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Cardiff Crossrail, Callaghan Square – DCFW Feedback

29th July 2024

DCFW attended a stakeholder engagement meeting organised by Cardiff Council and the wider client team including TfW on the 17th of July 2024 to look at proposals for the future of Callaghan Square. This note provides a summary of our feedback on the proposals.

We have been aware of the proposals to connect Cardiff Central Station with the Bay Line via a tram-train link for several years, but this was the first opportunity to review and comment on the scheme. By this stage, significant work has been progressed on the alignment of the track, highway, and dedicated cycle route to a point where they are substantially fixed. Despite the programme being constrained by funding timescales, earlier engagement would have allowed us to input more usefully into the process of designing the space and how all the different considerations are coordinated. In parallel, little early engagement seems to have been undertaken with the local community and stakeholders. Engagement at the start of the design process could have helped to set a shared vision and brief for the space, above and beyond an engineering-led layout around which a 'place' is to be created.

Presentation of Proposals

The 3D model fly throughs are helpful for getting a sense of the scale of the space but are not yet reflective of the nature of the proposals. Using this tool to understand and respond to the realities of the amount of traffic that is likely to be in the space and all the traffic lights, railings, lighting columns and signage will be important.

Highway Dominance

It is understood that the design process to date has sought to minimise the amount of space taken up by the highway, which is positive. However, there is no information yet on the proposed 'design speed' of the highway and how the design will reduce the dominance of the highway within the space. This will include aspects such as materials, kerb heights, signage, use of railings etc. In line with the transport hierarchy, set out in Planning Policy Wales and Llwybr Newydd, pedestrian and cycle provision should take priority. A review of whether this is truly reflected in the design should be undertaken and any adjustments made. This may include ensuring all pedestrian crossings are straight, single phase rather than staggered with traffic islands.

Accessibility Input

It is critical that the input of access and inclusion groups is taken at the earliest possible opportunity as this will impact the design of many aspects of the space. Defining safe pedestrian spaces and crossings will be important, however there will also be input on the

design and location of landscape elements, such as water features and benches, to inform how this space can be comfortable for all.

Vision and Leadership

The combined plan of projects which was presented in the meeting is helpful to show the extent, scale, and general nature of proposed change to the south of the city centre in coming years. However, this does not constitute a masterplan as it does not plan for, coordinate or direct future change, beyond what is already in progress.

It is clear that this project is part of significant wider change in the area and could be the catalyst for further change. This needs a single overseeing body with the power and accountability to ensure that all aspects work together to capture opportunities and provide coordination.

A vision-led masterplan that sets out what the local authority would like to see happen, including engagement with the local communities, and that defines the parameters for surrounding future development opportunities would help with this process. This should be a realistic but visionary process that considers where this area might be in 25 years (2050 – the net zero carbon deadline), well beyond the current funding opportunities and existing proposals. This will help to identify who needs to do what to enable and coordinate this.

The place

A key question that emerged from the discussion was 'What is Callaghan Square?' The nature of the square will change with the proposed interventions and future development opportunities, but the type of place it will become has not been clearly established.

The precedents presented were much more formally civic in nature than this space will be. There will be significant movement of people via different modes: this will be the main activity in the space. Whether people from surrounding business and student accommodation can be tempted to dwell in the space will depend on the quality of the spaces created and what other choices they have. The use of more applicable precedents would allow the design team to test draft proposals against the success of real delivered projects.

What is needed is a clear idea of what will make this place special and more than just the sum of its transport parts with plants and paving filling the gaps. If the primary purpose is movement by road, tram, bike and foot, how will this place be different to other large public spaces in Cardiff? We encourage the public realm proposals to be bolder in creating an intervention that is a truly memorable part of the journeys through this place.

Character and Function

We suspect there is too much paved space for the likely number of people passing through on foot or dwelling, whilst the green spaces are too dispersed and disparate to have much impact. It would be helpful to distinguish usable green space from other green areas.

Thinking about the length and character of the transport routes more broadly, not just within this project's red-line boundary might suggest something unique that could be developed here. For example, as trees need to be removed, substantial new tree planting will be required. A green zone of intensive planting (much more concentrated than the current plans) could make Callaghan Square unique and special. Green infrastructure may be a significant part of the vision as well as meeting SuDS requirements.

An oasis of dense planting is one idea that was suggested in the meeting, but there may be others to be considered. It is clear that, to be a success, this space with so many movement functions will need a really bold, strong design concept that is creatively delivered.

Distilling the key ideas down to the fundamental elements that must be delivered to meet the placemaking requirements of the space will be important for the ensuring that the contractor delivers them. This may be represented in a key diagram that accompanies the more technical data.

Engagement and Consultation

Early engagement with stakeholders and the community is a critical part of any placemaking-led project and it is important that there is scope to meaningfully influence the proposals. Therefore, the engagement stage should happen sooner in the programme.

Engagement on this project will likely need to be broken down into different aspects to ensure there are meaningful outcomes. There is bound to be significant feedback from the public on changes to the highway network and, while this needs to be listened to and responded to, it must not overshadow meaningful input into the design of the space.

The public art strategy for the space is a good opportunity for engagement with local people. The use of creative engagement with the community can help to inform the brief for public art and there shouldn't be too much presumption at this stage about what this might look like. There should be a level of openness and flexibility to what the process may result in.

The impact of terminating Bute Street at the square should be tested through engagement, not just in relation to traffic and movement impact, but also the social and cultural impact on the community of Bute Town. There should be a clear narrative for why the existing landscape features within the space have not been retained, particularly given the previous public investment this represents.

Contractor Requirements

Social value has been included in the assessment criteria in procuring the contractor to deliver phase one of the scheme. This is commendable, however the true value for local people should be maximised from the start of the design process through meaningful engagement. This would allow the social value commitments in the contracts to be more locally specific with maximised benefit.

Phases

Not all aspects of the public realm proposals will be delivered through the current funding package.

The design should show what the current funding will achieve and this should be clear in any consultation. That "Phase 1" design must be good enough to be a long term completed project in itself, in case full delivery funding is never secured.

The requirements for delivering the full proposals should be built into the initial contract as an option to enable future delivery at optimum cost.

Next Steps

We would welcome further engagement through design review of the proposals as they are developed by the design and contractor team. We encourage use of time now to focus on the design vision and ensure this is communicated clearly to the appointed contractor.

This is a significant space and a substantial amount of public money that must be used to deliver the best possible public realm for the city.

DCFW Attendees

Jen Heal, Deputy Chief Executive

Ewan Jones

Wendy Maden