

All Party Working Group on the City Centre

Wednesday, 2nd November, 2022

ALL PARTY WORKING GROUP ON THE CITY CENTRE MINUTES HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

- Members present: Councillor O'Hara (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland;
Councillors de Faoite, Hutchinson, Long,
McCann and McCullough.
- In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, Chief Executive;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Ms. D. Kelly, Programme Manager;
Mr. D. Sales, Director of Neighbourhood Services ;
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;
Ms. N. Doak, Portfolio and Programme Co-ordinator;
Ms. K. Gilliland, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mr. S. Conlon, Area Manager, Open spaces and Street Scene;
Mr. P. Quinn, Operations Coordinator, Community
Street Scene;
Ms. F. Dennison, Safer City Coordinator;
Mr. G. Dunlop, OSS, Assistant Area Manager;
Mr. J. Girvan, Lead Officer, Community Provision;
Mr. J. Uprichard, Business and Research Development
Manager;
Mrs. D. Smith, Neighbourhood Service Integration
Manager; and
Mrs. G. Boyd, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were received.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Updated Terms of Reference

Members of the Working Group agreed the updated Terms of Reference.

City Centre Vulnerability Update

The Chief Executive thanked Members for their attendance at the second meeting of All Party City Centre Working Group. He recapped on discussions from the first meeting

touching on the purpose of the group as set out in the Terms of Reference that had been updated and agreed accordingly. He advised Members that they would receive a presentation from a number of officers outlining the current work within the City Centre to deal with issues of vulnerability. The Chair thanked the Chief Executive and invited officers to give their presentations and asked Members to reserve questions and comments until after they had received all presentations.

Sean Conlon, the Area Manager, Open Spaces and Street Scene, outlined the purpose of the Open Spaces and Street Scene Team and outlined the challenges currently faced by staff, including the increased risks, frustrated and demotivated. He detailed the main vulnerability issues in terms of locations and classifications. The Area Manager added that there were increased cleansing requirements for staff in terms of sharps and drug paraphernalia, alcohol and food/packaging containers (including food waste), discarded cardboard, sleeping bags, tents, clothing – vomiting, defecation and on-street urination.

He went on to explain that variable circumstances could affect the volume of cleansing that would be required at a given time. For example, toilet closures would mean that there was an increase in on-street defecation, urination and discarded drug paraphernalia and weather would see an increase or decrease in on street drinking, drug use and the associated mess.

The Area Manager said officers were working in partnership with a number of agencies including PSNI, Extern, City Centre Management, BIDs and the Welcome Centre. He said that this partnership approach was crucial in addressing vulnerability in the city. He emphasised that the safety of staff members was a priority and outlined examples of partnership working in action to ensure staff safety whilst dealing with the vulnerable compassionately.

Paul Quinn, Operations Coordinator with the Community Safety Unit gave Members an overview of the Safer Neighbourhood Officers work within the City Centre. He said that the unit had been operational from April 2013 and originally the work had focused on neighbourhoods, parks and open spaces. In 2016, they saw the city centre demands increase in relation to drug use and several hot spots for anti-social behaviour. He went on to explain that the aftermath of the Primark fire and Covid had seen the service focus change dramatically in relation to vulnerability issues. The Safer Neighbourhood Officers are linked into Tasking and Complex lives and they work in partnership with a range of internal and external colleagues including PSNI, NIHE and Extern. There were three additional posts funded by Covid funding, however this funding is due to cease in December 2022 meaning they would be three staff members down. He said that the in-year and growth proposal 2023/24 bids they had applied for more resources. The current team (which included the three Covid posts) were aiming to provide seven day coverage across the city centre and the neighbourhoods and he emphasised that there was a heavy reliance on goodwill of officers and overtime to meet the demands across the city. He went on to outline the statistics in relation to the city centre between January 2021 and September 2022. 236 instances of drug/substance misuse, 214 instances relating to homelessness and/or begging, 42 instances of suspected drug overdose – since 2018 officers had administered Naloxene 12 times and 1868 individual instances of discarded needles equating to 10,023 discarded needles uplifted.

Kelly Gilliland, Neighbourhood Services Manager gave an update in relation to Refugee and Asylum seekers. She set out the points below for context:

- When Asylum Seekers arrived in Belfast they must make a claim for asylum with the Home Office. Until that claim is assessed they were not able to work or to claim mainstream benefits.
- Asylum Seekers get £40.85 per week if they are accommodated in self-catering accommodation, if accommodated in a hotel they get £8.24 per week.
- Prior to June 2021, asylum seekers in NI were primarily accommodated in 'Dispersal Accommodation' ie flats and houses throughout Belfast which meant that they were part of local communities and their children attended local schools.
- However, this approach has recently changed. In June 2021, given the increased numbers and shortage of housing solutions in Belfast, the Home Office introduced a model of 'contingency accommodation', whereby asylum seekers were accommodated in hotels or large B&Bs.
- The last figures obtained at the Migrant Forum indicated that 13 hotels in Belfast were being used to house asylum seekers.
- There were around 1200 asylum seekers living in hotel contingency accommodation in Belfast (2,700 overall). This included a substantial number of school-age children.
- The Home Office had also procured accommodation in three other council areas to alleviate the pressure in Belfast. Many children living in the hotels were not enrolled in schools.

She went on to highlight that through the Good Relations Unit, the Council had procured:

- The Red Cross to develop and deliver orientation programmes to asylum seekers, providing them with key information on services across the city as well as providing casework support. This service would be delivered bilingually.
- a programme that would provide opportunities to take asylum seekers out of the hotels and to link them with wider sporting and cultural programmes in the City.
- research looking at the lived experience of minority ethnic communities in the city, which had just been finalised and would be launched in December.

The Council had also provided asylum seekers with free access to Council owned leisure centres, to date over 600 asylum seekers had applied to the scheme. The Migrant Forum (12+ years) provided a regular consultative forum for debate and discussion on issues related to inclusion, access and service delivery for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, there are over 40 members represented on this Forum. The Council would develop a Race Equality Action Plan that would look at three key areas; Workforce, Accessibility to services and Civic leadership. The Council had recently been asked by TEO to establish an Assistance Centre for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Belfast. The Members noted the expectation of TEO in relation to the lead role that Councils had in integrating asylum seekers and refugees and that this would require additional resources - Council would need to engage directly with TEO and central government colleagues to explore how an appropriate

funding package would be secured to accompany the growing expectations around the council's role locally in supporting asylum seekers.

Denise Smith, Neighbourhood Integration Manager updated members of the Working Group on the work of 'Complex Lives' that aims to support vulnerable people in our community. She set out the Belfast context detailed below:

- High level of public, media and political concern and interest on the issues of drugs and alcohol, mental health and homelessness (evidenced by ongoing TV, press and social media coverage of the issues, repeated Notices of Motion and calls for action by elected members, MLAs, etc).
- A perception that little/not enough is being done, particularly at the political and organisational (in terms of resourcing and capacity) level.
- IDU Workshop/Report (April 2019)– called for a strategic body with the purpose of 'senior level decision making with authority that joins resources to deliver on an integrated plan for addressing injecting drug use in Belfast'
- Presentation to and discussion at BCPP Living Here Board (2019)
- Presentation to and discussion at BCC Party Group Leaders Forum (2019)
- Strategic Leadership (CEO level-Chaired by BCC) Group formed (January 2020)

The Neighbourhood Services Manager outlined the whole system approach to complex lives and detailed the partnership in action approach that had been undertaken, working with a number of organisations including health partners, PSNI, Extern, Probation board and the Welcome Centre. She described the multi-layer approach to the partnership working that included Strategic Leadership Group (CEO Level), Steering Group (Senior Management Level) Multi-Disciplinary Co-Located Team (Cross sectoral case management) and On-the-Ground Support (identified key workers).

She went on to give an example of the multi-disciplinary team approach to an complex lives issue. The example she used was chronic homelessness and outlined for Members the criteria as detailed below:

“Chronic Homelessness

Within the Homelessness Strategy, chronic homelessness is defined as “a group of individuals with very pronounced and complex support needs who find it difficult to exit from homelessness”.

Chronic homelessness can often manifest itself as rough sleeping or other street activity, and clients experiencing this type of homelessness can find it difficult to sustain a tenancy due to their often extreme vulnerability.”

She went on to detail the Membership:

BCC (facilitation), NIHE, PBNI, PSNI & BHSCT – (DOT & Inclusion Health), Extern – (MDHST-SISS-CJFS), Welcome Organisation, Simon Community and DePaul – those currently commissioned to provide outreach/intensive support to this cohort and advised that they meet weekly to discuss 20-25 of the most complex cases.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager gave two examples of complex lives clients and the complexities around health, rough sleeping by choice and difficulty staying in contact with the client to find a resolution that fits their need. She went on to outline the plan to progress the project in terms of funding and resources.

Frances Dennison, Community Safety Coordinator of the Community Safety Unit gave Members an update on the role of the PCSP (Policing and Community Safety Partnership) in addressing vulnerability. She outlined the operational work that they do in the City Centre as detailed below;

- “Community Safety Unit staff manage and support the City Centre Anti-Social Behaviour Officer.
- The ASB Officer takes daily action to address the impact of street ‘activity’ in the city centre by vulnerable/complex individuals (people focused)
- This role is vital to Council’s timely response to emerging issues/problems as they occur (service focused)
- Developing and maintaining stakeholder relationships key as well as having clear lines of communication around council services and their remit/ signposting to other relevant services as appropriate.”

She went on to outline the objectives of the City Centre Tasking Group (CCTG):

- “Secure a safer city for members of the public (people living and working in Belfast City Centre).
- Reduce anti-social behaviour in Belfast City Centre and its impact on businesses and members of the public.
- Monitor locations in the City Centre that require urgent responses, these are considered ‘hot spot’ areas and CCTG diverts and coordinates attention to these areas.
- Includes representation from: government departments; statutory agencies; charities – any agency whose work contributes to the daily operational issues that require both planned and reactive responses in Belfast City Centre.”

The Community Safety Coordinator concluded her presentation by outlining the PCSP Action Plan/ In-year 2022/23 Funded Initiatives.

She said that the Belfast PCSP was responsible for funding projects and initiatives on a Citywide and City Centre basis and detailed the initiatives below:

- Fund Extern to deliver a Street Injectors Support Service (£61,500)
- Support for Complex Lives (£35,000)
- Training for Night-Time Volunteer Group (£3,500)
- Fund Inspire to deliver an Alcohol and Drug Support Service to adults (£42,500 - but note delivery is City wide).

Kelly Gilliland, Neighbourhood Services Manager and Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty outlined for members the next steps and key considerations.

Details of these key considerations were detailed in their presentation:

- Research and Draft Action Plan produced in late 2021
- 19 short-term actions identified – 5 related to vulnerability/inclusivity
- Also included 70 longer term proposed actions/ menu of ideas – including for example safety of women
- Research PCSP & SCP funded – these partnerships to be updated on research findings and consulted on re next steps – particularly around relevant ‘inclusive and safe’ actions/ideas

They also highlighted the Lord Mayor’s meeting on vulnerability in June 2022, at which a range of ideas and suggested actions proposed.

They detailed the next steps as outlined in the points below:

1. Strategic Leadership Group (chaired by BCC CX) – provides strategic leadership, oversight and unlocks blockages in the system(s) re. addressing vulnerability
2. Established delivery mechanisms (PSCP and Shared City Partnership; Complex Lives Steering Group; Cleansing Taskforce; as well as Tasking (Community-Safety led) operationalise and drive forward implementation of key actions around our City being ‘clean, green, safe and inclusive’
3. Mechanisms in development to capture and share key information and data (both internal and external) to Members in an informed and timely way (e.g. dashboard)

The Neighbourhood Services Manager highlighted a number of considerations:

1. That Members of the City Centre Working Group would provide the platform to help shape the work going forward.
2. That Members recognised the scale and complexity of the challenges and the need for adequate lead in time to develop meaningful responses.
3. Frequency of meetings and how agenda/discussion is structured.
4. Interface with statutory partners and key delivery mechanisms (e.g. SLG/PSCP/ Shared City Partnership; partner agencies).
5. Need for shared approach to communications and messaging across partners and key stakeholders.

Feedback from Members on the City Centre Vulnerability Update

The Chair thanked Officers for the presentation and acknowledged the sobering content. Members thanked officers for the work that was being done behind the scenes to address the complex issues around the city centre. Members raised concerns for staff safety and asked for details of the protections that were in place for staff whilst on duty and also to

support them after traumatic incidents that might occur whilst they are on shift. Officers advised members of the range of support services that were provided for staff to support them physically, mentally and emotionally. Members reiterated the point that Officers safety was paramount and that should be recognised as priority. Members also raised concerns around resources in relation to police presence in the city centre, adequate housing options for asylum seekers and street cleansing to deal with the increasing matters associated with the city centre. Members highlighted the need for all partners within the cohort to share data freely to ensure a collaborative and up-to-date approach to dealing with vulnerability within the city centre and emphasised the need for some type of early warning system to escalate those most at risk. Members asked that an update on policing be brought to the next meeting of the Working Group and more details around communication and how information is filtered through various groups. Members acknowledged that sections within BCC were under resourced and said that Officers were to be commended for the exceptional work they were doing in incredibly difficult and complex circumstances.

Focus of the Next Meeting of the City Centre All Party Working Group

The Director of City Centre Regeneration presented the priorities for the City Centre working group as detailed in the table below:

Regeneration & Connectivity	Business & Investment	City Centre Vibrancy	Position the City to Compete	Digital Innovation	Clean, Green & Safe (Multi-Agency)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating the physical built environment to create vibrancy; sustain our economic recovery and support an inclusive, accessible and connected city centre. • Examples: • BRCD Projects ie Belfast Stories • Major Regeneration Developments • City Centre Living • Lighting & Tactical Regeneration • A Bolder Vision: Connectivity & Active Travel • Strategic Acquisitions / Built Heritage ie 2RA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support and sustain existing and new businesses, and attract new businesses. • Examples: • Vacant to Vibrant Pilot Capital Grant Scheme • Business Support Programmes • City Investment Service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To encourage vitality, vibrancy and increased footfall; maximising our cultural and tourism offering, building on the ten year cultural strategy, A City Imagining • Examples: • 2023 Year of Culture projects • Animation & events, pop up activities. • Enhanced use of public realm & environmental improvements to encourage footfall and increased dwell time • Meanwhile use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To build on our reputation as a unique destination for investment, tourism and development. • Examples: • Renewed Ambition – public private partnership • Development of a city regeneration and development – investment narrative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximising and deploying digital technology and innovation solutions to position the city as a key location for innovation and support indigenous and new businesses to thrive and grow. • Examples: • Smart District • Innovation District • 5G and Wireless opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enhance the city centre experience through a clean, accessible, safe and pleasant environment. • Examples: • Delivery and implementation of the CGIS Strategy and Action Plan • Providing enhanced city cleansing regimes • Addressing perceptions of safety in the city centre
Policy, Legislation & Market Intelligence: Reform of Licensing; Ensuring best practice through IPM; Footfall monitor; Research examples of best practice from other towns and cities; Market intelligence including housing, retail, development tracker etc					

Members agreed that the action plan and associated priorities would bring focus to the Working Group and would ensure an interconnected coordinated approach to tackling the issues faced by all who lived, worked and visited the city centre.

Chairperson