

Castle, Cavehill, Zoo and North Foreshore Steering Group

Monday, 27th February, 2023

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

- Members present: Councillor Whyte (Chairperson); and
Councillors Hutchinson, Maskey,
McCullough, Nelson and O'Hara.
- In attendance: Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and
Development;
Ms. S. Kalke, Project Sponsor; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apologies

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Councillor Ferguson.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 6th February 2023 were agreed.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Access to the Hills - Presentation from ARUP

Ms. M. McNamee (ARUP) attended in connection with this item and was welcomed by the Chairperson.

Ms. McNamee provided the background to the realisation of requirement to provide open space and outdoor recreation, given the indoor restrictions created by the Covid 19 pandemic. She referred to two notices of motion, which had been presented to Council in 2021, on the subject matter of providing increased access to the Belfast Hills.

To that end, she reported that specific routes had been identified and that the study undertaken had included both historical and new potential routes. As part of the delivery plan, she stated that a range of access agreements, providing access to the hills, would be required. Ms. McNamee referred to a longer-term objective of connecting the Belfast Hills to the Castlereagh Hills using the access conduit of the Lagan Valley.

In terms of the scoping exercise, Ms. McNamee reported that ARUP had commenced a stakeholder engagement programme to collect data and identify the main stakeholders and landowners relevant to the creation of a comprehensive and sustainable pathway network.

The Members were informed that, at the current stage of the engagement process, several refining workshops with active stakeholders who had been involved at stage one of the process were being organised. Ms. McNamee stated that ARUP had carried out a range of site visits in order to develop a comprehensive and detailed path audit which would assess gradients, viewpoints and identify potential constraints, including access, livestock and wildlife habitat.

As part of the refining process, the Steering Group was informed that a web-viewer software programme had been utilised to evaluate ecological and environmental constraints, including use made of publicly available web sites. Following completion of that process, the Members were informed that ARUP was able to create a list of constraints and opportunities, for the various routes, to cater for a range of ages and abilities and including constraints such as topography, traffic and land management.

Ms. McNamee reported that, as part of their pathway development proposals, ARUP had considered areas where they could achieve bio-diversity gain, including linkages to both communities and other greenways to promote active travel. The Steering Group was informed that they were currently in the process of identification and prioritisation of routes. Ms. McNamee reported that a comprehensive audit of all the various routes had been assessed, as part of a multi-criteria assessment tool, using a weighted score. She stated that this exercise had been undertaken in an endeavour to assess the routes, including the various opportunities and challenges associated with both.

The Steering Group was informed that ARUP had undertaken a high-level costing exercise, which included signage, steps and way finding. Ms. McNamee identified a range of potential routes providing the Members with a detailed map, as part of her presentation, which showed proposed linkages between the Belfast and Castlereagh Hills. It was reported that ARUP was now in the process of developing a range of concepts, for the various interventions, and was undertaking an economic appraisal in regard to a number of preferred routes.

The Members were informed that it was anticipated that a final report would be presented to the Council by the end of March 2023.

A Member raised a number of issues around access to the hills such as collaborative working, with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), to ensure adequate transportation and appropriate car parking facilities were provided at the appropriate access points to the hills in addition to alternative transport modes to provide access to the car parks. The Member enquired as to what measures could be included to minimise adverse environmental impact and restore the ecological balance to ensure net bio-diversity gain. The Member raised also the issue of using desire lines to develop and incorporate pathways into the Belfast Hills development proposals.

In response, Ms. McNamee stated that, as part of the promotion of active travel, ARUP had undertaken research on existing active travel infrastructure, as part of the MCA process, and that discussions had been undertaken with external landowners, including the National Trust. The Steering Group was informed that ARUP had been working with their ecology team to assess bio-diversity outcomes and the ecological impact associated with the Belfast Hills pathways programme. She stated that the use of desire lines to map out pathways had been used, in the past, to develop and formalise, both, pathways and mountain trails.

The Steering Group noted the information which had been provided and thanked Ms. McNamee for her detailed and informative presentation.

Date of Next Meeting

The Steering Group agreed that its next scheduled meeting would be held on Monday, 7th August at 5.15 p.m.

Chairperson