Belfast THRI[VES]: Transformative Health and Regeneration Initiatives [for Vibrancy, Equality, and Sustainability]

Belfast
THRI(VES)

Transformative Health and Regeneration Initiatives
[for Vibrancy, Equality, and Sustainability]

REGENERATION

VIBRANCY

HEALTH

SUSTAINABILITY

EQUALITY

#belfastthrives

Project Report – November 2023
SUMMARY EXTRACT

Belfast THRI[VES]

Transformative Health and Regeneration Initiatives [for Vibrancy, Equality, and Sustainability]

Project Report – November 2023: SUMMARY EXTRACT

Authors:
Dr Saul M Golden[1]
Dr Gavan Rafferty[1]
Professor Gerard Leavey[1]
Dr Callie Persic[2]
Ms Niamh Mulrine[2]

[1] Ulster University, Belfast
[2] Belfast City Council

Funding provided by

Belfast City Council

Department for Infrastructure
An Roinn Bonneagair
Depairtment fur Infrastructure
www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk

Department for Communities
An Roinn Pobal
Depairtment fur Commonities
www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Ulster University

Preamble/Acknowledgments

Belfast THRI[VES]

Executive Summary

Healthy environments are generally recognised as an integral part of the planning and delivery of vibrant places for people to live, work, play, and share (Johnson and Green, 2021; Atkinson et al., 2016). The World Health Organization's definition of health acknowledges the interplay between physical wellbeing and wider notions of social wellbeing as a fundamental right of every human being (WHO, 2020 [1948]). This right was echoed in Northern Ireland's own Regional Development strategy from 2010, which affirmed everyone should "be able to live in a healthy environment, with access to sufficient and appropriate environmental resources for a healthy life" (DRDNI, 2012: 50). Most recently, wellbeing for all has become a central tenet, in A Bolder Vision for Belfast (2021b), a visioning strategy jointly developed by Belfast City Council (BCC), Department for Communities (DfC), and Department for Infrastructure (DfI). In this context, THRI[VES] – Transformative Health and Regeneration Initiatives [for Vibrancy, Equality, and Sustainability] – applies urban-focused research to the challenge of measuring and integrating qualities associated with health and wellbeing for new projects delivered within Belfast's public realm. The research, a unique pilot partnership between Ulster University's Urban Research Lab and BCC, with DfI and DfC support, aims to develop new insights for:

- Integrating more comprehensive, evidence-based wellbeing criteria into urban development decision-making policy and practice.

- Better collecting and sharing of public-private knowledge (data, business cases, and public consultation) for more effective co-design and deliver of public realm projects, and

- Promoting more holistic cross-body frameworks for public space-focused investment and sustainable stewardship around established placemaking principles for liveable futures.

Examining how the City Centre can be an improved, inclusive, and innovative place for future generations, THRI[VES] argues for liveability as a unique framework to evaluate and deliver projects within and/or impacting on the public realm, primarily, through enhanced wellbeing priorities. It also investigates the role of public-private engagement to reframe wellbeing-based criteria and more effectively connect statutory and tactical regeneration process to more informal bottom-up evidence-based considerations that can collectively address and develop innovative solutions to tackle health, climate-change, and socio-economic stresses.

Four objectives structure the synthesis and presentation of report findings to:

- Assist Council-Executive goals to develop effective public decision-making processes to reimagine greener, healthier, more vibrant city spaces (in line with A Bolder Vision aspirations).

- Identify areas for improved cross-sector data-sharing on wellbeing, sustainability, and resilience.

- Develop evidence-based proposals to improve public-space policy and decision-making processes.

- Propose new data-sharing platforms and future collaborations to inform more effective evidence-based policy, design, and post-evaluation of new public realm projects for wellbeing.

Focusing on Belfast City Centre, primary evidence, literature reviews, and international precedents provide wider lessons about urban governance and place-management at different scales of development including:

- smaller projects (pop-ups, parklets, and meanwhile type examples)

- neighbourhood-wide visioning and masterplanning proposals, and

- city-wide to regional and national planning and regeneration project development policy.

The above project levels, discussed in report examples, acknowledge how all development and policy are interconnected, impacted by complex spatial and community decisions for local/national governing bodies.

The report highlights a need for greater shared understandings and collaboration amongst all policymakers, professionals, and the public about the terms, data, and co-production processes that inform both urban and rural development. The findings, discussions, and summary recommendations – set out below and expanded upon in the concluding chapter - are thus seen as a starting point to help improve placemaking for greater liveability and sustainable livelihood in Belfast, as an example for all villages, towns, and city centres.

Project lessons and recommendations

THRI[VES] has highlighted both positive opportunities as well as significant challenges for Belfast. Lessons suggest areas for improvement on aims to integrate more comprehensive wellbeing criteria into decision-making policy and practice, improve how public-private knowledge is collected and shared, and to promote more holistic frameworks for sustained, and sustainable liveable futures. The following sections collate project lessons aligned to the four research objectives and recap the THRI[VES] Project Recommendations with extended insights for future action:

1. **Assist Council-Executive goals for more effective public decision-making processes to reimagine greener, healthier, more vibrant city spaces, in line with A Bolder Vision.**

   1.1. Delivering A Bolder Vision's liveable and healthy, inclusive communities aims requires more inclusive and innovative participatory mechanisms. Fully engage more people in meaningful debate and innovative processes to co-produce and articulate shared outcomes.

   1.2. Uncertainty around the future of the city centre continues pre-Covid-19 trends for online retail and shifting patterns of local-global trade. Radical changes in working and living appear to be long lasting, with visiting/shopping figures anecdotally rebounding more quickly.

   1.3. There is a recognition, from COVID-19 temporary, emergency measures that interventions driven jointly by multiple sectors (e.g. infrastructure, regeneration, transport, business, and voluntary groups) are positive ways to move beyond what is often perceived as rigid and slow-progress development systems.

   1.4. Mixed and bottom-up inspired co-design initiatives need to be supported by more flexible project development processes and regulatory systems. Recognise variations between very short, medium, and longer-term projects to deliver more effective, value for money, and successful outcomes.

   1.5. Belfast and the NI Executive departments (DfI and DfC) must address uncertainty about who has/should have powers to implement projects in the proper scale and timeframes to deliver on Visions to continue to re-cover, re-imagine, and re-vitalise Belfast City Centre through programmes for 2025 through to 2035.

2. **Identify areas for improved cross-sector data-sharing on wellbeing, sustainability, and resilience**

   2.1. Develop more nuanced information about gender, age, culture, abilities, and about marginalised groups including homeless persons and the increasingly diverse migrant populations in and around the city.

   2.2. Treat each group who has traditionally, and more recently lived in or uses the city centre in either regulated or less/unregulated environments as individual rather than a monolithic data perspective.

   2.3. Data spread across multiple organisations is not always seen as available at needed local neighbourhood levels, making it difficult to effectively tailor analysis and co-production methods at granular level, defining the who/what/where about local 'communities' and targeting strategies to meet their needs.

   2.4. In addition to addressing the multiplicity and internal limits of dataset refinement, there remains a need to expand upon limited types of datasets in Northern Ireland that have been made available to academics and other interest groups to effectively analyse linkages to health-wellbeing factors.

3. **Develop evidence based proposals to improve public-space policy and decision-making processes.**

   3.1. Address language and cultural barriers for ethnic minorities and migrants in the city that may be in addition to economic barriers or feeling part of the city, affecting health through isolation and disconnection from services.

   3.2. Create more effective and timely feedback loops about government visioning and development projects for the public to become more aware of how decisions are realised; address a disconnect in survey responses from the public, who do not feel engaged in government efforts to include more local voices.

   3.3. Develop more enhanced hybrid methods for reaching the most marginalised voices across and within increasingly diverse city centre neighbourhood populations. Apply more "small area" analysis to overcome low numbers of city centre residents and low response rates to development processes.

   3.4. More joined up governance, management and investment was raised as a concern across all sectors to promote active travel and enrich the urban realm for economic and social vibrancy while respecting, protecting, and enhancing the quality/sustainability of Belfast's built environment for new generations.

   3.5. A need for more systematic ways to evaluate issues including environmental health, environmental justice, and the quality of the built environment across the city, the relationship between environment and equity, especially for vulnerable communities.

Belfast
THRI[VES]

4. **Propose new data-sharing platforms and collaborations to inform more effective evidence-based policy, design, and post-evaluation of new public realm projects for wellbeing.**

4.1. Policies should better address and share data on gender minority ethnic group concerns for physical safety, and perceptions of being safe from harm in public spaces to improve civic participation. Evidence gathering – statutory and hard data - was not, yet, seen as acknowledging people's perceptions, which become barriers to more use of the city centre.

4.2. Use opportunities to present pedestrian-active-travel choices to city centre stakeholders with more evidence of both economic and social wellbeing returns, as well as delivering on sustainability targets.

4.3. Areas for improvement in the delivery of innovative public places include increasing how public-council services are themselves included and supported (financially and through management programmes) in ways similar to support provided for economic activity such as in-door/out-door retail/hospitality.

4.4. Earlier development stage engagement at project inception should emphasise co-produced visions rather than relying on limited consultation with visualisations after designs are substantially complete. Co-production platforms that openly share data with communities can be better value for money, reduce consultation fatigue, and silos from top-down processes and within communities themselves.

4.5. Develop cross-sector platforms to balance choices about funded projects and uses catering for core business, student, and tourism demographics with innovative approaches for diverse and less-included population groups including younger and older persons, homeless persons, migrants.

Project Recommendations with chapter relevant signposting and extended descriptions:

1. **Apply a liveability lens. Ch.2**
   Integrate a place and health-focused liveability toolkit to re-balance evidence-based criteria for development decisions. Better connect inclusive economics to wellbeing, resilience, and environmental sustainability. Acknowledge the contested nature of concepts and terms applied to placemaking to remain open to adapt indicators for statistical and experiential evidence to specific health, climate, and socio-economic stresses in a given urban-rural development.

2. **Strive for active accessible public places, not pass-through spaces. Ch.4**
   Public realm projects – from pop-up experiments or medium-term meanwhile uses to long-term strategic plan delivery - should strive for welcoming and inclusive outcomes that encourage social interaction, lingering and leisure activities supported by unfettered public rights of use and access, pedestrian/cycle permeability, and managed public-private services. Appropriate programming should enable public-private stewardship.

3. **Formalise the informal. Ch 4**
   Policies, statutory processes, and practitioner training should normalise non-statutory types of creative engagement. Streamlining short-term pilots and placemaking experiments in the public realm can create and strengthen community-centred partnerships. Experiments on public realm projects - activentions (activating engagement with the public) have been shown to reveal deeper, earlier lessons than post-design consultation. Such lessons deserve greater weight in project development from earliest visioning, to pilot and throughout statutory decision-making.

4. **Avoid a failure mindset. Ch4**
   Effective stewardship of meanwhile projects in the public realm requires adding time and capital budgets for meaningful engagement with public and private sectors. Experimental projects, those without commercial operative oversight are especially vulnerable; plan for risk, unexpected uses, and demographic change; and things 'going wrong' during project lifespans. Use changes as co-learning opportunities (in development as in life) to adjust design and/or management, and to maintain end-user dialogue vs static dogma.

5. **Address barriers to wellbeing and engagement. Ch4**
   Language and cultural complexities across society in addition to physical and economic factors can be barriers to being or feeling part of the city for marginalised groups, minorities, and migrants, which can extend to health impacts and public service pressures.
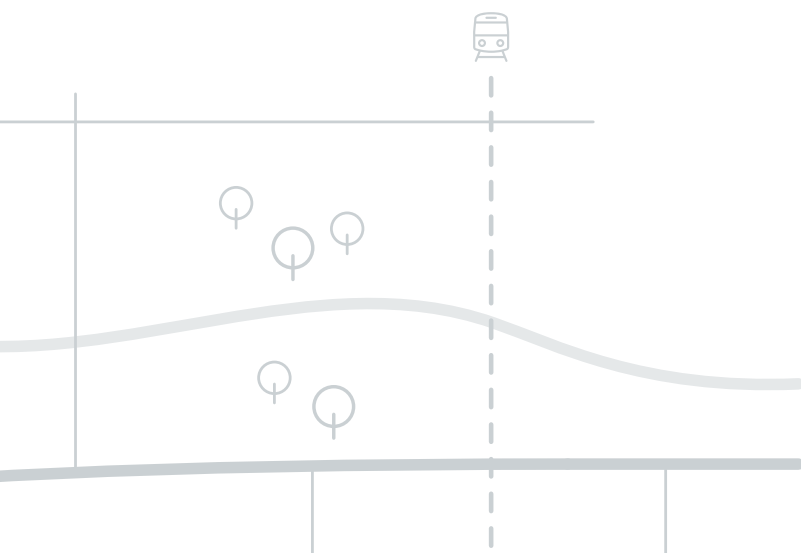
6. **Recognise capacity building as a two-way process. Ch2**

Top-down as much as bottom-up boundaries and blinkers can reduce effective input, understanding, and support across difficult or unspoken issues affecting the most vulnerable in society, increasing project risk and costs. Deeper engagement (including overcoming unconscious biases) requires social as much as physical capital building across institutional and organisational boundaries, and between professionals, policymakers, and the public from early visioning to delivery on resourcing, capacity, and sustainable stewardship.

7. **Provide for adequate and iterative meanwhile reflection. Ch4**

Pop-ups and meanwhile projects benefit from embedded processes to collect, evaluate, and share real-time liveability and place-based lessons to policymakers, planners, design teams, as well the wider public as stakeholders in public realm changes. Lessons from partnerships, capacity-knowledge and experience building should be applied to avoid an "it always been done that way" or "we know better than what's been before" approach, which contributes to practitioner and consultation fatigue.

8. **Use data to motivate and support policy and practice. Ch2**

By developing more effective local and global partnerships, Northern Ireland can learn how to better use data to influence policy and to work with others to

identify future health and wellbeing focused policies and interventions. More granular qualitative/ quantitative profiles, with suitable translation can adjust for anomalies in collection within small and/or low population wards.

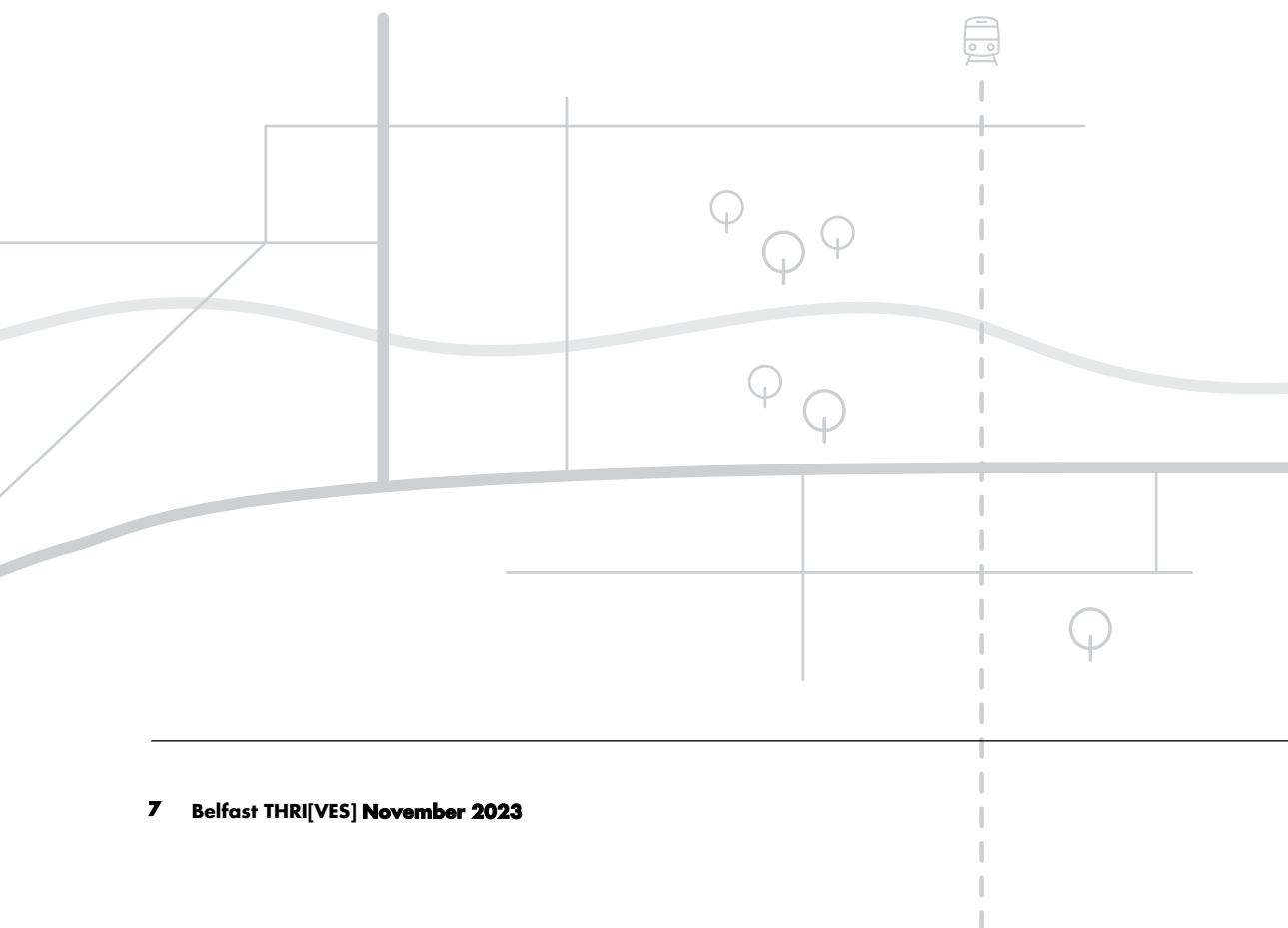9. **Apply a more intersectional approach to data. Ch2**

Recognise that health and wellbeing data on or from each group who uses the city is always nuanced, never monolithic: What might look welcoming for one person from one traditional demographic might be very different for people from ethnic minorities, gender minorities, for example, and for people of differing ages, sets of abilities/disabilities, and other backgrounds.

10. **Develop youth leadership. Ch2**

Formalise youth training and placement across the public, private, and voluntary sectors with support from academic and other civic institutions to diversify outreach experience and foster skills to identify liveability-wellbeing issues through more effective community engagement. New roles and successful models can emerge to support valuable capacity-building and sustainable leadership that foster long-term partnerships to achieve the above goals and future visions.
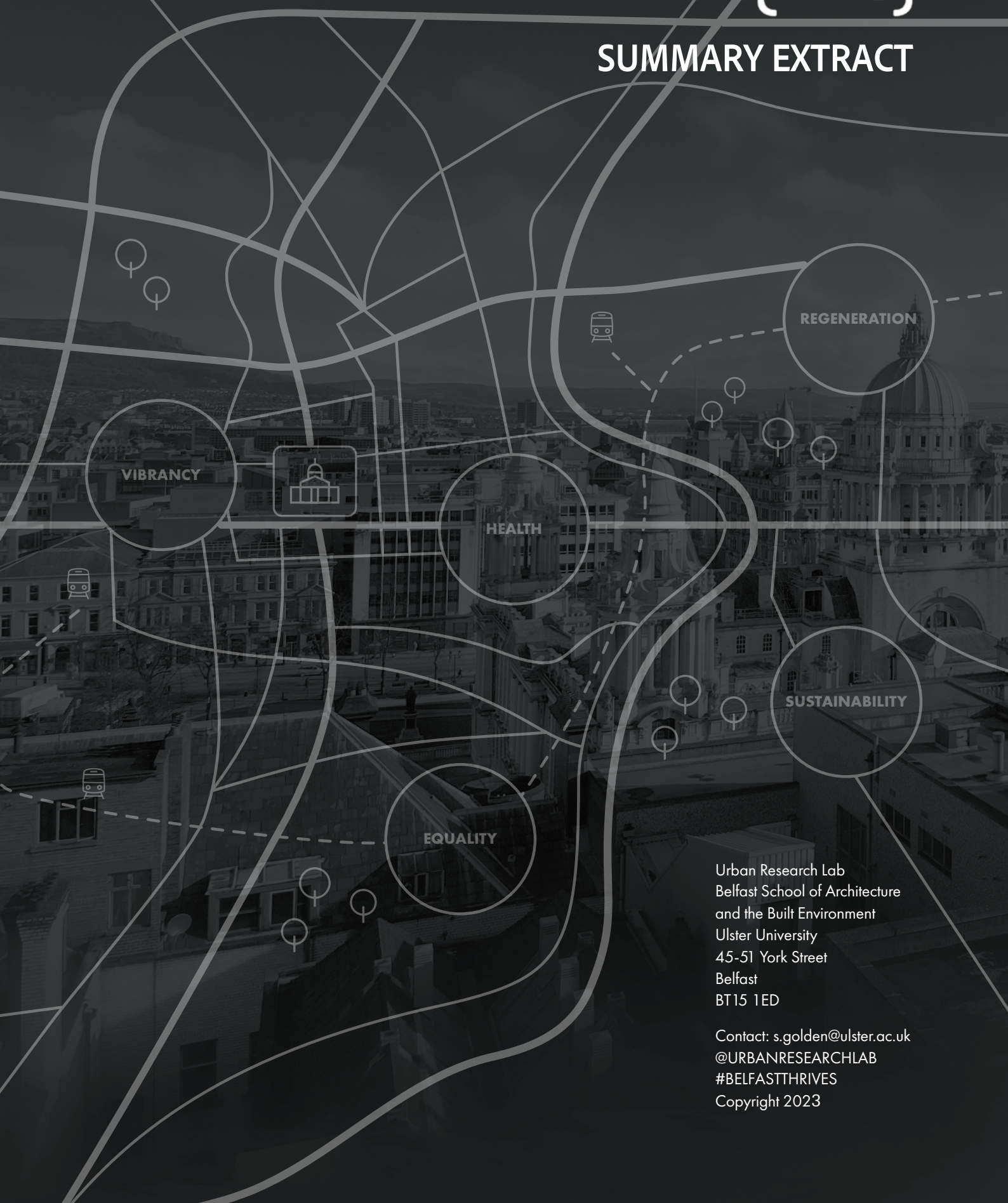
Next steps:

Develop appropriate Action Plans involving continuing engagement with project partners, the public and new contributors/stakeholders. It is envisaged that such progress can build on the report findings including policy level breifings, and internal Department-Council efforts to seek consensus on refining short-medium term impact targets.

Belfast
THRI[VES]

U Ulster University

Belfast THRI(VES)
SUMMARY EXTRACT

REGENERATION

VIBRANCY

HEALTH

SUSTAINABILITY

EQUALITY