



Submission on the Merrion Row Consultation

April 2021

Dublin Chamber welcomes the opportunity to respond to Dublin City Council's proposal to reduce vehicular traffic, enhance public realm and further pedestrianise Merrion Row. This business backed proposal comes at a critical time for the city centre and the businesses that are located there, particularly those in the hospitality sector. The Covid-19 crisis has had a devastating impact on Dublin's city centre and the businesses located there. As the restrictions are lifted and the economy reopens, it is important to ensure an attractive, accessible, and vibrant city centre so that businesses can bounce back and thrive.

Dublin Chamber is the representative body for businesses in the Greater Dublin Area, with a cross-sectoral membership spanning the spectrum from small start-ups to major multinationals. The Chamber is committed to improving the city's business environment and quality of life in tandem, and strongly supports a vision of Dublin with sustainability, urban density, and liveability at its core. Dublin Chamber supports intelligent pedestrianisation in the city centre, as seen by our strong support of the pedestrian trials last summer. Dublin Chamber fully supports the businesses that are backing this consultation and believes that the proposed trial run will offer data and learnings to ensure the pedestrianisation works for both the businesses located in the area and the NTA in ensuring Dublin City's public transport is not negatively impacted.

Creating pedestrian spaces in the City

The Chamber supports pedestrian-first policies, but also recognises the challenges with modal change. Until Dublin's public transport capacity and service levels are significantly improved there will continue to be a reliance upon and need to facilitate the car in the city centre. The Chamber has been a long-term supporter of the BusConnects project and recognises the NTA's plans under BusConnects to remove almost all bus routes from Merrion Row by 2024.

The proposals focus on the need to reduce the levels of traffic congestion in the area while maintaining access for the bus routes and for traffic coming from Kildare St. This represents a 75% reduction in traffic for Merrion Row, enabling the road to be reduced to one lane of traffic. The plans outlined strive to balance the demands from the businesses in the area for enhanced space for outdoor dining, from the public for increased pedestrianisation, and from the NTA and Dublin Bus to maintaining the flow of public transport on key routes.

Dublin Chamber commends the ambition of the businesses located on Merrion Row for the full pedestrianisation of the space. While the current proposal represents a compromise on all sides and should be supported, the Chamber also encourages the actors involved to

consider whether the removal of bus routes, scheduled for 2024 under the BusConnects project, could be accelerated.

In changing the current road layout and diverting traffic away from Merrion Row the Chamber would stress the need for the Council to consider integrating how active transport will be facilitated. The Chamber notes that the current existing cycle lane on Stephen's Green East enables cyclists to move into the correct lane to turn right onto Merrion Row. Dublin City Council should consider the possible benefits of installing a segregated cycle lane on Hume St and Ely Place alongside any vehicular traffic changes in the area. Cycle lane access for Merrion Row should also be considered as long as it remains used for vehicular traffic. The Chamber encourages the Council to continue to invest in active travel infrastructure, and to further encourage modal shift to public transport, working with relevant stakeholders to progress key projects such as BusConnects, the DART and Luas expansion plans, Metrolink and the roll-out of the Greater Dublin Area Cycle Network Plan. The Chamber recognises the critical importance of bus transport to the city and the significant work involved in bringing the BusConnects project to its current stage. Any proposal put forward by Dublin City Council must support the bus network redesign under BusConnects.

Dublin: The 15 Minute City

In Dublin Chamber's recent *Dublin: The 15-Minute City* report we outlined how a 15 Minute City vision could work in Dublin. Our document highlights the role that active travel plays in achieving this vision: every journey starts first with a walk, whether that is the full journey or a short walk to access a bike, car, or public transport. Having a high-quality public realm and facilities that promote active travel will be necessary to effect modal change on a large scale. The combination of pedestrian-first policies and green infrastructure has been very successful in Barcelona's superblock redesign and has significantly enhanced the walkability of the city.¹ Pedestrian-first policy focuses on improving the walkability of a city and recognises the role that active transport plays in improving both public accessibility and the health of citizens. Safe walkways, crossroads, shade and shelter, permeability, and access are all key features of a walkable space.² By investing in the public realm, focusing on access for all, lighting and safety, and maintaining safe distances between cars and pedestrians, Dublin can create communities that are walkable and support the vision of a 15 Minute City. Creating connected and walkable places in which people can live, work, and play also encourages social interaction, thereby building stronger communities. This proposal has the potential to be a flagship project for hospitality in the city centre.

Collaboration with businesses

Collaboration with businesses is vital to ensuring the success of many improvements to the public realm. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a renewed focus on the need for collaboration between businesses and the Local Authorities across the city. The ability and desire to work together to come up with innovative solutions to enable businesses to trade will be increasingly important. The swiftness with which Local Authorities have responded to the need for changes to the public realm to facilitate walking and cycling in the context of social distancing has been very welcome and is eye-opening to the possibilities post Covid-19.

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-07/inside-a-barcelona-superblock-pedestrians-rule>

² <https://www.itdp.org/2018/02/07/pedestrians-first-walkability-tool/>

Trial runs and pilot programmes are an excellent and engaging way of establishing the positive potential of a new policy initiative, as well as its potential problems. The Chamber has previously called for pedestrian trials and strongly welcomed Dublin City Council's trial pedestrianisation of College Green in the summer of 2019, which largely met with positive results.³ The trialling of the concept helped both citizens and businesses to get a sense of the benefits and potential challenges of the project. In future pedestrianisation projects and public realm improvements, pilot programmes and trials should continue to be embraced as a way to learn what works and what does not, allowing for flexibility and creativity in relation to all sectors and stakeholders involved, particularly in dynamic and vibrant parts of the city. The current proposals reflect the desire of businesses located in the area for enhanced space to enable outdoor dining, the general public's desire for increased pedestrianisation, and also the need to ensure that public transport in the city continues to operate effectively and efficiently.

Recommendations

The proposal is a welcome step toward greater pedestrianisation in the city centre and has the potential to establish Merrion Row as a key location for Dublin's vibrant hospitality scene. Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on the businesses located in this sector and in this area. Normally a vibrant hub of business activity, many evenings it is now empty and desolate. We welcome the consultation put forward by Dublin City Council and note the use of the trial runs in previous projects has been helpful in establishing how they would work in practice. Pedestrianisation and public realm projects must continue to be integrated with the needs and concerns of business that are directly impacted in these areas.

Dublin Chamber recommends:

- The proposal as outlined by Dublin City Council to reduce vehicular traffic on Merrion Row from 3 lanes to 1 to increase the space available for both outdoor dining and pedestrians.
- Working with the businesses located in the area, the NTA and Dublin Bus and other related stakeholders to accelerate the current ambition to remove bus routes from Merrion Row by 2024.
- Integrating active travel and segregated cycle lanes into any proposed vehicular traffic changes.
- Continued engagement with businesses in the area, particularly those located on the impacted streets, to understand their needs and to work through any specific issues that arise.
- The continued use of pilot programmes and trials in other parts of the city to establish learnings, based on the success of the programme in both the College Green area and the Grafton Street Area.

³ <https://www.dublinchamber.ie/media/news/december-2018/chamber-calls-for-trial-of-college-green-plaza>