

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Monday, 11th April, 2016

SPECIAL MEETING OF CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Howard (Deputy Chairperson);
Alderman McGimpsey; and
Councillors Craig, Dudgeon, Graham,
Magee, Ó Donnghaile, O'Hara, Lyons and Walsh.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Wylie, Chief Executive;
Mr. G. Millar, Director of Property and Projects;
Mr. D. Durkan, Director of Development; and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Aldermen Kingston and Stalford and Councillors Hargey and McDonough-Brown.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

(Councillor Howard in the Chair)

Presentations

Living with Water Programme

The Deputy Chairperson advised the Members that Ms. Linda MacHugh and Mr. Paddy Brow, Department of Regional Development (DRD), were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting.

Mr. Brow provided the Members with an overview of the city's existing drainage infrastructure and highlighted its inadequacies, particularly in relation to dealing with flooding, and that pollution of the Belfast Lough could lead to contravention with EU Standards. He pointed out to the Committee that a new framework for action had been launched, 'Sustainable Water - 2015-2040', to address the long-term plans for creating a sustainable water sector in Northern Ireland.

Ms. MacHugh advised the Members that, in order to address the inadequacies and to ensure that the city could grow in terms of business and residential development, the DRD had developed a programme of work entitled 'Living With Water', which aimed to create a Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan. She provided guidance on why major investment in the infrastructure was necessary, not only to protect against flooding, but also to enhance the environment and to enable the economy to grow.

In response to a Member's question, the representatives from the DRD advised the Committee that the Council's Local Development Plan would need to incorporate Planning Policy Statement 15 (PPS) to ensure that all newly built properties within the city had adequate drainage.

During discussion, a Member suggested that a public awareness programme might be useful in order to educate members of the public about reducing their residential water usage, ensuring adequate drainage from their property and what measures they could take to reduce flood risk.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance and they left the meeting.

Belfast Streets Ahead Phase 3 - Public Realm

The Deputy Chairperson advised the Committee that Mr. Mark O'Donnell and Mr. Ciaran Donnelly, Department of Social Development, were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting.

Mr. O'Donnell provided the Members with an update on the public realm improvement works which had formed the first phase of the Streets Ahead programme and outlined that it had included fourteen streets within the city centre, including Anne Street, Fountain Street and Donegall Place. During discussion, he advised the Committee that Phase 2 comprised the public grounds around the City Hall but that the plans were still in the initial stages. Mr. Donnelly agreed to circulate the preliminary designs of the Phase 2 proposals to the Committee.

Mr. O'Donnell outlined the concept plans for Phase 3 and highlighted that it would begin where Phase 1 had been concluded, from Royal Avenue to Cathedral Gardens, and would also include Library Square and Fredrick Street. The Committee was advised that the redevelopment of Cathedral Gardens was important in order to maximise the green space within the city centre.

The representatives from DSD advised the Committee that the estimated budget for Phase 3 was £32million and that input from the Council had already been sought on the design, as a Member of the Project Board. He also reminded the Members that a Business Case had been submitted for Phase 3 and that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee had, at its meeting on 22nd January 2016, agreed in principle to commit up to a maximum of £5million towards the redevelopment of Cathedral Gardens as part of the wider scheme.

In response to a Member's question regarding those communities which bordered the city centre, Mr O'Donnell advised the Members that the Department had recently carried out regenerative works on the Newtownards Road and Andersonstown Road and had also contributed towards up-scaling the Department for Regional Development's Belfast Rapid Transit routes into the city centre.

During discussion, the representatives clarified a number of points with the Members regarding issues with the paving joints in Phase 1, the street cleansing of Anne Street, public art and the types of plants to be used within Phase 3.

After discussion, the Deputy Chairperson thanked them for their presentation and they retired from the meeting.

Purpose Built Managed Student Accommodation

The Deputy Chairperson advised the Members that Mr. Damien Toner, Director of Estates, and Ms. Caroline Young, Director of Student Plus at Queen's University Belfast, were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting.

The Director of Student Plus provided the Committee with an overview of the University's ambitious growth plan and outlined that, within the past five years, it had grown its international student population by 121%, and, by 2020, it aimed to grow this figure by a further 111% as well as increasing the post graduate student numbers by 53%.

The Director of Estates explained that the University accommodation was oversubscribed by approximately 1,000 rooms each year and that it had therefore taken a decision to invest in Purpose Built Managed Student Accommodation (PBMSA) instead of relying on the private sector. The Director of Student Plus advised the Members that demand for university accommodation had increased from those in their second, and subsequent, years and explained that Queen's had attributed this to the options which the university accommodation offered in comparison to private sector rentals, such as term-time contracts, security, pastoral care and budget options.

The Chief Executive reminded those Members who were on the Planning Committee that the planning application from Queen's for PBMSA on College Avenue had been deferred by that Committee for a site visit and that any Member of the Planning Committee should not make any comment on that proposal.

After discussion, the Deputy Chairperson thanked the representatives for their presentation and they left the meeting.

Bike Life Survey

The Deputy Chairperson advised the Committee that Mr. Steven Patterson, Deputy Director of Sustrans NI, and Mr. Andrew Grieve, Head of the Cycling Unit in the Department of Regional Development, were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting.

Mr Patterson presented an overview of the work of Sustrans' to the Members and described how, as a charity, it aimed to encourage people to travel by foot, bike or public transport for more of their every day journeys. He advised the Committee that, amongst others, they coordinated the cycle network and the active school travel programme in Northern Ireland.

He outlined to the Members the findings of Belfast's first Bike Life Report which had been inspired by the successful Copenhagen 'Bicycle Account' which was a regular assessment of cycling development within the city. The Committee was advised that 1,100 residents in Belfast had been interviewed for the Belfast Report, including both cyclists and non-cyclists, and collected data on behaviour, perceptions and facilities around cycling in the city.

He presented the main findings of the Belfast Bike Life report to the Committee and advised them that the response was generally very positive and showed potential for increased cycling within Belfast. The Committee was advised that over 7 million bicycle journeys were taken in NI each year, 2.7million of which were people cycling to work. He highlighted the changes which non-cyclists had proposed in order to encourage more people to take up cycling in Belfast, the majority of which focused on safety, such as the implementation of protected bike lanes and traffic-free cycle routes.

Mr Grieve presented the Committee with an overview of the Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland which had set out, over a 25 year period, how the Department planned to make Northern Ireland a cycling community. He also detailed the Belfast Bicycle Network Plan and explained that cross-agency partnerships were essential in order to deliver a successful network for cycling within the City.

In response to a Member's question he confirmed to the Committee that a series of consultation events was planned to engage with the public on the plans for the Network as it was essential to gauge local input.

Mr Grieve highlighted two key findings from the Belfast Bike Life Report to the Members, namely, that 46% of Belfast households had access to a bicycle and that 75% of people thought 'things would be better if people in general rode bikes more'.

Mr Patterson outlined how the Council could play its part in advocating active travel and encouraging their staff to use sustainable transport. He reminded the Committee of the success of schemes like Bike Week, the NI Festival of Cycling, the Belfast Bikes, Ciclovía and the upcoming Active Belfast Challenge (ABC) which was due to take place in May 2016 and encouraged the Members to get involved.

During discussion, a Member commended Sutrans on the success their Bikeability course and thanked them for the training which had enabled them to be more confident while cycling on the roads. In response, the representatives suggested that they would like to see changes to the cycling proficiency training for primary school children in order to undertake safe on-road cycle training.

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

Chairperson