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Measures to Make Belfast a Hub for Health and Wellbeing Explored in Ulster University and Belfast City Council Partnership

10 May 2021

– Pictured in Cathedral Gardens at the launch of the Belfast THRIVES project are (l-r) Dr Gavan Rafferty (UU), Lord Mayor Alderman Frank McCoubrey, Dr Saul Golden (UU), Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, Prof Gerard Leavey and Pro Vice Chancellor Research Liam Maguire (both UU)

Today marks the launch of *Belfast-THRI(VES)*, a pilot, practical research project between Ulster University and Belfast City Council (BCC) to support BCC and both the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and Department for Communities (DfC) to better inform decisions for enhancing the liveability of the city and wellbeing of its inhabitants.

During Mental Health Awareness week this week (10th – 16th May), this innovative pilot programme has been launched to study holistic health and wellbeing-led models for planning, designing and managing the city centre’s public spaces for the long-term; and to respond to immediate health and socio-economic threats from the Covid-19 pandemic.

A multi-disciplinary team of researchers from Ulster’s Belfast School of Architecture (Urban Research Lab) and the Built Environment and School of Psychology (The Bamford Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing) are working jointly with a team from Belfast City Council’s City Regeneration & Development team to deliver this research.

The research project will support BCC, DfI and DfC to develop new urban-health focused collaborative working practices across civic and private sectors and will complement other active studies into economic regeneration and reducing the carbon footprint of the city.

Three key areas of research exploration have been identified to make Belfast a more liveable and inclusive city:

1. how to better plan for and design public spaces to recognise and encourage use by all people, including often marginalised populations;
2. managing public parks, plazas, streets and underutilised spaces such as parking areas for diverse uses encouraging more cycling and walking, and pairing leisure and commerce with delivering vital public services;
3. proposing post-occupancy tools for public realm projects to better connect liveability and wellbeing data across public, private, and voluntary sectors, to inform future projects.

The research will focus on three specific areas of the City Centre: Linen Quarter Public Realm Pop-ups, the Dublin Road Corridor Cycle Lanes, and Cathedral Gardens Plaza-Play Park, adjacent to Ulster University’s brand new Belfast Campus. These BID, DfI, DfC and BCC-led transformations will inform future City Centre investment and infrastructure strategies.

Belfast will take inspiration from cities around the world, working with governments, developers, and researchers from Auckland to Seattle and Philadelphia to Manchester, who have pioneered health and regeneration initiatives from one-off projects to city-region-wide strategies. THRIVES will seek to learn from these processes in order to shortcut challenges faced by others and to identify gaps in Belfast’s current offering which could be developed.

Those set to benefit from this research project include:

- ☐ *The public and community*, especially those who live, work and visit Belfast: the researchers will seek inclusive engagement on their diverse health-focused needs and decisions impacting this audience
- ☐ *Policy-makers*: through objective evaluation of decision-making processes on pilot interventions

- *Project Partners, Contributors and Advisors*: will benefit from cross-sector working and data sharing, disseminating expertise together with on-the-ground evidence to inform policy, practice, and further research
- *Ulster University Students*: those directly involved through experience and learning from research-led teaching addressing real-world issues, and all those who will attend the new Campus

Lord Mayor Alderman Frank McCoubrey, commented:

“It has been a year of great challenge for the health and wellbeing of the people of the city of Belfast and beyond. Quality outdoor spaces and active travel routes contribute to good health and mental wellbeing, which have never been as important to our citizens as they are now. The Bolder Vision for Belfast has guided our recovery work, and through this pilot research programme, we hope to emerge from the pandemic better equipped to make Belfast a more liveable city. Our aim is to diversify the city centre and improve connectivity to bring better health outcomes for those who call it home.”

Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey said:

“Supporting this research project is an important aspect in helping us better understand the devastating impacts of the health pandemic, particularly on our health and well-being, and importantly how we can better respond to ensure that, together, Belfast City Centre returns to a vibrant and inviting destination for all”.

Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon said:

“We are excited to see what this research project will mean for the wellbeing of the people of Belfast and those who visit this wonderful city. The project will inform the Bolder Vision for Belfast which I am committed to delivering, working in partnership with Belfast City Council and the Minister for Communities. It will help us as we continue to reimagine and transform Belfast’s public spaces as part of our Green recovery from Covid.”

Dr Saul Golden, Ulster University Lecturer and Project Lead:

“The outcomes we are jointly working towards are significant for this city: they include policy papers and recommendations for data-sharing and health and liveability criteria which will inform strategic decisions, interventions, and investment toward a more inclusive, liveable, and sustainable Belfast with wellbeing at its heart.”

Professor Liam Maguire, Pro Vice-Chancellor Research, Ulster University added:

“This project highlights the University’s role as a catalyst for change in the local Belfast community, particularly given that we’ll welcome staff and students to our new city centre campus from the Autumn so they too will benefit from the health outcomes. It’s also a great learning opportunity for our students on related courses as some will contribute to the research team and all have the opportunity to learn from the pilot programme.”

The project will deliver an interim public symposium on 16-17 June 2021, with the public invited to evening and daytime events to hear from international and local keynote speakers and panel discussions contributing to mapping health-related data, designs, and attitudes on key transformative projects for cycle lanes, quiet streets, and public interventions for shared recreation, retail, and delivery of Council services. Please take part and share your thoughts on your city, more information and registration link here: <https://ndevents.co.uk/belfast-thrives2021/> (<https://ndevents.co.uk/belfast-thrives2021/>).

Funded through BCC via the Department for Communities (DfC) Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), the project will run until September 2021.

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