

Castle, Cavehill, Zoo and North Foreshore Steering Group

Monday, 16th May, 2022

CASTLE, CAVEHILL, ZOO AND NORTH FORESHORE STEERING GROUP MINUTES HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Alderman Rodgers;
Councillors Hutchinson, Maskey,
McCullough, O'Hara and Whyte.

In attendance: Ms. S. Grimes, Director of Physical Programmes;
Ms. S. Kalke, Project Sponsor;
Mr. A. Ferguson; Senior Development Manager; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant,

Election of Chairperson

Nominations were sought to fill the vacant position of Chairperson and it was:

Moved by Councillor O'Hara,
Seconded by Councillor Maskey and

Resolved – that Councillor Whyte be appointed to the position of
Chairperson for the period ending June 2023.

(Councillor Whyte in the Chair)

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the North Foreshore Steering Group of 8th January, 2019 were agreed.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Schedule of Meetings 2022-23

The Steering Group agreed that its meetings would be held on a quarterly basis and the Director agreed also to hold special meetings of the Steering Group, to deal with specific issues, as required.

Terms of Reference

The Director of Physical Programmes informed the Steering Group that this was first reconstituted with the remit of overseeing and coordinating developments in the wider Belfast Hills, Zoo and North Foreshore areas.

She referred specifically to the role of the Steering Group in the provision of cross-party strategic leadership and political oversight on the development and implementation of plans in the area, looking at best practice from the experiences of other cities and local authorities across the U.K. and Ireland. She highlighted further roles for the Steering Group, including monitoring the progress of all projects and the evaluation of synergies between projects.

The Director emphasised the importance of collaborative working with external partners and local authorities to avail of funding opportunities and to maximise the economic, social and community outcomes of future potential projects.

A Member, referring to the Terms of Reference, stated that it required to place a greater emphasis on biodiversity across the site and specifically the need to incorporate biodiversity and leisure as part of the Belfast Castle/Cavehill investment and marketing strategy. The Steering Group raised the issue of the Zoo being referred to as financial burden as not being a positive term. The Members were advised, however, by the Director that the specific wording had been contained within a Notice of Motion which had been agreed at a meeting of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in March 2020.

In response to further clarification on the synergy between the Motion and the implementation of the investment programme for the Zoo, the Director confirmed that the motion referred specifically to the Council support for the Zoo and its staff, including a long-term investment programme allied to a moral and compassionate approach to the animals contained within its confines. She confirmed that the process being undertaken was complimentary to the wording contained within the motion which had all party agreement. The Members were informed that the Council had agreed to approach central government ministers with a view to securing additional funding in regard to the regeneration of the Zoo site and which would involve an all-party delegation to meet with central government departments in pursuit of that objective.

The Steering Group requested that greater access to the hills be incorporated within a revised Terms of Reference as part of a future investment strategy and agreed also that it would be beneficial to undertake a site visit to both the Zoo area and the North Foreshore in order to familiarise the Members with the area and the future development proposals for the site area, subject to the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee. The Chairperson requested also clarification from the Strategic Policy and Resources regarding the mode of attendance at meetings of the Steering Group to operate under hybrid conditions, subject to statutory regulations.

A Member highlighted the importance of information being made available on the geological status of the North Foreshore as a means to provide information on which infrastructure projects could be undertaken, given the previously identified inhibitors, including subsidence and the prevalence of methane gas.

Noted.

Presentation by Urban Scale
Intervention re: Belfast ZOO

The Director provided the Steering Group with background information in regard to the undertaking of a feasibility study for the Zoo and which had culminated in the Council engaging with Urban Scale Interventions (USI) to develop a strategic vision for the Zoo. She stated that the Strategic Vision would be integral in framing a master plan for the area. The Director informed the Members further that the Zoo was now the responsibility of the Place and

Economy Department and was closely aligned to a range of strategic initiatives, including the Council's new tourism strategy.

Mr. D. Black, Urban Scale Interventions, attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

Mr. Black explained that USI had been tasked by the Council to focus on a vision and development plan for the Zoo and the wider Belfast Hills and to explore new opportunities to develop and promote the area. He highlighted the importance attached to enhancing the customer experience and the creation of new revenue streams, with particular emphasis being placed on opportunities, including the Floral Hall and the Bellevue Steps. The Members were informed that it was intended that this project would assist in enhancing the customer experience and would underpin a commitment to conservation, both in terms of animal welfare and infrastructure.

The Steering Group was informed that the Zoo and Belfast Hills project was ambitious and would ensure that the Zoo and the wider area would be developed as a centre of well-being, given its unique setting and historical significance. The importance of connecting the Zoo both to the Belfast Hill and the city as a whole as part of the development plan and strategic vision for the area was emphasised

Mr. Black took the Members through a number of proposed themes underpinning the strategic development and provided a range of practical examples underpinning each of the aforementioned themes. Mr. Black explained that, as part of the development plan, the Zoo had been segmented into three key areas incorporating an overarching vision, which included both a long and short-term plan. As part of this a number of examples of types of projects which could diversify the customer experience offered by the Zoo were highlighted, including for example telling the history of the Zoo and the surrounding hills combined with well-being, animal welfare, education and interactive projects. He further added re the potential for partnership working in respect of the Zoo and surrounding hills.

The Steering Group thanked Mr. Black for his detailed and informative presentation and he departed from the meeting.

The Director confirmed that the development plans and vision for the Zoo were deliberately ambitious and emphasised that many of the projects proposed provided synergy with many of the Council's priorities, including active travel, tourism, economic development and a commitment to a green economy.

A Member stated that the Council had an opportunity to build on the tourism strategy and harness the benefits to the city, as a whole, with particular reference to the north of the city. The Member expressed a view that an animal audit might be considered to ensure that the animals contained within the confines of the Zoo were suited to the site and its specific terrain.

In response, the Director confirmed that the Zoo was a regional tourism attraction and that visitor numbers had increased significantly since the pandemic. She stated the tourism benefits associated with the development proposals and that the Council would be seeking to maximise these. The Project Sponsor stated that animal audits are ongoing and that it was anticipated that greater consideration would be placed on matching animals to their habitat with an emphasis on indigenous species.

The Director, in response to a question from a Member, in respect of how the Zoo development proposals might benefit the local community, confirmed that synergies between

projects, to that end, would be assessed to maximise community involvement and consultation and to assess the potential financial, economic and community benefit of the development proposals. A Member highlighted the need for integrated connectivity in regard to the development proposals, including securing engagement and support from central government departments. The project sponsor recognised the need to integrate transport links to the site utilising a variety of travel modes as a means to address the Members' concerns.

A Member requested that bio-diversity be incorporated in the future development plans and agreed that transport connections were an integral part of the development proposals. The type of jobs being created was also raised by the Member and the cost associated with the current proposals.

In response, the Director stated that we were at an early stage in the overall process and that the issues raised by Members would be addressed as the projects under consideration progressed to a more advanced stage. The Director confirmed that additional external funding streams would be sought and that a more detailed costing profile would be presented, as and when the relevant development proposals were approved, and subjected to detailed costings.

The Director confirmed that reflections on the terminology would be taken on board and provided the Steering Group with a number of short-term improvements which had already been undertaken at the Zoo, including new investment facilities for the animals which had resulted, amongst other things, in a new water treatment facility for the sea-lions, a range of improvements to animal enclosures and a range of new murals which had been displayed and had received positive public feedback. She highlighted partnership working which was being undertaken between the Council, the National Trust and the Woodland Trust to facilitate improved access to the Belfast Hills. The Director stated that a new officer Steering Group had been established and that information and recommendations from that group would be fed into the Member-led political steering Group for its consideration.

The Director agreed also to provide an update, to a future meeting of the Steering Group, on the gorse fires which had occurred recently on the Cavehill.

**Request authority to receive presentation from
Giant's Park Belfast Limited, at a future meeting
of the Steering Group re: revised proposals for the
Commercial/Leisure Development Brief**

The Steering Group agreed to receive a presentation by Giant's Park Belfast Limited, at its special meeting, to be held on Monday, 23rd May at 5.30 p.m.

Date of Next Meeting

The Steering Group agreed that it's next scheduled meeting would be held on Monday, 15th August at 5.15 p.m.

Chairperson

