

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 28th April, 2021

REMOTE SPECIAL MEETING OF CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Brooks (Chairperson);
The High Sherriff, Councillor Long;
Aldermen Dorrian and Kingston; and
Councillors Donnelly, Ferguson, Gormley,
Harvey, Heading, Lyons,
Maskey, McMullan, Murphy,
O'Hara and Spratt.

In attendance: Mr. A. Reid, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development;
Ms. C. Patterson, Business Research and Development
Manager;
Mr. S. Dolan, Development Manager;
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer; and
Ms. K. McCrum, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

(Councillor Murphy in the Chair)

Apologies for the inability to attend were reported on behalf of Councillors Howard and T. Kelly.

Declarations of Interest

No Declarations of Interest were reported.

Presentations

Ulster University; Belfast City Campus

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy welcomed to the meeting Professor D. Morrow, Director of Community Engagement at Ulster University. He then outlined the support that the Council had provided to the development of the new University Campus to date, and provided detail about a number of forums that staff continued to take part in.

Prof. Morrow provided a detailed presentation on the Belfast City Campus build, the most significant regeneration project in the City for many decades, which was scheduled to open in September, 2021. He noted, however, that Covid-19 regulations were likely to have an impact on the level of utilisation that would be possible.

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The Committee was provided with details of the building design and faculty layout, as well as its positioning in the north city centre.

Prof. Morrow explained that the campus was in the heart of the city, neighbouring many of Northern Ireland's most deprived Super Output Areas and Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. He suggested that engagement with local communities had to be creative, meaningful and long term in nature.

He stated that the University site could be seen as a connector point with many key attractions and historical buildings within its half mile radius. He also advised that the arrival of the University had the potential to reconnect historical buildings, referencing the 'Great Place North Belfast' initiative which had been supported by Lottery funding in order to create community based assets which would enliven the whole area alongside existing attractions.

He then highlighted the main changes that could be expected as a result of the development:

1. Demographic Change: 16,000 new stakeholders in the community with over 7,000 people expected on site on a daily basis during term-time;
2. Physical Regeneration: After years of dereliction and neglect, North City Centre was expected to become a core economic driver for Belfast and Northern Ireland;
3. Economic Opportunity: Based on the normal Universities UK multiplier of 1:5, an investment of £300m should result in an economic expansion of £1.5bn per year through innovation, start-up services, the night time economy, retail, and visitor numbers;
4. Social Change: Change to class, income, age, religion and ethnicity profile of the city centre would make a vacant space more vibrant and multi-cultural;
5. Environmental: Opportunities through regeneration and construction, but challenges with additional traffic, planning considerations therefore remained key.
6. Cultural Development: A potential driver for culture as a 'Shared Space' venue and as a result of a network of people living in the city centre.
7. Connectivity: A junction to other areas of the city, encouraging Active Travel and reconnecting walking and cycle routes, however many transport considerations were outstanding.

In relation to social clauses at a construction level, he explained that they had over-delivered with the help of the Department for Communities, with an equivalent of 93 years' worth of training, placement and apprenticeship opportunities to young people, students and the long term unemployed. He also advised that social clauses would be built into service contracts, working alongside partners within the Council, Department for Economy and Department for Communities.

The Committee was provided with an overview of the opportunities that would be brought to the city by the University, from teaching and learning, research and professional development, to events and facilities through a shared space. Prof. Morrow

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also detailed further economic, social, cultural and environmental opportunities such as increased job opportunities, the rejuvenation of the city, an increase in arts and sports activities, Active Travel and creating a more liveable city.

In terms of outreach and relationship building, Prof. Morrow provided an overview of Access Scholarships, which were due to launch within the week, for 40 students from low income families offering £2,000 per year in order to reduce the obstacles to accessing higher education.

Details regarding the UU-Community Benefits Framework, Neighbourhood Community Forum, Community Safety Group and Campus Regeneration Forum were also provided.

With regards to Active Travel, the Committee was given information on 'desire lines' emanating from the campus as the University was keen to ensure good walking, cycle and public transport links. Prof. Morrow detailed a number of initiatives that would support this goal, including Belfast Streets Ahead Phase 3, the Clifton Gateway, and the Belfast Cycle Network, particularly the Northwest, North and Inner Ring cycle routes. He explained that positive work was ongoing with Translink in order to identify the best routes for students and staff and work with the Council was underway to establish an Active Travel Hub at Cathedral Gardens to encourage and sign-post walking and cycling options.

He confirmed that increased traffic was the biggest concern given the lack of managed parking and welcomed any support the Council could provide with this. He outlined additional work that was underway regarding transport corridors, junctions and additional pedestrian crossings.

In conclusion, Prof. Morrow outlined future opportunities as a result of the campus move and suggested that the build was only the beginning of the investment. City living, City Deal, Active Travel, integration of the city and covid recovery were highlighted as areas that would be impacted positively.

The challenges were outlined also, with weak traffic and transport infrastructure being key, alongside community safety concerns, integration of the new student population, environmental degradation, timing and tackling inequality. Prof Morrow concluded by stating that partnership working, collaboration and long term relationships were needed.

(Councillor Brooks in the Chair)

During Members questions, Prof. Morrow was asked about the impact of purpose built managed student accommodation on the issues in the Holylands area of South Belfast. He advised that the University had supported the development of the private sector purpose built accommodation as it was seen as the best way to manage large groups of students and create a healthy living environment. He noted that, while the University was not responsible for buildings, they were engaged in ongoing discussions about congregation areas that were both safe for students whilst not causing disruption

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to existing residents. He suggested that embedded culture issues and the price of accommodation influenced student choice of accommodation.

He pointed out that the community relations and engagement work that was done by the University in the Holylands area to assist with managing the ongoing problems and to encourage living in a civically engaged way. He also highlighted the positive aspects of attracting young people to the city and their impact on the sustainability of the city.

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy advised that the concentration of student housing in the Holylands area made it unique, and support would be needed to regenerate the houses into suitable family homes if a shift in living demand was to take place. During further discussion, a suggestion was made that trends in housing should be monitored to see if the goal of a city centre campus, in use during both the day and night, could be realised.

While the Committee was broadly supportive of the development and initiatives that had been presented, concerns were raised about the lack of solutions to the transport and traffic issues, particularly given that the development had been in the planning for close to a decade.

Prof. Morrow stated that he shared those concerns and welcomed support in progressing these aspects. He advised that engagement with the Department of Infrastructure had improved in recent years through a Junctions Working Group, however, the plans required structural changes which would take time, and it was therefore likely that necessity would force action in some areas. He noted again that parking was also a major concern and the urgency of the issue was being highlighted to the Minister. In reference to the accessibility of the campus, Prof. Morrow confirmed that the building was fully Disability Discrimination Act compliant and the University was committed to meeting all of its obligations on that front. He added that priority parking was available for disabled drivers. He also highlighted that the environment around the University was important, as were the junctions, to ensuring that they are fully walkable and accessible for all.

He stated that discussions had taken place regarding a railway halt at Gamble Street however there were no current plans given the major infrastructure project involved, but a redesign to Yorkgate station was planned and details had been published. He underlined the importance of public transport and Active Travel routes to deter people from using their cars.

With regards to air pollution, he explained that air quality measures were included within the campus impact study and would continue to be measured going forward.

Several queries regarding community engagement were posed, with Prof. Morrow confirming that engagement would be ongoing with both residents and key stakeholders. He welcomed a deepening relationship between the University and the Council as the plans moved forward. He also welcomed the opportunity to brief Councillors again and undertook to respond to any further queries that Councillors may have.

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After discussion, the Chairperson thanked Prof. Morrow for his attendance and welcomed the exciting project.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Chairperson