



Subject:	Future City Centre Programme
Date:	14 th April 2021
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	To update Members on various matters in relation to city centre development and in particular those linked to the Future City Centre (FCC) Programme of work.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The Committee is asked to; <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Note the ongoing challenges of the city centre and it's criticality to the recovery of the wider city and region; and the need to adopt a multi-faceted approach to the re-imagination and recovery of the city centre.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Note the ongoing Future City Centre Programme aimed at addressing the issues impacting upon the city centre and its alignment with the wider Belfast: Our Recovery framework priorities. A short presentation will also be provided at Committee. ▪ Note that a Members workshop on the Future of the City is proposed to take place on 25th May, which will provide the opportunity to discuss priorities and future areas of focus. ▪ Note the completion of the tender competition process to appoint a suitable consultant to deliver the next phases of the Bolder Vision City Centre Connectivity Study and the recommendation to move this piece of work to this next stage of delivery.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p>It is recognised that in the current context of the ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic the landscape of the city centre is undoubtedly challenged. As highlighted in a recent 'Centre for Cities' report, Covid-19 has struck at the very heart of what cities do best. Centre for Cities do however emphasise the importance of thriving city centres, particularly given their criticality in terms of jobs and economic recovery for the wider regions, and reiterate that the reopening of city centres, supporting their recovery and further growth and longer term economic performance will be critical for the delivery of the Government's 'Building Back Better' and 'levelling up' agendas. Despite the issues impacting on city centres as a result of Covid-19, predictions from various sources do however indicate that the long term trend towards urbanisation will continue over the next decade.</p>
3.2	<p>Belfast remains the economic driver for the region. The Regional Development Strategy 2035 specifically recognised the need to enhance the distinctive role of Belfast City Centre as the primary retail location in Northern Ireland. However even prior to the onset of Covid-19 pandemic the city centre and the retail sector in Belfast, like many other cities, suffered challenges from changes in consumer behaviours including trends towards more online shopping and the desire for enhanced experiences on the high street. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated these changes, with a number of city centre retail closures, many of which were the result of closures of chains of national stores across the UK.</p>
3.3	<p>It is clear that Belfast, in line with other cities need to consider the purpose of the city centre and how it can adapt to becoming a multi-purpose location, combining retail and hospitality with business, residential, cultural, community and other facilities, alongside new ways of working and embracing innovation and digital technology.</p>
3.4	<p>Members will be aware of the Future City Centre (FCC) Programme which was initially developed around the key findings and recommendations outlined in the Pragma Consulting retail analysis report (reported to CGR Committee February 2020). However, given the significant challenges</p>

brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and taking on board the views of a number of stakeholders, as well as recommendations from elsewhere (inc. the Institute of Place Management, High Street Task Force in England etc.) the FCC Programme is being recast to help address the issues impacting on the city centre.

3.5 In December 2020, CGR Committee agreed that a workshop would be held for Committee Members and Party Group leaders to consider the Future of the City in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated social, economic and environmental challenges. There is a proposed workshop date of 25th May (details to be confirmed with Members). In keeping with the commitment in the Belfast: Our Recovery plan to focus on a jobs-led recovery, the FCC approach acknowledges the importance of Belfast – and the city centre in particular – in creating new jobs across a range of sectoral areas.

3.6 The FCC Programme is linked to the longer term ambitions of the Belfast Agenda and Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy but is also integral to the delivery of the Council's Recovery Programme. It is charting a way forward for diversification of uses, enhanced connectivity, investment and inclusive economic and cultural growth but it is recognised that it needs to remain agile to deal with the ever changing challenges of the city centre. The FCC programme currently has six cross cutting pillars aimed at revitalising the city centre and creating a vibrant shared city centre where people will want to live, work and invest, but also enhancing connectivity with surrounding communities. The overarching FCC Programme and key areas of focus is attached at Appendix 1, but with a recognition that further focus may be required on issues such as skills, transport, infrastructure and climate change.

3.7 There is a pressing need, now more than ever to plan ahead with our city partners and central government to ensure a joined up and collective approach to help facilitate the recovery of the city centre and it is also critical that we respond to opportunities for external funding with a focused vision and route-map as to priorities. Further discussion will take place on this at the Members Workshop.

3.8 The following provides an outline of some of the current areas of work within the overall Future City Centre Programme.

Regeneration and Connectivity

3.9 This priority is around creating the physical built environment from a place making perspective to help bring about vibrancy, diversification of use including increased city centre living, enhanced

connectivity and sustainability, supporting innovation and jobs to sustain economic recovery and support an inclusive, accessible and connected city centre. Key areas of focus include:

City Centre Living

- 3.10 Members will be aware of the need to reimagine and inject new life into the city core – an issue that is more critical now than ever – a thriving residential population will be integral to a reimagined city centre. Reports have previously been brought into Committee on city centre living including the Council’s ongoing Strategic Sites Assessment work as part of the housing the led regeneration programme incorporating Council and other public and private sector lands. As Members will be aware, there are a number of cluster sites that are being brought forward for development, some of which comprise the potential for additional public and/or private sector lands, and further reports will continue to be brought back to Committee on these. In addition, Members will be aware that work is underway in relation to a city-wide Strategic Site Assessment exercise. By way of a brief update, this has included work to map lands in the ownership of BCC, DfC, and NIHE together with a review of housing lands identified as part of the LDP Urban Capacity Study and Housing Monitor. There is ongoing liaison with other public sector bodies to coalesce on this work in a partnership approach which has also been identified as a key priority for the Community Planning Partnership City Development Board. LPS is also leading on compiling a register of government land and property and to date, DfC land is available on the LPS website with certain other government land data to be published in April 2021. A further report will be brought back on the detail of this city wide work in the very near future and following the next meeting of the Community Planning Partnership City Development Board.
- 3.11 As an update in relation to the Inner North West cluster sites (comprising Little Donegall St, Library St, Kent St) which is in joint BCC/DfC ownership. Members will recall that this was being progressed by way of a two stage process with an Expression of Interest (EOI) issued to all Housing Associations on the basis of a mixed-tenure mixed-use scheme. This EOI sought confirmation from those Housing Associations who wished to go forward to the Development Brief stage and five Housing Associations responded confirming interest. The Development Brief, which has been progressed in partnership with DfC, is due to be issued to the five Housing Associations by mid-April with an expected return date by July 2021.
- 3.12 In addition there are a number of private sector led residential developments currently proposed for the city centre, either as part of major mixed use regeneration schemes (outlined below) or as stand-alone developments. Officers are working with the private and public sectors, alongside other stakeholders with a view to maximising the potential of such developments.

<p>3.13</p>	<p>Members will also be aware of work underway on a City Centre Living Vision, which is aimed at providing an overview of a number of interrelated stands for successful city centre living. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantifying the existing and latent demand of the Belfast city centre residential market including: demand across all housing tenures; existing communities and engagement; urban design & creating a quality environment. • Opportunities and challenges including: existing policy and plans; barriers to development; supporting social and physical infrastructure; repurposing existing buildings; existing planning consents • Deliverability including: investor and delivery models; funding; overcoming obstacles to delivery; cluster sites viability <p>City Centre Connectivity Study: Bolder Vision</p>
<p>3.14</p>	<p>Members are reminded of the previously agreed Council, DfC and DfI City Centre Connectivity Phase 1 Study - a 'Bolder Vision for Belfast' which was ratified by Council (March 2020) and endorsed by respective DfC and DfI Ministers. The Bolder Vision for Belfast involved a significant re-think of how the City's streets and places are used to make them attractive, heathy, vibrant and accessible places.</p>
<p>3.15</p>	<p>It was subsequently agreed to progress with the next phases of this City Centre Connectivity Study (CCCS) and commission a co-cliented BCC/DfI/DfC consultancy to bring it forward. The procurement process has just been completed, and it is now intended to proceed with the appointment of the preferred bidder.</p>
<p>3.16</p>	<p>These next phases will provide options and projects/scenarios to inform the future landscape and priority connectivity infrastructure required to support a resilient and sustainable city and ultimately completion of a final Bolder Vision Strategy and Delivery Plan. The work will involve the assessment of planned and proposed physical large scale infrastructure developments and gain an understanding of the changing land use within the city centre including emerging developments; support the increasing requirement for city centre living, sustainable transportation, re-imagined public realm and open spaces, enhanced connectivity and accessibility.</p>
<p>3.17</p>	<p>The CCCS is premised on the criticality of the city centre to drive forward economic growth, provide a social focus, foster vibrant city centre living and provide enhanced connectivity to communities. The</p>

recent pandemic has caused a re-evaluation of open spaces, streets, mobility and connections to services and each other.

- 3.18 It is intended that this work will help the prioritisation and acceleration of projects, aligned with the Bolder Vision principles and emerging infrastructure projects, including consideration of current pilot projects as well as short, medium and longer term projects. It is to include the approach to the development of preferred delivery options including packages of potential projects in the short term that will support longer-term changes. Stakeholder engagement and a public awareness communication plan will be an integral element.

Indicative timelines

- 3.19 Phase 2: April – September 21 – baseline and vision review; scenario development/options with potential interventions. Note - opportunity for pilot projects being brought forward in tandem with progression of final strategy and delivery plan. Thematic workshops and targeted stakeholder engagement and analysis, and draft strategy report for consultation in Phase 3.
Phase 3: September 21 – April 22 – 12 week public consultation on Draft Strategy report and Delivery Plan, Strategic Outline Business Case, and Monitoring Strategy.

Reimagining Public Realm / Connected Spaces and Places

- 3.20 Covid-19 has brought about an accelerated need to rethink how we use our city's spaces and places with a renewed focus on addressing the place-making potential and providing space for culture, leisure and people centric activities, as well as enhanced active travel options. This aligns with the themes for change within the previously agreed Bolder Vision approach which recognised a transformation of the city centre premised on active public realm and green spaces, vibrant and safe streets, prioritisation of walking, cycling and public transport and overcoming severance with surrounding communities.

- 3.21 As Members are aware, a number of projects have recently been brought forward or are in train, involving the reimagining of public space and providing a connected and people focused approach. These include:
- *Entries and Lanes Programme* – Transformation of a number of pedestrianisation links. Phase One is progressing towards completion, with a small number of remaining artworks due to commence shortly, alongside the installation of the schemes largest feature lighting installation in Winecellar Entry and Castle Arcade. A number of additional entries are now being taken forward as part of a Phase 2 programme, and design work has commenced on these. These include Sugarhouse Entry, High St Entry, Patterson's Place, and College St Mews. The Entries and

Lanes initiative has been very much supported by adjoining businesses, particularly in a post-Covid environment where the enhanced utilisation of outdoor space is often critical for the resilience of many businesses, particularly in the hospitality sector. The physical enhancement of these entries forms part of an overall approach linked to a tourism and city animation programme, aligned with the Cultural Strategy. The Entries and Lanes programme will form part of a wider tourism offering to explore the Belfast experiences as part of the culture, heritage and history of Belfast.

- *Cathedral Gardens*: Temporary Play Park in place, with proposals for a permanent park, taking into account the changing nature of the city centre and other pending developments in the area, with a focus on the use of public spaces via the Bolder Vision lens. Proposal also for a meanwhile Active Travel Hub to support increased levels of active travel and physical activity by encouraging modal shift, particularly given the pending opening of the UU campus in September. Discussions ongoing with stakeholders, with further detail to be brought back to Committee.
- *Public Realm Catalyst Projects*: 5 Cs Public Realm Scheme in core city centre, being progressed in conjunction with DfC and utilising developer contributions. Following an initial period of public consultation from September – December 2020, design development is continuing, and further targeted stakeholder engagement is ongoing with final designs to be agreed and brought forward for delivery. Further public realm catalyst projects utilising historic developer contributions are also being scoped out and reports will be brought back to Committee on the detail of these.
- *Reimagining Public Realm /DfC Revitalisation Fund* – Programme of streetscape / public realm projects underway to help to rebalance the use of public space, safely promote economic recovery and provide a people focused approach. Includes the delivery of parklet and street improvements/enhanced pedestrianisation schemes in Castle Place, Adelaide Street, Cathedral Quarter and Linen Quarter BID areas; as well as the delivery of city centre Business Cluster and Community grant projects. Indicative timeframes for the delivery of the city centre interventions were provided to CG&R Committee in March, with anticipated completion timelines of Spring/early Summer although some of the works remain contingent upon statutory processes and DfI undertaking certain civils works.
- *Lighting Strategy* – a coherent place making approach to lighting as agreed by Members in December 2020.
- *Tactical Regeneration* – creative, relatively quick and low cost place making interventions to address dereliction and animate and brighten areas, often acting as a catalyst to further regeneration.
- *Active Travel*: DfI have brought forward pop up cycle lanes in response to the Covid pandemic and officers are working closely with DfI to consider a range of future active travel interventions. Ongoing BCC led interventions are also incorporating active travel measures, including the

Castle Place scheme and the 5 C's Public Realm. A report will also be brought back to Committee in the near future in relation to the active travel related element of the DfC Revitalisation Fund, as previously agreed by Members. Members will also recall the emerging proposals to bring forward a Belfast Urban Greenway concept, as reported to Committee in October 2020. This initiative is seen as an outworking of the Bolder Vision, and seeks to improve connectivity from neighbourhoods into and through the city centre. The development of this proposal is underway and will also be brought back to Members as it is further worked up – although the future delivery of this will depend on funding and partnership working with various stakeholders, including DfI.

Major Developments

- 3.22 The city centre has a number of major regeneration schemes at different stages of development which could significantly change the landscape of the city. There is an opportunity to maximise the collective potential of these large scale development and infrastructure projects as catalysts for city regeneration and inclusive economic growth and social well-being. During the last five years Belfast has seen over 2.5 million square feet of floor space of office accommodation completed or under construction, almost 5,000 purpose built student accommodation beds have been completed or under construction and to support the growing tourism market 1,500 hotel beds have been completed. There has however been limited residential development in the city centre, albeit that there are currently a large number of residential planning applications at various stages in the planning process, many of which also form part of the major regeneration schemes as below.
- 3.23 Currently there are a number of major mixed use regeneration schemes at differing stages in the development process. Examples include:
- Belfast Transport Hub & Weavers Cross: 1.3 million ft² mixed use regeneration scheme adjacent the new Belfast Transport Hub. Phase 1 enabling works underway.
 - Tribeca: £500m+ 12 acre mixed use regeneration scheme in the city centre. Outline planning approved at Planning Committee Sept 20. There are various regeneration challenges, and in order to collectively work together to bring the scheme forward and unlock some of these challenges, there have been recent meetings with BCC, DfC and DfI. There are also discussions on potential meanwhile uses in the area. Currently economic activity in the area is low and is unlikely to improve until development comes forward. This is having a detrimental impact on key streets including Donegall Street, North Street and Royal Avenue.
 - Waterside (former Sirocco): £450m mixed used scheme on a 16 acre brownfield site with outline planning consent; including social and private housing.

- Titanic Quarter: one of Europe's largest urban waterfront regeneration projects with a significant focus on mixed tenure residential as part of future development phases.
- City Quays: £275m mixed use scheme with the fifth building (City Quays 3) currently under construction and extensive new areas of waterfront public realm completed.
- Smithfield Yard: £75m office/workspace/retail scheme adjacent Smithfield Market within the Inner North West masterplan area.
- BCC Housing Led Regeneration inc. the Strategic Site Assessments Programme involving BCC and wider public /private lands.
- Belfast Destination Hub: proposed new £100m visitor attraction under Belfast Region City Deal.

Addressing Vacancies

3.24 Given the increasing number of vacancies within the city centre, officers have been working up proposals to look at potential short and medium term interventions to help address the issue of vacant premises. There are a complex range of factors leading to vacancy, particularly in the context of COVID and the changing nature of the city centre, hence the need to ensure that any proposed interventions are deliverable and impactful in terms of outcomes. Further details will be brought back to Committee on proposed interventions.

Building Foundations & Supporting Longer Term Recovery

3.25 As highlighted in Belfast: Our Recovery Framework, there are a number of opportunities which will be key to supporting longer term recovery.

- **Delivering the £850m Belfast Region City Deal**: Investing in new physical and digital infrastructure, enhancing the city's tourism offer, providing significant skills, training and employment opportunities
- **Creating Innovation Districts, Smart Districts and Smart Ports** to act as catalysts for economic growth on a transformation scale
- **Improving our Connectivity**: working with partners to secure investment to enhance our sustainable transport infrastructure, including our green and blue infrastructure and strengthening links with other key economic locations including Dublin and London
- **Digital innovation**: advancing next generation digital infrastructure and skills
- **Levelling up investment in R&D**: driving innovation, business growth and creating more and better jobs
- **Addressing climate change**: maximising the potential availability of climate finance as a stimulus to invest in climate resilient infrastructure, supporting our green recovery, skills development and employment

- **Further regeneration:** in the city and neighbourhoods (including a re-imagined city centre) and investment in sustainable infrastructure, including community assets.

Business and Investments

- 3.26 This priority workstream is around supporting and sustaining existing and new businesses, and attracting new investment. While the economy as a whole has experienced a significant shock over the last twelve months, there are a number of sectors that have remained more resilient than others. This is particularly the case for tech-based sectors where recruitment is still ongoing at a pace. Other sectors such as logistics and warehousing and health and social care have also continued to recruit while sectors such as hospitality and tourism have been decimated. With around 8% of Belfast workers currently on furlough, it is essential that the council works closely both with private businesses and with government departments to ensure that residents are supported to move back into work at the appropriate time.
- 3.27 Prior to Covid, there was a positive real estate market, particularly for commercial property and office space. While the long-term effects of flexible working are yet to be determined, evidence suggests that, although the workplace will change, businesses will still largely want to establish and retain offices in vibrant locations that are attractive to their workforce. The holistic approach of the FCC work – not only looking at the city centre as a business location but also a tourism destination, a leisure space and a place where people live – will be critical for its long-term economic success. The Belfast Agenda’s commitment to creating 46,000 new jobs and attracting 66,000 new residents means that we need to think differently about where people work and what will attract them to this place so it is essential that our business and investment programme takes a place-based approach.
- 3.28 The unemployment rate in Belfast has doubled over the last year and the economic inactivity rate remains stubbornly high. While the tech and digital sectors are likely to drive the city’s economic growth in the coming years, it is essential that we retain a focus on inclusive economic growth in order to ensure that our residents can benefit from the developments in the city. Taking account of planned investments such as the Innovation District, we will work with employers to develop targeted interventions to support those furthest from the labour market or with specific challenges to access employment and skills development support and find a job.
- 3.29 Given the particular challenges impacting upon the retail, tourism and hospitality sectors, a key focus of our work will be to support the revival of tourism and hospitality in the city centre, as well as a restructured retail offer focused on the uniqueness of Belfast and building on the wider work to

reimagine and reshape the city core. Alongside this, we will be working with businesses outside the city centre to support business recovery in a drive to enhance their future resilience and sustainability.

City Centre Vibrancy

3.30 This priority workstream is around encouraging vitality, vibrancy and increasing city centre footfall; and maximising our cultural and tourism offering. A number of strands of work are currently under development. These include examining the opportunities for culture and creativity to play an important role across the overall Future City Centre Programme and to fully integrate into recovery plans. This includes areas such as:

- Innovative approaches to addressing current short-term vacancies and the role of culture and leisure in the longer-term future uses within the city centre.
- Animation and city dressing projects to improve the look and feel of the city centre to support a more welcoming and vibrant place.
- Importance of shared cultural events to attract additional footfall and enhance the year-round offer. This will include programming in public and outdoor spaces.
- Seasonal programmes of activity to enhance the offer within the city centre to create more experience driven opportunities aligned to future marketing and communications campaigns.

3.31 The ten year cultural strategy, A City Imagining, also sets out a number of strategic projects that will help shape the future of the city centre. This includes:

- 2023 as a designated international year of culture. These plans are critical to city recovery with a number of large scale projects such as Urban Forest designed to capture the imagination of local audiences as well as attracting out of state visitors. These projects are will also examine the role of cultural programming in improving connectivity between the city centre and neighbourhoods through extensive engagement programmes.
- UNESCO City of Music designation will enhance the night-time economy through a new and enhanced approach to music programming in venues and public spaces.
- A new 10 year tourism plan will also include the Belfast Visitor Experience Framework that will increase the coherence of the city's tourism offer through clustering or products and improvements to visitor servicing. This will give specific consideration to how visitors experience the city including the relationship between the city centre and other key attractions. This work will also support the development of the Belfast Destination Hub and how it will be a catalyst for local tourism.

3.32	<p>Digital Innovation</p> <p>This priority workstream is around 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. With the new UU campus as an “anchor” for the Innovation District, there will be a focus on investment in technology infrastructure such as the development and deployment of smart technologies, and the development / roll out of 5G and wireless opportunities. This is intended to act as a beacon for talent and inward investment, provide the critical ‘density’ to sustain a world-class ecosystem for start-ups, SMEs, academia and multinationals and act as a driver to enhance the existing quality of life in the area - a ‘go to’ location for residents, workers and visitors.</p> <p>Clean, Green & Safe (Multi-Agency)</p>
3.33	<p>This priority work stream is around enhancing the city centre experience through a clean, accessible, safe and pleasant environment. City and Neighbourhood Services Department are currently undertaking a Strategic Stakeholder Engagement Study and Action Plan for a Belfast City Centre Clean, Green, Inclusive and Safe Initiative. The consultant appointed has been tasked to review the strategic and policy context, and examine research / statistics in terms of how Belfast is performing against key Clean, Green Inclusive and Safe indicators, and to benchmark best practice from elsewhere. The next steps include conducting an online survey that will offer the opportunity to feedback on their ideas and priorities to help enhance the city centre, with a framework developed to engage with a range of key stakeholders. It is intended that this work will inform the development of an action plan that will be embedded within an overall approach to the re-opening and future of the city centre and the longer-term priorities within the overall FCC programme.</p>
4.0	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>None directly associated with this report.</p>
5.0	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/ Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>None associated with this report.</p>
6.0	<p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p>
	<p>Appendix 1 – Future City Centre Programme priority work streams overview.</p>