

Development Committee

Thursday, 30th January, 2014

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Hargey (Chairman);
Alderman Ekin;
Councillors Austin, Beattie, Convery, Garrett,
Keenan, Kelly, Kyle, Mac Giolla Mhóin, Ó Donnghaile,
and Spence.

Also attended: Alderman Rodgers; and
Councillors Haire, Hanna and Hendron.

In attendance: Mr. K Sutherland, Urban Development Manager;
Ms. A. Doherty, Planning and Transport Officer; and
Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer.

Belfast Rapid Transit System

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 3rd December, it had agreed that representatives of the Department for Regional Development be invited to attend a future meeting in order to provide an update on the Belfast Rapid Transit System.

Accordingly, Mr. C. de Búrca and Mr. R. Totten from the Department's Transport Projects Division were welcomed to the meeting.

Mr. Totten informed the Members that a rapid transit system had long been recognised as being a key element in enhancing public transport provision in the City. He explained that, in 2008, the Department for Regional Development had published a Strategic Outline Case, which had been based upon a feasibility study around potential routes and technologies for rapid transport in Belfast. That had confirmed that a bus-based rapid transit system, as opposed to light rail, would be the preferred option for the City and would provide a modern, safe, efficient and high quality public transport service, whilst supporting sustainable economic growth and regeneration.

He reported that, in 2012, an Outline Business Case had been published, which had set out the preferred option for the Rapid Transit System in terms of the network routes, procurement strategy, commercial/business model and outline design. That had led the Minister for Regional Development to recommend that the system be progressed, that the majority of the design and infrastructure works be undertaken through his Department and that the contract to operate it be awarded to Translink. Those recommendations had been endorsed subsequently by the Northern Ireland Executive.

Mr. Totten informed the Committee that the Department for Regional Development was finalising plans for the first phase of the Rapid Transit System, which would connect East Belfast, West Belfast and the Titanic Quarter via the City Centre and

would replace the majority of Metro services in those areas. The cost of that phase, which was due for completion in 2017, would be approximately £98.5 million and would involve around fifteen infrastructure projects.

He explained that the system would operate from approximately 6.00 a.m. till 11.30 p.m. during the week, finishing later at weekends, and that bus lanes, which could be used also by cyclists, would be provided along all of those routes. Thirty-five modern, high capacity vehicles, with advanced engine technology and information systems, would be purchased through a procurement process, at a total cost of £20 million. Smartcard and other technologies would expedite the payment process on vehicles and the purchasing of tickets in advance of boarding would be integrated with other public transport services. Halts and interchanges would provide passengers with real time information and security would be enhanced through the use of closed-circuit television. He concluded by stating that it was envisaged that the Rapid Transit System would lead to an overall reduction in public transport journey times of between 25% and 30% and that the Minister for Regional Development had undertaken to examine the feasibility of extending the initiative to the North and South of the City, following the completion of Phase 1.

In response to a number of questions from the Members, Mr. Totten explained that the initiative had been publicised through, for example, the media, information sessions and Elected Members and that feedback from residents and traders along the selected routes had been positive. He stated that the required infrastructure works, which would give rise to some disruption, would provide employment opportunities within the construction industry and that the Department for Regional Development would be including standard social clauses within its contracts. He undertook to make available to the Members the drawings associated with the first phase of the Rapid Transit System. In terms of extending the initiative to include the George Best Belfast City Airport, he confirmed that there were difficulties in finding an appropriate route through the Belfast Harbour Estate and pointed out that the Airport was served by a nearby train halt at Sydenham.

Mr. de Búrca confirmed that consideration was being given currently to the nature of signage to be used along the route of the Rapid Transit System and that the Department for Regional Development would be willing to discuss additional signage requirements for locations such as the Gaeltacht Quarter. He added that the Department for Regional Development and the Police Service of Northern Ireland were working on a joint initiative to address the unauthorised use of bus lanes.

The Chairman thanked Mr. C. de Búrca and Mr. R. Totten for their presentation and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Chairman