



Subject:	City Centre Open Spaces
Date:	11 th August 2021
Reporting Officer:	Cathy Reynolds, Director, City Regeneration & Development
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	To update Members regarding ongoing work to develop and enable the creation and curation of a network of high quality open/green spaces across the city centre that are both accessible and attractive to a range of users.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The Members of the Committee are asked to recommend that, in accordance with the Council decision of 4 th May, the Chief Executive exercise her delegated authority to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Note the ongoing work to identify open space and additional greening opportunities across the city centre and connections to local communities;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the update regarding Cathedral Gardens design development • Agree to receive a presentation on the emerging Cathedral Gardens Masterplan in the near future; • Agree to the proposal to consider opportunities to create a new temporary pop-up park in a suitable location during the permanent construction works for Cathedral Gardens; • Note the work underway through the INW Open Space Framework to maximise the combined benefits of emerging open space and regeneration projects in the wider Cathedral and UU area and its alignment also with the ongoing Bolder Vision Connectivity work; BRT Phase 2; Belfast Streets Ahead etc; • Note the update on other emerging projects, including City Quays Gardens and key connections between the City Quays and City Centre areas. • Note the ongoing work on a 'Playful City'.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p><u>Background</u></p> <p>The City Centre Connectivity Study: 'A Bolder Vision', in line with the Belfast City Centre Regeneration Investment Strategy (BCCRIS), proposes the development of a more attractive, accessible, safe and vibrant city centre with a greener, walkable and connected core that is more people and family-focussed. BCCRIS identifies that the city centre lacks major publicly accessible open spaces, and that the majority of open spaces are disconnect and have a hard landscape and character, with the centre lacking in greener streets that can provide relief in the most densely developed part of the city. BCCRIS also identifies the opportunity to provide a sizable new open space and greening opportunities by linking St. Anne's Cathedral to Cathedral Gardens and Writers Square. It goes onto say that 'the entire Inner Ring should be tamed, humanised and greened to reduce severance from adjacent communities.</p>
3.2	<p>It is well understood that there is a need to enhance existing, and develop new, high quality open spaces across the city centre, for the benefit of all users, including existing communities, and to support the growth of the resident population and diversification of uses in the city centre. This was reflected in the Future City Workshop held with Members of the CG&R Committee in May 2021 where Members agreed that the right infrastructure needed to be developed in order to achieve the aims of diversification of use and supporting city centre living within the Future City Centre Programme. It was noted that this includes the provision of community infrastructure and high quality, inclusive and sustainable open spaces for families and city users to enjoy and utilise the outdoor environment.</p>

3.3	<p>At the Future of the City Centre Workshop in May 2021 Members had asked that officers look at the provision of open and green space across the city centre and opportunities to improve on this in order to attract families, build communities and support businesses. At the CG&R meeting in June 2021 Members had also raised some concerns in relation to the timeline of expected developments that were key to the Bolder Vision connectivity work and the importance, in the interim, of bringing forward existing plans and interventions, such as the greening of the city centre in a timely manner. Through ongoing work under the Future City Centre Programme officers will be bringing key pieces of work to provide a holistic approach to address the matters raised by Members, both from this Workshop and other Committee Meetings, to this Committee in the near future. This includes the City Centre Living Vision, the Bolder Vision and the City Centre Open Spaces work.</p>
3.4	<p>While this paper relates specifically to ‘City Centre Open Spaces’, additional papers to this Committee meeting address ‘Connectivity & Active Travel’, and an update on the interventions under the Covid-19 Revitalisation Programme. It is important to note that the work referred to in these papers, including specific projects, form part of an integrated approach to addressing key city centre issues under the Future City Centre Programme in terms of maximising combined outcomes through targeted interventions. In this context, the aim is to develop a network of temporary and permanent spaces across the city centre that complement one another in terms of form and function, and that are connected by streets and other linkages that are designed for people and economic benefit.</p>
3.5	<p>An update regarding the second phase of the Bolder Vision is included in a separate paper to this Committee, and sets out next steps in terms of developing proposals that will seek to reimagine the city centre and connections to local communities, where streets and open spaces are designed to meet the changing needs of a diverse range of users, as well as supporting existing businesses alongside the diversification of city centre uses to promote resilience and wellbeing within a more sustainable, climate-resilient city.</p>
3.6	<p><u>Providing Enhanced Open Spaces</u></p> <p>Officers have commenced work to scope a review of open space and ‘greening’ opportunities within the city centre, with a view to producing a recce of open spaces and identifying potential opportunities for improvements to existing spaces or greening opportunities. The focus of the work is to enhance usability and sustainability, as well as opportunities to create new spaces of varying size and function, with an emphasis on</p>

	<p>greening and softening otherwise hard and underutilised streetscapes. To bring forward proposals will require collaboration across Council departments, and with other agencies and landowners in terms of statutory approvals, consents and deliverability, funding opportunities and consideration of new models of maintenance and stewardship. To note also that such opportunities may also involve the private sector/developers etc, particularly in relation to lands or properties that are vacant or underutilised and where meanwhile uses may be explored. This proposal is aimed at ultimately providing a connected network of spaces that when knitted together enhance the overall experience of connectivity and usability of the city centre. As this work progresses, further detail will be provided at a future meeting of the CG&R Committee.</p>
3.7	<p>It is also considered that opportunities to temporarily utilise vacant sites (public / private) to provide open space 'meanwhile uses' should be fully explored, including sites pending development, taking account of the opportunity to release social value while protecting asset value and development potential. This would centre on the Council / wider public sector assets as well as private sector land ownerships linking in with and enhancing policies associated with the Clean, Green, Inclusive & Safe research, Resilience Strategy, the Cultural Strategy, the Belfast Open Space Strategy, the One Million Trees Initiative and the Cultural Strategy. Careful consideration will be required across Council departments in terms of delivery, funding and maintenance however this will not be viewed as a Council only initiative but will influence other public and private land holders to commit to and deliver the aims and objectives of the work.</p>
3.8	<p>To support the ambitions set out in the 10 year cultural strategy, A City Imagining and in the new tourism plan, a strategic and operational assessment of meanwhile sites in the city is to be carried out. Further detail will be presented to committee as part of the culture and events programme development and will be subject to approval. This will include consideration of internal use of the Bank of Ireland building subject to a condition survey and options for the potential use of external space based on a cost analysis and the wider development timeline.</p>
3.9	<p>There are also a number of specific open space / public space projects in development by Council and others, which represent opportunities to deliver on the ambitions set out above and conveyed by the BCCRIS and 'A Bolder Vision', with updates provided below.</p>

Cathedral Gardens

3.10 Members will be aware of the temporary use of the Council’s Cathedral Gardens site as a playpark, which was completed in August 2020 as a meanwhile use. In terms of its permanent redevelopment, as part the Council’s Physical Programme a Master Plan for the space has been commissioned with the intention to create a unique urban space reflective of the changing nature of the city centre. As part of this Master Plan, and to inform the emerging design concepts, a number of engagement sessions have recently taken place with key city stakeholders and it is expected this process will be completed in early Autumn. The project is at Stage 2 (‘Uncommitted’) in terms of the Council’s Physical Programme, and in line with the Council’s governance process further updates on will this be provided to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee via the “Physical Programme Update”. Upon completion of the draft Masterplan, which is envisaged late August, it is recommended that the plans are presented to the CG&R Committee in the near future.

3.11 The consultants developing the Master Plan are also assisting Council with the development of a temporary Active Travel Hub within Cathedral Gardens, to promote modal shift among user groups including the growing student population. This Active Travel Hub will be delivered through the Covid-19 Revitalisation Programme with further details provided in the associated update report to this Committee meeting.

3.12 A consideration during delivery of the project will be how to offset the temporary loss of open space at Cathedral Gardens during the permanent construction works, with potential utilisation of vacant city centre lands for temporary open space currently under exploration by Officers. The existing play space has seen substantial usage, particularly during the pandemic when outdoor and family friendly space was at a premium and has been recognised internationally as a leading example of how to create child friendly spaces in city centres while addressing issues associated with underused or derelict spaces. Pending agreement and subject to funding it is proposed to recreate this space within a suitable site to ensure a continuity of provision while construction works are undertaken. As further details are developed a report will be brought into this Committee for approval prior to proceeding.

Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy: Inner North West Special Action Area; Open Space Framework

3.13 As above, BCCRIS highlighted the opportunity to link the spaces of St Anne’s, Cathedral Gardens, Writers Square and Streets Ahead 3. While Council are developing designs for

	<p>Cathedral Gardens, a number of other schemes are emerging in the immediate vicinity of the Cathedral Gardens site. St Anne's Cathedral (funded by DfC / HLF) have appointed Urban Scale Interventions to carry out an initial scoping exercise which will explore options for the future of the Cathedral, looking at both internal and external space within the theme of 'Reframing Reconciliation' (included Appendix 1). This work includes concept design development (to RIBA Stage 1) for land surrounding the Cathedral including creation of green space through a process involving gradual transition from meanwhile installations and partial landscaping to a fully green and integrated space connecting beyond to Cathedral Gardens and Writer's Sq.</p>
3.14	<p>In addition to this, DfC have commenced a review of the Belfast Streets Ahead 3 scheme designs under the Principles of the Bolder Vision for Belfast and the BRT Phase 2 route options opened for consultation on the 26th July 2021. The Tribeca Scheme was granted planning approval in 2020 and includes proposals for North Street and Writer's Square. It should be noted that while developer discussions are ongoing, Writers Square currently remains within the ownership of DfC. The University of Ulster Greater Belfast Campus, due to open this year, through the Campus Community Regeneration Forum have prioritised the provision of sustainable and active travel connections, and enhanced provision of open spaces both in the city centre, and in the connections to local communities.</p>
3.15	<p>Given the strategic significance of the location and the range of schemes at different stages of design and delivery, officers are engaging consultants to ensure a fully considered and collaborative approach to placemaking across the emerging schemes that will maximise the delivery of the combined open space and public realm. As identified in BCCRIS, this will aim to provide an integrated approach in terms of both form and function, while fully capitalising on the potential of the core area of Cathedral Gardens, Writers Sq., St Anne's Cathedral and surrounding infrastructure to maximise contribution of the combined investment to the immediate surrounds, adjacent areas and the wider city centre. This approach is supported by key stakeholders including St. Anne's, University of Ulster, DfC & Dfl.</p>
3.16	<p>This work will be informed by existing policy and strategy including BCCRIS, relevant masterplans and the visioning principles of '<i>A Bolder Vision</i>', and will enable the identification of synergies or disconnects, critical areas of collaboration, as well as opportunities to align approaches from a placemaking (and connectivity) perspective, through existing projects or via further commissions. Officers will consider the timing of</p>

design development and phasing of delivery across schemes, to ensure alignment of design ethos/approach, and to maximise efficiencies through delivery, future proofing etc, in order to work towards a collective vision to help inform current and future funding opportunities.

City Quays Gardens

- 3.17 Belfast Harbour Commissioners (BHC) are continuing to develop design proposals for 'City Quays Gardens', which they have indicated will place significant emphasis on creating quality open and green space, incorporating active travel infrastructure and event space, enhancing connections with adjacent communities. The overall scheme is expected to exceed £20m and comprises 4 phases (Appendix 2), with BHC intending to submit a planning application for Phase 1 (Clarendon Gardens) in the coming weeks. Subsequent phases extend beyond the BHC estate and potentially include lands in Council ownership. Officers will continue to engage with BHC to ensure Council land and operational interests are protected, while also seeking to collaborate with and capitalise upon the BHC scheme as a catalyst to deliver further regeneration benefit in line with BCCRIS and the Greater Clarendon & Sailortown masterplan (Appendix 3).
- 3.18 There are specific opportunities in this regard to deliver wider benefit through and alongside the Housing Led Regeneration programme of work, and to utilise committed and potential developer contributions in the area, to help reconnect and humanise streets and spaces in this part of the city.
- 3.19 BHC are developing the City Quays Gardens scheme in the context of a wider 'Placemaking Strategy', which is attached at Appendix 4.
- 3.20 The work of the INW Open Space Framework and the projects identified within the 'Connectivity and Active Travel' paper to this Committee Meeting, including the North/South Spine, the Little York/Little Patrick St scheme, and the Fredrick St Junction will provide enhanced connectivity between the emerging Open Spaces of Cathedral Gardens and City Quays Gardens. These projects will focus on linking open spaces through prioritised sustainable and active travel and enable a seamless link of quality places through and around the city centre (Appendix 5).

‘Playful City’

- 3.21 Over the past three years, officers have worked to elevate and embed play in the city centre, placing emphasis on the need to create family-friendly places through engagement and participation with user groups during design development. For example, due to the multi-functional nature of the space, the temporary scheme completed at Cathedral Gardens in September 2020 involved children and other user groups early in the design process to develop an understanding of how people of all ages might use the space before design detail was considered.
- 3.22 In terms of taking an ‘active learning’ approach, the Urban Childhoods Report that shaped the Resilience Ambitions document as previously reported to SP&R was informed by the Castle Place pop up park and resulted in a shared approach to progressing a child-friendly city centre. Recently, an internal officer’s workshop was held to explore issues, challenges and opportunities to progress a child-friendly city, in line with the aspirations of the Cultural Strategy and Resilience Strategy to establish Belfast as ‘A Playful City’ by 2023. Council teams involved to date include representatives from City & Neighbourhood Services, Physical Programmes, Local Development Plan, Tourism, Arts and Culture and City Innovation.
- 3.23 Drawing upon Belfast’s membership of the Resilient Cities Network (RCN), officers worked with Placemaking X and the Real Play Coalition (ARUP, Lego, IKEA, Bernard Van Leer Foundation, National Geographic, and UNICEF) and identified a number of areas for focus, including, the engagement of children and young people in the design and development of schemes and places, tangible projects and space for children and families in the city centre and the potential to leverage in policies and strategies to support a coherent approach. This programme supports the wider Future City Centre programme and the diversification, re-imagination and liveability of the city centre. Play and leisure are key drivers for successful place-making and increase footfall and dwell time. It is also recognised that play is not just for children and supports the physical and emotional well-being of people, regardless of age.
- 3.24 Through this work with the RCN, Belfast has been invited to join the ‘*Strengthen Resilience through Play*’ initiative and be one of a selected cohort of eight cities who will become an Ambassador City for Play. The initiative aims to promote the value of play in cities and support impactful play-focused ideas that contribute to children’s well-being and development and strengthening the resilience of cities. This programme is being led

	<p>through the Resilience Unit and will run from June 2021 to January 2022 with CRD and other officers from across the Council feeding into it at key intervals, including a knowledge sharing webinar. The aim of the programme is to have cities develop and sign up to a pledge in January 2022 and it is likely that our involvement will give us access to additional resources which will become available through the Real Play Coalition in 2022.</p>
3.25	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>Concept design work (up to £40k) for temporary play areas will be covered from within the CRD approved budget.</p> <p>INW Open Space Framework (up to £20k) will be covered from within the CRD approved budget.</p>
3.26	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>None associated with the report- EQIA Screening will be undertaken by Council or lead partner organisations as required as projects are further developed.</p>
4.0	<p>Appendices – Documents attached</p> <p>Appendix 1- INW Open Space Framework Study Area</p> <p>Appendix 2- City Quays Gardens Phasing Diagram</p> <p>Appendix 3- Greater Clarendon & Sailortown Masterplan Extract</p> <p>Appendix 4- Belfast Harbour Commissioners Placemaking Strategy</p> <p>Appendix 5- Committed & Emerging Projects- Inner North Special Action Area</p>