

NI Assurance Process
Project Assessment Review
Risk Level: High
NI Assurance ID: GWY/000/14
Privacy Marking: OFFICIAL

Project Title: York Street Interchange

Version number:	FINAL
Date of issue:	14 November 2020
Programme or project:	York Street Interchange
Organisation:	Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
Senior Responsible Owner (SRO)	[REDACTED]
Project Sponsor	[REDACTED]
Review Sponsor	[REDACTED] Minister for Infrastructure
Business Case stage reached:	OBC
Review dates:	2 to 5 November 2020
Review Team Leader:	[REDACTED]
Review Team Members/s:	[REDACTED]
Previous Review(s):	Gate 2 October 2015 (previous scheme)

Project Assessment Review**Project Title: York Street interchange****Risk Level: High****NI Assurance ID: GWY/000/14****Privacy Marking: [Insert OFFICIAL (in capitals) unless advised otherwise]****About this Report**

This report is a snapshot review of the project, reflecting the conclusions of an independent Assurance Review Team. It is based on information from project documents reviewed and from interviews carried out within a short 4-day timeframe and is delivered to the Review Sponsor/SRO at the conclusion of the Review.

This Project Assessment Review was arranged and managed by:

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1. Scope of the Review

The Terms of Reference (Scope) of this Review are:

To provide assurance to the Minister on how and to what extent the proposed scheme reflects and accommodates key Ministerial, Executive and Belfast City Council objectives and priorities (or could be adjusted to do so). The review should focus on the scheme's ability to deliver the following and consider any other issues highlighted:

- The Minister's priorities around focus on wellbeing, sustainable travel, creating thriving liveable places and communities, responding to the climate emergency and connecting people and opportunities;
- The Executive's priorities set out in New Decade: New Approach and the Outcomes Delivery Plan, and;
- The scheme's strategic fit alongside the emerging policy context, for example, the Belfast Agenda, the Belfast City Council Development Plan Strategy and the emerging Transport Plans.

2. Executive Summary

Delivery Confidence Assessment (DCA)

By agreement with the review SRO's a Delivery Confidence Assessment was deemed not appropriate for the terms of reference for this review.

The Review Team concludes that the York Street Interchange (YSI) project provides an adequate solution to the original brief. The solution has been endorsed by a Public Inquiry. and the previous Minister announced his intention to proceed with the scheme. However, these original YSI project objectives, which are focused on improving strategic traffic and maintaining local traffic, are no longer fully in line with current and emerging thinking on urban spaces, communities and the role of transport. Nor do they adequately align with the Minister's priorities for:

- Wellbeing
- Sustainable Travel
- Creating thriving and liveable places and communities
- Responding to the climate emergency
- Connecting people and opportunities.

Whilst YSI is noted in the Executive New Decade New Approach as being one potential project in the "turbo charging of infrastructure delivery". It is not designated as a Flagship Project nor is it specifically mentioned in the Outcomes Delivery Plan.

In terms of the emerging policy context, particularly for Belfast City Council and emerging transport plans(thinking), which is around sustainability, climate change etc. it is difficult to see a strong strategic fit between YSI and the developing policy themes.

3. Summary of Recommendations

Ref	Recommendation	Report Sections (where more detail can be found)	Criticality: Urgent/High/ Medium/Low
01	The YSI project brief should be reviewed and revised to ensure it aligns with the concept of “place making” and new best practice in terms of urban transport design, and with the Minister’s agenda.	8.3 Validity of Current Scheme	High
02	The wider area impact and benefits of the Project should be evaluated using appropriate quantitative and qualitative assessment mechanisms.	8.3 Validity of Current Scheme	High
03	The current Project costs should be updated to act as a benchmark to inform any decision on future alternative development.	8.3 Validity of Current Scheme	High
04	There needs to be a system of ongoing communications with all interested parties. This should include updating the 2017 Communications Strategy and employing a robust Communications Structure now as well as during any construction phase. Communications should be ongoing and not just point in time.	8.5 Communication and Co-Ordination	High
05	There needs be much closer co-ordination both within the Dfl and between Dfl and other relevant departments and interested parties at both policy and delivery levels with regard to YSI development and delivery.	8.5 Communication and Co-Ordination	High
06	There needs to be a co-ordinated decision made in the context of emerging policies, which then needs to be applied to ensure that the YSI project aligns to this context.	8.5 Communication and Co-Ordination	High

4. Summary of the Project

The York Street Interchange in Belfast is a road scheme to improve the flow of traffic at the confluence of two motorways and the Westlink. The scheme is deemed to be essential infrastructure scheme, which is identified as a key Executive priority in New Decade New Approach.

5. Background and Context

The need for a scheme in this area was identified in the 1960s. Development of the current scheme commenced in 2008. Following a Public Inquiry and the publication of the statutory orders, procurement of the project commenced in 2017.

However, the proposed award of contract was subject to a legal challenge on the basis of process. As a result of a High Court legal case (prior to contract award) in 2018, the Court set aside the decision to award the contract to the successful tenderer. DfI lodged a Notice of Appeal, however in September 2019 the appeal upheld the original judgement, that the award of the contract was unlawful.

Following the court judgement, the Department is currently developing / finalising a new procurement strategy which is targeted for by the end of 2020 (if all approvals are in place).

An independent assessment of the procurement strategy will be provided by specialist consultants

6. Aims and objectives

The scheme will address a major bottleneck on the strategic road network, replacing the existing signalised junctions at York Street with direct links between Westlink, M2 & M3, the three busiest roads in Northern Ireland. It will also separate strategic traffic from local traffic movements via underpasses below the existing road and rail bridges and underneath a new bridge at York Street.

7. Key Milestones

(Indicative timescales provided by the Project and subject to ministerial approval to proceed to procurement and the availability of funding)

What	When
Pre-Tender Market Engagement Exercise	January 2021
Cost Estimate Approval	January 2021
Confirmation of Procurement Strategy	February 2021
Publish OJEU Contract Notice	March 2021
Invitation to Tender	September 2021
Contract Award	April 2022
Make Vesting Order	May 2022
Confirm Target	June 2023
Full Business Case approval	September 2023
Notice to Proceed to Stage Two	December 2023
Works Commence	January 2024
Completion	January 2028

8. Detailed Review Team Findings

8.1 Context for the findings

The Review Team was asked to consider the extent to which the York Street Interchange (YSI) project reflects :

- The Minister's priorities around focus on wellbeing, sustainable travel, creating thriving liveable places and communities, responding to the climate emergency and connecting people and opportunities;
- The Executive's priorities set out in New Decade: New Approach and the Outcomes Delivery Plan, and
- The scheme's strategic fit alongside the emerging policy context, for example, the Belfast Agenda, the Belfast City Council Development Plan Strategy and the emerging Transport Plans.

8.2 The changing strategic and cultural context

The Review Team found that the proposed YSI scheme is very much a traffic focused product to improve regional strategic transport links. The need for an urban traffic corridor was first conceived during the 1960s and development of the current scheme began in 2008 at a time when the approach to developing transport infrastructure was focused primarily on facilitating and providing for increased motorised traffic movement whilst minimising adverse impacts to its environs.

Since then further improvements have been made to respond to stakeholder concerns and following the Public Inquiry in 2015 in terms of introducing more measures to cater for walking and cycling. These include dual outbound cycle lanes, widened footpaths, some provision for dedicated public transport lanes and measures to increase the ambience of existing infrastructure (specialist lighting under bridges, high quality finishes to walkways etc). However, these have had to be fitted into the physical constraints of the existing scheme largely dictated by its urban location. This has resulted in a set of proposed measures that are the result of significant efforts to meet the output from the Inquiry but are limited in terms of addressing the new "place" and wellbeing agenda for Belfast and its citizens. Within the current design constraints and scheme parameters, this appears to be the best achievable solution, although the resultant design and measures were viewed by many interviewees as being sub-optimal.

Improving the flow of traffic will help to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emitted, currently estimated at some 190 tonnes per annum (60% of current emissions), as well as reduced noise generation. We also learnt that there will be a considerable economic benefit for commercial traffic in terms of reducing operational costs caused by current delays at the junction. However, significant doubts were raised by a number of interviewees as to the efficacy of proposed measures to improve the ambience and reduce the current severance of affected communities from each other and from the city centre. In particular, the history of North Belfast and its consequent impact on the residents mean that there is a higher level of stress for those residents in negotiating any form of less than welcoming walking and cycling routes. The Review Team concurs with these concerns.

Since project inception, research about and recognition of the elements necessary for successful regeneration of depressed neighbourhoods and achieving thriving, liveable urban

spaces and communities has gathered pace significantly. It now has both a higher profile and a much higher priority in strategic plans for towns and cities in the UK, Europe and further afield.

The concept of “place making” and its growing importance in achieving excellence in urban living, as currently understood, was mentioned by a number of interviewees. The Review Team heard of a number of examples of good practice of this in cities such as Helsinki, Copenhagen and Seoul, although it is not clear how much of this has been utilised in YSI development to-date.

The need for appropriate connectivity and its role in facilitating liveable places and supporting priorities such as wellbeing, active travel and connecting people and opportunities is recognised in this agenda of “place”. However, in approaching this issue it is necessary to consider other key factors such as building community cohesion, raising aspirations and making access to opportunities (educational and employment) rather than a straightforward focus purely on transport infrastructure for its own merits as has historically been the case.

The emphasis on “maintaining” access for walking and cycling in the current YSI scheme objectives is not aligned with the strong emphasis placed on “prioritising” walking, cycling and active travel in the strategic documents from Belfast City Council, together with the Bolder Vision for Belfast draft strategy (part 1) nor with the Minister’s priorities.

In addition to the above changes in strategic context for the YSI scheme, there have been other recent significant events that could impact the case for the current design of the scheme. The principal two are:

- The impact of the UK leaving the European Union (Brexit) for the Region and Belfast. The consequences for YSI are difficult to assess as so much is currently uncertain. The main impact was said to be on Belfast Port, however what and how much cannot be calibrated as yet. Interviewees did not see any changes significant enough to impact YSI significantly.
- The situation is similar in terms of what the change, if any, in travel behaviours in the medium to longer term as a consequence of the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID) is likely to be. The Review Team was told that overall traffic volumes (prior to the current lockdown) had already risen to 80 - 90% of its pre-COVID levels, albeit we were told (anecdotally) that some 40% is now delivery vans. This could possibly be as a consequence of increased online shopping activity. Several interviewees noted that, as a result of changes in travel behaviour due to COVID, there could be lasting changes to the timings and levels of peak flow traffic with reduced morning and evening peaks, although we did not see any evidence of forecast future travel patterns.

8.3 Validity of current scheme

The scheme was justified in a Strategic Outline Case (SoC) from Oct 2014. In this document the YSI Project scope is outlined as;

..... A direct link will be provided between the Westlink and the M2 and M3 motorway. This will be achieved by creating new flyovers over and underpasses... (page 2)

The strategic case is made on the basis of linking the three strategic corridors based on the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTN-TP) 2015 and the New Approach to Regional Transportation launched in March 2012. This also confirms that the "YSI is a Strategic Road Improvement (SRI) scheme.". YSI is also part of the Trans European Network (TENs) which is important in terms of the economy of the region and the UK.

There is no mention of the wider connectivity described in the Minister's aspirations.

Six options were considered leading to the choice of a preferred option. The selection criteria were however based on the traffic related project objectives. The Project is assessed as a self-contained road project that appears to have given limited consideration to the wider area impacts beyond its "Red Line" boundary. For example, the benefits are assessed on the shortening of journey times within the boundaries of the Project. The Review Team appreciates the budget and legal implications of considering development outside the Project boundary (Red Line). However, we note that some consideration needs to be given to the impact on areas adjacent to that Red Line in terms of disbenefits.

The YSI scheme has been designed to an early version of Design Manual for Roads and Bridge (DMRB 2019) which has been updated in England (Design Notes 1 and 2) in 2020 but no formal review of these updates has yet been carried out for YSI. DMRB is often not ideal for designing major trunk roads in urban situations and YSI has currently 113 departures from standards given the restricted environment in which the scheme is to be delivered.

The traffic flows within the site were assessed in 2008 using traffic models in accordance with the DMRB standard TD37 (in effect from 1993). No wider area traffic strategic multi-modal modelling appears to have been carried out. It is understood that DfI Transport Planning and Modelling Unit has been preparing a multi-modal, variable demand transport model for Northern Ireland and Belfast since 2015. This was made available in 2016 but has not yet been validated. The Review Team understand that, in the next iteration, such a model would be used. This is key for evaluating any development, transport and non-transport, in a modern urban environment.

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was conducted for the Project and the resulting Environmental Statement (ES) was published in January 2015. The ES states that it is a key document to inform any final decision as to how to proceed with the Project and the EIA was considered at the Inquiry This assessment was carried out in accordance with the EIA directives from 1993 and roads regulations from 2007.

The EIA assessed the impact of the Project at the time and to the standards of the day. In terms of existing and future land use it noted that "To fully assess the options considered for York Street Interchange there is a requirement to consider the impacts of future developments" (3.4) and identified the University of Ulster Greater Belfast Development (GBD) as one such a project.

The University of Ulster has subsequently been constructed and there will be a full complement of 15,000 people on site (students and staff) by September 2021. It considers itself to be a key driver of regeneration with a significant place-making function in the area which will need to be fully assessed in relation to its implications for YSI. The Review Team notes that car usage is expected to be very high and car park provision is some 300 spaces compared with current Jordanstown campus provision of 3000 spaces. There is clearly a need for better public transport, cycling and walking provision and linkages to the York Street train station which is on the other side of the YSI scheme. It is not clear to the Review Team the extent to which the impacts of the YSI on the new campus as well as other relevant developments and vice versa have been taken account of in the YSI project as it stands.

The Review Team notes that for an important scheme of this nature it is essential that the wider area benefits and disbenefits, as well as impacts on the urban environment, are fully assessed and quantified as appropriate.

At the time of approval, the project cost was estimated in the range £125-£165 at Q2 2013 Prices with a strong indicator for potential future EU funding of up to 40%. The current Project Approved Estimate is £129.9m. The cost was updated based on Nov 2014 prices, but is quoted as being within the same range £125-165m with a risk premium of 8% and an optimism bias of 16%. These both appear low to the Review Team for the nature of the YSI scheme, although we note that the Project has continued to work on risk since the Inquiry. In particular the risk premium at 8% (updated 2017) appears low considering current flooding issues with Westlink and the need for a pumping station to support the new design. The Review Team understands that the cost is currently being updated and heard that this could result in a substantial increase. We also welcome post review advice that a further risk workshop is planned for mid-November.

An updated cost estimate with an appropriate risk allowance and optimism bias will be a key piece of information to inform any decisions on the future development of the project. This will be particularly important should any decision regarding a revision of the brief to meet new objectives be taken as costs will play a key role in any reassessment of options.

Recommendation 1: The YSI project brief should be reviewed and revised to ensure it aligns with the concept of “place making” and new best practice in terms of urban transport design, and with the Minister’s agenda.

Recommendation 2: The wider area impact and benefits of the Project should be evaluated using appropriate quantitative and qualitative assessment mechanisms.

Recommendation 3: The current Project costs should be updated to act as a benchmark to inform any decision on future alternative development.

8.4 Support for the current scheme

Everyone interviewed made consistent comments to the effect that something requires to be done to resolve the obvious bottleneck issue present at the interchange and support economic growth objectives. The Review Team notes that the volume of traffic pre-COVID ranges from 85 – 110,000 vehicles per day. However, the majority of parties interviewed were not supportive for the scheme in its current format.

Themes articulated included:

- Many felt that there was a danger that the Project could become outdated well in advance of its expected lifespan and its relevance eroded due to a shift in thinking away from highway dominated solutions and towards more sustainable transport options. From what we were told this thinking has especially accelerated after the date of the Public Inquiry as evidenced by the Bolder Vision for Belfast 2019 (draft).
- A number questioned if there was enough urban design input to address the perceived “harshness” of the scheme. There was a consistent sentiment that the sole focus of YSI was to alleviate a vehicle bottleneck issue. This ties in with the scheme objectives (words like “maintenance of existing” etc.).

Community stakeholders, including the University, felt that there was not enough stakeholder engagement to address issues such as those related to severance (concerning the local community, adjacent communities and the city centre), softening the design especially concerning those residential properties directly affected, and creating stronger linkages for pedestrians/cyclists.

The above concern, in particular, was articulated in different ways from others focusing on the clash between solving an obvious hard congestion problem at the expense of soft “place” creation. The perceived threat was that there could be a lost opportunity to enhance regeneration of the area, if the Project were to proceed in its current form.

Several commented that it is unknown what lasting impact external factors will have on the need for the project, such as COVID 19, and Brexit, the former relating to the need for mainly office workers to commute into the city and the latter on mainly freight movement through YSI.

Many interviewees commented that the scheme design was old fashioned and was a consequence inherited from a decision made some 50 years ago to create a major conduit through the City as opposed to an alternative route around Cavehill. This consequence now manifests itself as YSI.

A re-occurring question was had there been enough thought given to the comprise between traffic flow and local linkages and design. Various contributors have alternative ideas around this which could be summarised to the effect that the current format of the Project is unrelated to good urban design principles.

There was also considerable concern regarding the short to medium term impacts of construction, including the risk of serious vermin infestation (as experienced when the new university campus was built) as well as the normal dust, noise and disruption of normal life.

8.5 Communication and Co-Ordination

There is a perception that the Project Team has tended to operate in an insular fashion since the Public Inquiry. There was a Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) which has not met since mid 2019, and there appears to have been little engagement with stakeholders since the Public Inquiry whilst other plans and developments have been evolving despite the delay to the YSI project.

This is especially so with regard to local residents where communications appear to have been reactive and conducted as a result of direction given by Inspector at the Public Inquiry. It would

appear that there has not been any other motivation or form of meaningful engagement with residents and residents were described as disillusioned, resigned and feeling they are not empowered and did not have an active voice that is listened to. This is especially sensitive as the North Belfast communities have suffered a considerable amount during the Troubles and have not benefited significantly from any Peace Dividend. As a consequence, they feel left behind.

The Review Team found that there appeared to be a lack of robust communication and co-ordination across government, within DfI itself and with the City Council. YSI lies at the interface of a number of initiatives such as Sailortown Regeneration, Healthy Cities Agenda and Streets Ahead (public realm) work. All of these appear to be proceeding independently and to play no role in the design and development of YSI. The same would appear to apply to the City Deal for Belfast, which is not mentioned in respect of any of the YSI documentation we have seen.

In similar vein to communications, there is currently an uncoordinated swirl of policies emerging from various quarters. These range from local policies such as the Bolder Vision for Belfast strategy (BCC) to wider ranging Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) and the United Nations Paris Agreement on climate change. These need to be pulled together in a co-ordinated manner and a call for direction then given relating to what to do next with YSI. One of the reasons this disconnect has occurred could have arisen from the current narrow focus of the YSI brief objectives as noted earlier in this report.

The Review Team considers that in order to achieve an optimal design from YSI that will provide greater alignment with Ministerial priorities and other strategies, full account should be taken of all relevant policy, social and urban initiatives. DfI will wish to consider how best this can be achieved.

Recommendation 4: There needs to be a system of ongoing communications with all interested parties. This should include updating the 2017 Communications Strategy and employing a robust Communications Structure now as well as during any construction phase. Communications should be ongoing and not just point in time.

Recommendation 5: There needs to be much closer co-ordination both within the DfI and between DfI and other relevant departments and interested parties at both policy and delivery levels with regard to YSI development and delivery.

Recommendation 6: There needs to be a co-ordinated decision made in the context of emerging policies, which then needs to be applied to ensure that the YSI project aligns to this context.

8.6 Conclusions

The Review Team concludes that the YSI project provides an adequate solution to the original brief. However, these original YSI project objectives, which are focused on improving strategic traffic and maintaining local traffic is no longer fully in line with current and emerging thinking on urban spaces, communities and the role of transport. Nor do they adequately align with the Minister's priorities for:

- Wellbeing

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- Sustainable Travel
- Creating thriving and liveable places and communities
- Responding to the climate emergency
- Connecting people and opportunities.

In addition, whilst YSI is noted in the Executive New Decade New Approach as being one potential project in the “turbo charging” of infrastructure delivery (although not designated as a Flagship Project) it is not specifically mentioned in the Outcomes Delivery Plan.

In terms of the emerging policy context for Belfast and the emerging Belfast transport plans, which are around sustainability, climate change etc. it is difficult to see a strong fit between YSI and the developing policy themes.

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ANNEX A – Progress against Previous Review Recommendations

The previous Gateway review was held in October 2015 prior to the original procurement. In view of the lapse of time since then, the Review Team did not consider it relevant to this review.

ANNEX B – Conduct of the Review

This review was held by remote video conferencing (Zoom) in light of the prevailing Coronavirus restrictions. The review was held from 2 to 5 November 2020. The Review Team members are listed on the front page of the report.

The Review Team would like to thank the SROs, the Project Team and all those interviewed for their time and openness, which helped our understanding and the outcome of this report. Our thanks also to [REDACTED] and colleagues for their excellent administrative and logistical support throughout the review.

ANNEX C – List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Role
[REDACTED]	DfI Director of Major Project & Procurement, Joint SRO for the review
[REDACTED]	DfI Director of Transport Policy, Joint SRO for the review
[REDACTED]	DfI, Project SRO YSI
[REDACTED]	DfI YSI Project Sponsor
[REDACTED]	Aecom, YSI Project Director
[REDACTED]	Aecom, YSI Project Manager
[REDACTED]	Belfast City Council, Strategic Director of Place & Economy
[REDACTED]	Sustrans, Policy Manager
[REDACTED]	DfI, Transport Planning & Modelling Unit
[REDACTED]	DfI, Active Travel Unit
[REDACTED]	MLA, Minister for Infrastructure
[REDACTED]	DfC, Director of Regeneration for Belfast
[REDACTED]	Ministerial Advisory Group
[REDACTED]	RSU Architects, Director
[REDACTED]	Belfast Chamber of Commerce, Chief Executive
[REDACTED]	Strategic investment Board (SIB) Chief Executive
[REDACTED]	Logistics UK (FTA) Road Haulage, Policy Manager
[REDACTED]	Belfast Harbour Commission, Development Director
[REDACTED]	Ashton Community Trust, Technical Advisor
[REDACTED]	Ashton Community Trust, Community Development Co-ordinator
[REDACTED]	North Belfast Heritage Cluster, Chief Executive
[REDACTED]	Ulster University, Director of Community Engagement
[REDACTED]	Sailortown Regeneration, Project Manager
[REDACTED]	Sailortown Regeneration, Chair