City Centre

Friday, 1st March, 2024

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

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

In attendance: Ms. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and
Development;
Mr. E. McConville, Director of External Affairs, Communication
and Marketing;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Mr. J. Uprichard, Business Research and Development
Manager;
Ms. D. Smith, Neighbourhood Integration Manager;
Ms. L.A. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Mr. S. Leonard, Neighbourhood Services Manager; and
Ms. C. Donnelly, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies for inability to attend were recorded.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 17th January, 2024 were agreed.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Presentation

Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce

The Chairperson welcomed Mr. G. Annan, President of Belfast Chamber, Ms. L. Barr, Castlecourt Centre Manager, Mr. T. Stokes, TSA Planning, Mr. A. Best, Lacuna Developments, and Ms. C. Guinness, CEO, Belfast Chamber, to the meeting.

Mr. Annan explained that Belfast Chamber had almost 600 members with a broad spectrum of representation. He stated that Belfast Chamber's vision was to make Belfast a global destination for growth and a better place to live, work, learn, visit and invest.

He stated that the purpose of the Chamber was to create the best economic environment for its members to flourish.

He outlined the following four strategic themes that Belfast Chamber would be undertaking over the following three years:

- Regeneration;
- Connectivity;
- Social value; and
- Sustainability.

Ms. Barr reported that Castlecourt supported over 3000 jobs in the city centre, both in the retail and leisure sector and within the offices on the second floor. She explained that over the past 18 months there had been around £14 million of investment.

She stated that it had been a challenge to restore footfall to pre-pandemic levels and that the Primark fire had also negatively affected footfall, however, the increase in student numbers in the city centre had boosted footfall.

She added that Castlecourt had ambition to contribute to revitalising the nighttime economy.

Mr. Stokes provided the Working Group with an update on city centre living and explained how the city centre was still evolving following the pandemic and how working, social and shopping habits had changed.

He reported that city centre living could provide solutions to the social housing deficit and highlighted that there were vast amounts of underutilised space within the city centre that could be converted into housing and contribute to the revitalisation of the city centre.

Mr. Best outlined how city centre spaces, the spaces between developments, provided linkage and green space and required development to increase fluidity in the city centre.

Ms. Guinness explained that sustainability was key and that there was an opportunity for the city to improve governance and that Belfast Chamber would like to see more efficient movement collectively to adapt to the changing market.

She added that culture and heritage must be preserved as it was a key selling point along with the fact that Belfast was one of the safest cities in the UK. She stated that dereliction and vacant spaces provided an opportunity to evolve as a city with a low carbon footprint and mindset.

The representatives answered several questions from the Members of the Working Group and the Chairperson thanked them for their presentation.

Noted.

Communication of City Centre Evidence (Verbal Report)

The Director of External Affairs, Communication and Marketing stated that messaging would be delivered through the Council's own channels, that would deliver positive messaging around the city centre, in a digestible format and that the provision of accessible information to the media would strengthen the messaging on an ongoing basis.

The Working Group noted the update.

FCC Dashboard and City Centre Messaging (Verbal Report)

The Business Research and Development Manager outlined the footfall data systems used to record the primary retail core footfall and highlighted the benefits and drawbacks of each of the providers and highlighted the following key elements:

- Regeneration and connectivity;
- Business and investment;
- Animation and distinctive offering;
- Green, clean, inclusive and safe; and
- Vulnerability.

He reported that there had been 106,616 average daily visitors to the city centre in January, 2024, which was a 12% increase from January, 2023. He informed the Working Group that the spend data received from Tourism NI was based on transactions processed by Visa and could be used to inform our understanding of visitor spend patterns. He stated that key metrics included the location and category of spend and the nationality of the cardholder.

The Director of City Regeneration and Development outlined the recent city centre market activity and highlighted key investment had been made along Donegal Place and Royal Avenue with the announcement of The Ivy at Clever House and a new River Island concept store along with the Council's investment in 2 Royal Avenue.

She stated that new brands, The White Company, Pret A Manger and Jamaica Blue had opened in the city centre along with local businesses opening new city centre locations.

She explained that there had been a significant step forward in city centre living with 778 new homes breaking ground at the Loft Lines development that brought the number of city centre homes under construction to 1000.

She reported that alongside the delivery of new build grade A office space, heritage conversions, such as Pearl Assurance House and Printworks were under development. She added that pockets of clustered development was creating a regenerative impact on the city centre.

The Working Group noted the update.

Complex Lives Update (Verbal Report)

The Neighbourhood Integration Manager updated the Working Group on the Belfast Complex Lives model to address the needs of the most vulnerable, particularly within the city centre.

She stated that the model was not a solution to chronic homelessness but had been designed to support the individual with a coordinated cross-agency support plan in place.

She reported that, over the previous months, the project had supported 119 individuals, 74 of whom were male and 45 females.

She stated that the model had been evolving in response to need and that feedback from partners and service users had been very positive.

The Neighbourhood Integration Manager explained that a multi-disciplinary team was under development to address trends such as prison releases and support for homeless individuals returning to communities.

During discussion, the Working Group agreed to invite Extern to a future meeting to discuss complex lives and consider a walk-around the city centre with its representatives.

The Working Group noted the update.

Belfast 2024 Update (Verbal Report)

The Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism provided the Working Group with an update on the Belfast 2024 launch event that was held in 2 Royal Avenue.

She explained that collaborative work was being undertaken with Visit Belfast, Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland to promote the events of the programme and to promote Belfast as a culturally vibrant destination.

The Working Group noted the update.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Working Group was scheduled to take place on 12th April, 2024.

Chairperson