

Outcomes Note

'Wednesday Webinar' 4 - 25th November 2020

The 'New Normal'

CHAIR: Cllr Martin Kearney, Mid Ulster DC, NILGA Office Bearer (SDLP)

OBJECTIVES

1. To develop elected member understanding of the importance of quality environments and the councillors' role in promoting high quality development.
2. To explore the wider policy context and how this will drive future place-making policy and practice
3. To develop an understanding of the rapid changes being experienced and how best to respond.

SPEAKERS:

Ministerial Address: Planning for a green recovery – what will the 'new normal' look like in terms of infrastructure? - Nichola Mallon, Infrastructure Minister

Building Back Better for Business - Simon Hamilton, Belfast Chamber of Commerce

Planning for the future and a green recovery - Ann Watt, Pivotal PPF

Local Government Response - Maura Fox, Head of Planning, DCSDC (SOLACE)

All Presentations and videos available on the NILGA website at

<https://www.nilga.org/nilga-networks/place-shaping-and-infrastructure>

MINISTER'S ADDRESS *(paraphrased)*

The immediate priority is to deal with the public health emergency. DfI and the Minister are committed to playing their part as part of an Executive wide effort to slow the spread of the virus and protect lives. Recent experience has shown the importance of the role of infrastructure in supporting citizens at this time and keeping services running.

Without downplaying the current challenges, it is important not to lose sight of our longer-term vision. In the midst of COVID, in terms of the climate emergency and in the face of Brexit we are in hugely challenging times – but it is in these circumstances we need to be most ambitious, creative, and courageous.

We must look to the future with hope and use the experiences of the last eight months to build for a better greener healthier happier future. Infrastructure is vitally important to our daily lives and communities, our environment and economy. We often take things like clean water, efficient public transport, and safe roads for granted yet these are key building blocks for our economy, to address regional imbalance, improve wellbeing and to develop a thriving island where people want to live, work visit and invest. It also helps provide us with the connectivity we need to compete on a global stage.

This critical role and the need for investment in infrastructure and public services is rightly at the heart of 'New Decade, New Approach', all-island infrastructure is at the heart of a Taoiseach's new 'shared island' unit, and 'turbo-charging infrastructure' is the focus of Boris Johnson's recently announced connectivity review. These are new opportunities that can deliver real and positive change for people, especially those who have been left behind.

To make this change happen the Executive needs to end the long history of underinvestment in infrastructure and recognise that we cannot deliver our wider commitments without the underpinning infrastructure in place. Capital investment in our water and sewerage infrastructure is the foundation of our economy's revival. These are essential to good health and wellbeing of our people and are essential to the post-pandemic economic recovery. There are over 100 areas where new development simply cannot connect to the system, including areas of Belfast. This issue is now better recognised, and the necessary funding and investment must follow. Our water sector must be at the heart of our recovery, leading the green revolution with innovation and creativity and demonstrating what can be achieved within the public sector.

The 'Living with Water in Belfast' consultation has just been launched in relation to Belfast: an integrated plan with the objective of providing the infrastructure needed to protect against flooding, to enhance the environment and to enable the city to grow. The plan provides holistic and integrated drainage solutions to achieve multiple benefits at reduced cost and disruption, providing 'soft' open space solutions alongside hard engineering, to store water, to enhance the environment and reduce flood risk. This can all work towards imaginative and recreational opportunities.

Current estimates are that around £1.4Bn of capital investment will be required to implement the plan over the next 12 years - a significant challenge in the current economic climate - but without this investment, incidence of flooding and pollution will intensify, and future development may be constrained. This plan provides an opportunity to invest in essential infrastructure in the Great Belfast area providing the foundation both to grow the city in a sustainable manner and to enhance the environment. We also need to learn from the COVID crisis, including some of the positives that have emerged. We have been given a glimpse of how things could and can be; quieter, safer roads, cleaner air, more families out walking and cycling. The Minister does not want us to lose this. If we return to the way it was before then the huge sacrifices made will have been in vain, and a massive opportunity will have been wasted – to enjoy a better quality of life and to help tackle the climate crisis. We must create more opportunities for active travel; safer infrastructure for those who want to walk, wheel or cycle. DfI has piloted pop-up cycle lanes and pavement widening, has supported innovative solutions such as the Ormeau Rd ‘parklet’ and has established a new **£20million capital blue-green infrastructure** fund to help transform communities, promote active travel, and shape our places for the ‘new normal’, but this is only the first step – there is much more to do. At the heart of this must be people-centred place-shaping that delivers multiple benefits for the community, such as greenways, which help provide a solution to localised flooding problems while providing a space for communities to improve their physical and mental health and to come together in a way that tackles social isolation.

The Minister wants to work in partnership with councils and local communities to deliver green projects that can drive lasting change, enhance the economy, and improve lives.

Public transport is another opportunity to seize the chance for change. Public transport usage had been growing steadily, (and markedly on rail and the Glider services) but this has been hit as a result of COVID restrictions. DfI is investing in 21 new train carriages, zero emission buses and new transport hubs in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. The minister also sees great opportunity in developing rail connectivity and has granted funding for the feasibility study on the Phase III upgrade of the Derry to Belfast railway line. The DfI is also working with colleagues in ROI to finalise terms of reference for the new high speed rail feasibility study that now includes Belfast, Derry, Dublin, Limerick, and Cork, forming a spine of connectivity and tackling regional imbalance.

Too many parts of NI are not realising their potential, with significant socio-economic differentials, particularly in areas of Belfast, the North West, and a number of rural areas. It is essential that government delivers balanced regional growth, and no longer leaves some citizens behind.

The Minister noted her commitment regarding the A5 and A6, the A1 junction safety programme, the Narrow Water Bridge, York Street interchange, and a range of bypass projects and active travel opportunities, all of which she believes will have multiple benefits. She has also recently established an expert Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure, which has completed a focussed exercise to look at how the Minister and NI Executive can improve support for long term development of infrastructure in NI. The Minister is currently considering their findings, with Executive colleagues.

The Minister highlighted the role of the Planning system in realising recovery, creating better places with safe and attractive linkages, promoting active travel and the development of green and blue infrastructure, while also adapting to and mitigating climate change. LDPs are one of the vehicles for creating a positive post-pandemic environment for everyone. Councils are progressing LDPs ensuring they take on board the desires of communities while ensuring land is available for economic growth and housing. The DfI ensures that strategic policies are taken into account, and at strategic level plans should support the changes we have seen in travel behaviour by supporting the development of housing in sustainable locations with a high degree of integration with centres of employment, community services and connectivity to public transport, taking advantage of existing infrastructure. Integrating land use and infrastructure can create the spaces and places that can be used positively to enhance well-being for all. The challenge will be to think innovatively about the linkages that can be made. The past eight months have shown councils' commitment to progressing plans despite the unforeseen circumstances. This work must continue to ensure that up to date plans can provide certainty and help facilitate sustainable development while working towards our green recovery. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of effective planning for future crises and the need to take a long-term view to improve health and wellbeing for all. The planning system will therefore need to be resilient to adapt and to respond to the challenges ahead. Regional planning policy must continue to provide an appropriate framework and direction to enable planning authorities to respond positively to the present crisis and to develop detailed operational policies through their LDPs to assist local communities in their social, economic, and environmental recovery.

Having modern and sustainable water drainage and transport networks is essential if we are to grow our economy and improve the lives of our citizens. As part of the recovery work and as part of the longer-term plans that are agreed by the Executive in a new, strategic PfG, our infrastructure has a critical role to play in addressing key barriers to economic growth. Without investment in infrastructure, particularly water and sewage services, new developments - whether private or social housing, hotels, schools, or hospitals - will simply not be able to happen. Continued investment in our transport infrastructure is needed to play our part in meeting our climate change commitments whilst also ensuring we provide fast, efficient, and safe transport networks to help with our recovery.

As we move towards a 'new normal' we must be bold and work together to bring about the change needed to build a better future for our citizens. We have a joint responsibility to make choices today that will improve our environment, economy, and quality of life, not just in the next four or five years but

in the next four or five decades, so that our children can realise their potential.

The Minister stated her commitment to working with local government to realise our shared ambition for our citizens right across Northern Ireland.

Q&A with the Minister:

Q: In an area with a mix of commercial and residential property, can the Minister agree to advance a badly needed residents' parking scheme. Due to the lack of joined-up ownership the council may find it difficult to address parking issues through a local parking strategy. Can DfI help?

A: There has been an analysis of the residents' parking scheme that was rolled out in Rugby Avenue in Belfast, which enabled learning as to what worked well and what needed to be improved, which will be used to inform future schemes. DfI officials are preparing a submission and the Minister committed to making the findings public to address member concerns and requests arising in various local areas. Such parking schemes are difficult to navigate, due to variance in local opinions but the Minister gave an undertaking to consider schemes on the basis of learning to date.

The Minister has had a number of discussions with councils in relation to active travel, a creative approach to car parking and the impact on traffic flow. She is happy to consider proposals coming forward (parking, cycle lanes etc), taking a more holistic approach while coming from the 'bottom up' rather than imposing 'top down' solutions without sufficient local knowledge or understanding of local needs.

Q: We realise the DfI is a 'supertanker and not easy to turn around'. In a recent meeting with a council the experience was that the official answering questions on cycling was not the local roads manager but someone from DfI HQ. An example was given of a proposal to make a road junction more usable by cyclists and walkers, which was blocked by DfI officials, in favour of a simple resurfacing exercise. Moving things forward has been slow and difficult. How is the Minister hoping to ensure her department works 'as one' when trying to deliver e.g., the cycle strategy?

A. The Minister recognises that the Department has been very focussed on roads and she is trying to change the culture, by embedding that culture change right in the heart of the Department by appointing the walking and cycling champion to signal very clearly that this is the direction of travel for the Department. There is a challenge in trying to embed that right across every aspect. Active travel is not an afterthought or an outer part of the department – it is about having this approach right across, so that embedding active travel is nearly the first consideration in design of schemes.

The Minister has challenged her officials to ensure that they facilitate opportunities for active travel and take opportunities to do things in a new and better way. She noted several current opportunities in Belfast, and her intent to be able to show how differences have been made, and active travel made safer during her time as Minister at the end of the current mandate. She also noted how councils are leading in active travel planning and projects across NI and requested councillors to be advocates for active travel and constructive critical friends to the Department.

Q. We are pleased to see that a review of the planning system has been instigated. We believe this is a timely and a welcome decision. Can the Minister agree that local government should be a key partner in the review and the outcomes?

A. The planning system is crucial in recovering from COVID and also in tackling the climate crisis, and local government is a key partner in the delivery of that planning system. Yes, local government will be key stakeholders in terms of the review of the Planning Act, however, it is important to note that this is not a fundamental root and branch review of the two-tier system. This review will be focussed on the implementation of the legislative provisions within the Act itself, and the extent to which the original objectives of the Planning act are being met. Councils will play a key part in helping identify what is working and what is not, and to identify opportunities to make improvements. Some of these changes will require legislative fixes and some will not. The Minister reassured councils that they have a valuable role to play and DfI officials will be working with them very closely as the Act is reviewed and beyond that.

PANEL DISCUSSION AND Q&A

Q. (To Simon Hamilton) Is Belfast Chamber working collaboratively with Chambers or other trade bodies in places outside Belfast?

A. Prior to the pandemic, this did not happen much but out of necessity chambers and trade bodies across the region have come together to discuss issues including the wider 'city region'. The City Deal can be a catalyst for lots of different things, including bringing the business community in the wider city region together more. Local government needs a cohesive business voice, and as we begin to recover it would be good for neighbouring Chambers to come together – not in a formalised way – but in a more cohesive effort.

Q. Also, the Chamber's proposals for Belfast seem to be slanted towards pedestrianisation – what provision has been made for ensuring accessibility for mobility impaired people and to cater for our ageing population?

A. We tend to talk about 'pedestrian friendly', but we do need to be mindful about accessibility, and this comes in various forms. At an early stage in the crisis, a proposal was made at a council meeting to temporarily close off Donegall Place to all vehicles. In time, properly done, more vehicles could be removed from that space but to remove buses (for example) was going to seriously negatively impact accessibility to the City Centre for people from the North and West of the City and up into Antrim & Newtownabbey. Making the city more pedestrian-friendly, more public transport friendly, more cycling friendly cannot be at a cost to accessibility for those who need it. Belfast Chamber have met with IMTAC Translink etc. to ensure that schemes are well thought out, of high quality and not rushed. It is better to take a bit of time and get it right, with everyone on board.

Q. In terms of scale and what councils are responsible for, the difference between government and NI councils is striking but the vision of councils is massive; the WLGA recently published a manifesto for localism, which is about place-shaping rather than councils. In terms of the language that is being used

in neighbouring jurisdictions – like localism, subsidiarity – do you feel that in regard to our strategic planning policy and even in the face of the new emerging PfG should we be using terminology like this? That we have to start talking this language before we ever get where we want to be – to enable councils to scale up and for NI to get the proportion right between central and local government and the better government we are looking for?

A: Obviously, NI councils are far behind in devolution of powers compared to other UK jurisdictions. There is a case to be made in that councils have much greater understanding of and leadership in their local areas, so it is worth councils keeping a push for greater devolution (which may not be welcomed in Stormont) using evidence from elsewhere such as from the combined authorities in England i.e., showing how it works when you put councils into the driving seat and deliver good outcomes. Also bringing evidence about good use being made of existing powers to lead and deliver is important. For example, the devolution brought about in Manchester was in response to many years of the council leadership making the case for increased devolution, and it was that vision and the partnerships they built leading to successes locally that were noticed. Councils need to demonstrate what a difference they can make with the existing powers they do have.

The right process needs to be in place or else it does not happen. The business community can see where there are disconnects and why the current government arrangements in NI do not work for them or for citizens. The business community and civic society have more liberty to push for governmental change like further devolution as this does not come across as self-serving. They have more freedom to identify problems and suggest solutions.

The City Centre is where the critical mass is to attract larger retail businesses, and there is a view that during the pandemic it has lost out to ‘neighbourhoods’, and although it is noted that in the longer term these areas should not suffer due to the pull of the city centre, use of ‘localism’ as a term may be viewed differently by different sectors. The city centre has a slightly different purpose than other retail hubs in the city, and town centres regionally.

Q. Re Belfast City Centre. The council is deeply worried by the voids that are already apparent and feel that decline could speed up over the years post-Covid. There is frustration that business wants the status quo but council knows that to make the city centre more attractive, diversification of use is necessary.

A. Change is accepted as good in the long term, but political impatience is not helpful when businesses are in survival mode. There is growing acceptance that an offer wider than retail in the city centre is necessary - the impact of closure of hospitality businesses highlighted this. Also, families are a missing demographic, which needs attention to ensure it is a more attractive destination.

Commonality between speakers/Themes for Next Steps

- Designing for people rather than cars
- ‘Empowering the council’ – Garnering support from outside local government to do this
- ‘Turning the DfI supertanker round’

- Lobbying activity: appropriate investment and appropriate powers in appropriate places

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