

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 22nd February, 2023

SPECIAL HYBRID MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Murphy (Chairperson);
Alderman Dorrian;
Councillors Beattie, Bunting, Duffy, Ferguson,
Harvey, Heading, Hussey, T. Kelly, Lyons,
Maskey, McCabe, McLaughlin, Murray,
Nelson, O'Hara and Spratt.

Also present: Councillors Flynn and McCullough.

In attendance: Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development;
Ms. N. Largey, Interim City Solicitor;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors McDonough-Brown and Whyte.

Declarations of Interest

In relation to item 3.a) Rent Controls, Councillor Harvey declared an interest in that he owned an Airbnb property in Donegal and left the meeting while the item was being considered.

Councillor McCabe also declared an interest in relation to item 3.a) Rent Controls, in that her husband owned a rental property and left the meeting while the item was being considered.

Presentations

York Street Interchange (YSI) Placemaking and Active Travel Review (PATR)

The Chairperson introduced Mr. P. King, Project Sponsor, and Mr. B. Hassard, Project Manager, representing the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), and Mr. J. McBride, Project Manager, Mr. P. Clarke, UK and Ireland Masterplanning Lead, and Mr. A. Patterson, Landscape Architect, representing AECOM, to the Committee and they were admitted to the meeting.

The representatives reminded the Committee that AECOM had been commissioned to carry out a Placemaking and Active Travel Review (PATR) of the York

Street Interchange (YSI) scheme in 2021 and the purpose of the study was to undertake further analysis around placemaking to identify opportunities to deliver benefits for communities, particularly in terms of connectivity and the wider living places agenda and to consider how DfI could maximise the social, economic and environmental benefits of the project and its contribution to the future development of Belfast.

Mr. Clarke advised that this had included an international best practice review, connectivity analysis and stakeholder engagement which had resulted in eleven placemaking guiding themes and thirty-one desired outcomes for the area.

Mr. McBride described the proposals for the new cycle infrastructure across the city and summarised the audit outcomes.

Mr. Clarke and Mr. Patterson informed the Committee of the various placemaking scenarios which had been considered which included mapping and illustrative sketches of the options, together with potential active travel, urban greening and streetscape improvements.

It was reported that the five scenarios had been evaluated against the 11 Guiding Principles, and Mr. Clarke provided an overview of the overall conclusions and recommendations of the refinement and development of three of the scenarios. He pointed out that, as part of the engagement strategy, it was recommended that consideration was given to the potential for a programme of stakeholder consultation, community involvement and co-design that could unlock further local insights, support buy-in and create long term social value.

Mr. Clarke highlighted that, following publication of the report, refinement of placemaking and active travel scenarios had been undertaken, such as the alignment with A Bolder Vision for Belfast and an evaluation of selected place making interventions.

Mr. McBride described the realignment options for the development of the M2 and provided illustrations of the Corporation Street studies.

He explained the potential delivery of the active travel network improvements, together with the next steps in the process. This included: Packaging and Phasing of Delivery; Engagement with Delivery Partners around delivery and long-term maintenance; Cost analysis of the interventions and wider economic benefits assessment; and Further engagement with stakeholders on selected topics. He pointed out that the preferred strategies would be developed for recommendations to the future Department for Infrastructure Minister.

During discussion, the representatives answered a range of questions in relation to the review of the transport objectives, additional costs incurred from the initial estimates since 2015, the delivery of the cycle network, the redevelopment of Cityside, the need to increase the daytime economy and the importance of the communities, the alignment to the bolder vision and traffic management issues.

In relation to the impact of the development on the Stella Maris Hostel situated in the area, Mr. McBride advised that there were no plans to demolish the building in the current plans.

During further discussion, regarding the potential for social housing in the scheme, Mr. Clarke advised that initial meetings had taken place with the Housing Executive but decisions on the type of housing was yet to be confirmed.

The representatives advised that they would provide further details in relation to releasing the findings of the Review of the Strategic Transport Objectives and the timeline for the implementation of cycle lanes on the Limestone Road.

After discussion, the Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance and they retired from the meeting.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor O'Hara,
Seconded by Councillor Ferguson,

Resolved - The Committee agrees to write to the Department for Infrastructure and ask them to review the Strategic Transport Objectives of the York Street Interchange, in light of these objectives being set in 2008 and prior to the declaration of a Climate Emergency by this Council, the NI Assembly and the passage of the Climate Act. The Committee also agrees to request that the Department share the Assurance Review of the York Street Interchange which was provided to the Minister in March 2021.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- Noted the information which had been provided and that, where relevant, DfI would provide further information on the issues raised;
- Agreed to write to the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) to request that it reviewed the Strategic Transport Objectives of the York Street Interchange. in light of the objectives being set in 2008 and prior to the declaration of a Climate Emergency by the Council and the NI Assembly, and the passage of the Climate Act; and
- Requested that DfI share the Assurance Review of the York Street Interchange which was provided to the Minister in March 2021.

Strategic Planning and Performance **Group – GP Services**

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting in December, it had been agreed that representatives of the Strategic Planning and Performance Group be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to present on how they plan to maintain GP services in Belfast, in particular details of future provision based on the Belfast Agenda population growth ambitions, especially in the City Centre where there are limited GP services.

The Chairperson welcomed representatives of the Strategic Planning and Performance Group to the meeting: Mrs L. McIlroy, Head of Business Support (Belfast) and Dr G. Meenan, Medical Adviser (Belfast).

Mrs. McIlroy explained that the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) (formerly Health and Social Care Board – HSCB) was part of the Department of Health (DoH) and was accountable to the Minister for Health. It was responsible for improving and overseeing the delivery of effective, high quality, safe health and social care services within available resources. She advised that the Primary Care Directorate managed and sought to develop the services that people received from:

- General Practitioners (GPs);
- Dentists;
- Community Pharmacists; and
- Opticians.

She described the General Medical Services (GMS) Contract and highlighted that the Belfast Local Government District (LGD) had the largest number of GP Practices in Northern Ireland (77 GP Practices) with Belfast LGD having the highest number of GPs per 100,000 registered patients (77.5), more than one third higher than the number in Mid-Ulster LDG (57.2) which has the lowest, with the average across NI being (70.2).

She provided an overview of GP services and the location spread across Belfast, together with Practice Changes since 2020.

She advised that the current challenges in Primary Care included: Access to Services; Workforce Planning and Development; Multi-Disciplinary Teams; Winter Pressure Support; Recruit, Attract, Retainment; and Support Practices in Crisis.

She pointed out that, in moving forward, the Primary Care would need to continue to transform to meet growing patient demand and highlighted that technology and new ways of working would continue to play an important role, alongside existing arrangements. She advised that the increase in demand for Primary Care services could not be met solely by increasing the number of GPs and Agencies must work in partnership to improve social, economic and environmental determinants of health. She advised that SSPG would need to continue to work to evolve the model of telephone-first consultation to provide more flexibility to patients and prioritise urgent access where necessary.

During Members questions, the representatives explained further the volume of GPs across the city and confirmed that 121 GPs had been trained in the last year. They described the work of the recovery team and the practice referral process.

In answer to a Member's question on the data of full-time equivalent GPs across the city, Mrs McIlroy advised that she would investigate if this data was available and report back to the Committee in due course.

In relation to GP indemnity costs in Northern Ireland, Dr. Meenan reported that there was disparity in Northern Ireland, where GPs were the only GPs in the UK who paid their own indemnity costs, which increased the more they worked.

During further discussion, Dr. Meenan explained the 'telephone first' approach in operation in GP Practices which resulted in a mix of face to face and telephone consultations. He pointed out that there were a range of other opportunities where patients were treated, such as prescription requests, treatment rooms and chronic disease management reviews. One Member questioned whether this approach would disproportionately impact certain sectors of society.

Due to time constraints, the representatives advised that they would welcome any further questions the Committee might have.

After discussion, the Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance, and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee:

- Noted the information which had been provided and that, where relevant, SPPG would provide further information on the issues raised.
- Agreed to write to the Permanent Secretary to request an update on the work being undertaken to resolve GP indemnity in Northern Ireland.

Issues Raised in Advance by Members

Rent Controls (Councillor Beattie to raise)

The City Solicitor advised that, at the Standards and Business Committee on 21st February, the Notice of Motion on *Increase in Average Rent Costs*, which had been proposed by Councillor Ferguson and seconded by Councillor Michael Collins, had been considered with the options to either adopt the motion, refer it for debate at the Council meeting (with or without restrictions) or reject the motion. As the motion had been rejected and was unable to be amended at the Committee, a procedural query had been raised by Councillor Beattie questioning why the Motion could not have been referred to a committee for discussion.

The City Solicitor advised that, after further review of the process, the Motion could have been referred to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, as it was an economic policy that impacted housing in the city, therefore, it was a competent matter for the Committee to consider.

She highlighted that *Issues Raised in Advance by Members* were not ordinarily permitted at a Special Meeting of the Committee. However, due to the procedural error, she was using her discretion, as City Solicitor, in permitting the item to be considered as part of the agenda.

In relation to a query regarding the potential need for both landlords and renters to declare an interest in the item, the City Solicitor advised that she would provide further clarity on the issue before the Council Meeting in March.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Beattie,
Seconded by Councillor Duffy,

The Committee notes the cost of privately renting a home in Belfast has risen significantly in recent years, making it increasingly unaffordable for many people, particularly those on low incomes and young families. The Committee: Wants to see costs for renters reduced; Acknowledges that legislation is required to protect renters from unfair rents, improve housing standards and end unfair letting fees; Recognises the introduction of rent controls is one way to help renters. Furthermore, the Executive needs to be back up and running and a Minister in place to progress this.

The Committee agrees to:

- Write to the Department for Communities Permanent Secretary and the Head of the Civil Service to engage with the Council and other key stakeholders concerning rent controls in Belfast; and
- Support local community organisations and advocacy groups in their efforts to campaign for the introduction of rent controls and to ensure that the voices of renters and those affected by the housing affordability crisis were heard.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Ferguson,
Seconded by Councillor O'Hara,

The Committee agrees to include the following addition in the aforementioned letter to the Department for Communities Permanent Secretary and the Head of the Civil Service: to request the powers to control rents locally be vested to the Council to protect renters in the cost-of-living crisis.

On a vote, six Members voted for the amendment and nine against and it was declared lost.

The original proposal standing in the name of Councillor Beattie and seconded by Councillor Duffy was put to the meeting and agreed.

Accordingly, the Committee noted the contents of the proposal and agreed to:

- Write to the Department for Communities Permanent Secretary and the Head of the Civil Service to engage with the Council and other key stakeholders concerning rent controls in Belfast; and

- Support local community organisations and advocacy groups in their efforts to campaign for the introduction of rent controls and to ensure that the voices of renters and those affected by the housing affordability crisis were heard.

Chairperson