

WN World-Class
Belfast

Alistair Reid
Belfast City Council



Alistair Reid is onto his Third Act: that period in plays (and life) when things get resolved and protagonists get a new sense of who they really are. He's a place maker has previously taken starring roles in the redevelopment of both Leicester and Bristol. He's now been at the heart of Belfast's rapid redevelopment for the past two and a half years.

So why did he leave Bristol and why the need to have a third attempt at a major city?

"There's a lot going on in Bristol and I'm really proud of the work that we achieved there. But I guess from my point of view, the one that we really wanted to get away was the arena," he explains. "I spent four years of my life on that project, investing emotional energy and sleepless nights. But by the end, it just wasn't meant to be and so I was faced with a choice: stay and live with the decision or move on and do something else with my life.

"I don't like just giving up, so I needed to do something. I'd planned on a four-to-five-month African bike adventure which my wife was meant to talk me out of, but she said 'No, you should definitely go and do that.' We agreed that I would resign from Bristol, go to Africa on this trip and then when I came back, I would decide whether I wanted to take on a new challenge or possibly go into the voluntary sector to 'do something with my life'. Well, the day I submitted my resignation in Bristol, this very articulate recruitment consultant from Belfast got in touch with me, told me about the role and asked if I'd be interested? His classic line was 'don't turn down a job you haven't been offered yet'. So there was my challenge."

What level of growth are you anticipating in Belfast?

"We've designed a 2035 plan that anticipates or rather envisions growth in the city's population of 66,000 people, 40,000 jobs and the requisite number of houses and apartments and growth in office space."

What are the likely drivers for growth to hit those targets?

"Belfast has a real opportunity to grow its city centre and it has a significant set of advantages in the two universities sitting to the north and south of the centre. I believe that a lot of population growth will initially come from the student population That's something that we're already starting to see as both universities are looking to the centre for more student accommodation. And then, in due course, we'll see a greater proportion of those students staying on in the city afterwards as they take advantage of its improved economic success and emerging status as a hub for cybersecurity and more. Students become couples become families and we'll be looking to serve all their needs with the provision of more play areas, offices and family-friendly infrastructure over time.

“Young parents will want space where they can grow and flourish with their young families. And up till now, there is a kind of tendency to move out to the countryside. But if you look at continental Europe, you find families live in cities because there’s provision for their needs. Until about six months ago, there was no children’s provision in Belfast City Centre. What we’ve put in place recently for those children has already proven hugely popular. We think that there’ll be a change in how many families stay on in future.”

The other huge influence on Belfast’s development surely has to be Covid?

“Just as we were beginning to make real progress, along came Covid. But I’m very clear that the future of cities will sustain. There’s a lot of talk now about how people in offices have left cities and, and they won’t come back or that the office life will change. I think that there’ll be, in the medium term, some degree of more flexible working between home and office. But I am very clear that people will want to reconvene in cities again to do business. And history has shown that the great cities of Europe are built following public health crises. So, the cholera outbreaks in London in the 19th century brought about Chadwick’s public health reforms and the public sector responded to that with reforms. And despite how cholera ravaged cities like London, people continued to convene in cities. After two world wars, all across Europe, people abandoned cities but soon came back. There’ll be dips and blips, but Covid won’t permanently affect urban growth. It may affect how we build our cities, but not if we build our cities.

“I also believe that the city will see a softening of edges as new communities softly merge with established communities. That’s going to need us to soften the line between the glass and concrete of the new builds and the long-established communities just a mile outside the city centre.

Is the city an attractive investment?

“Definitely. I think what we need is long-term relationships with some of these funders so that there’s sustained funding. Ideally, you’re not looking for people most likely to come in and out. You want to create a set of longer-term arrangements where we seek to understand the kind of criteria and rate of return that they need and they understand the product we need. It will have to be sustainable in all its guises: economically, socially and environmentally.

“Two and a half years ago, I had a conversation with one of the major pension funds that came to Belfast for their senior UK management team meeting and their head of city investment was there. I asked him: ‘what kind of cities do you invest in?’ And he said, ‘we invest in culturally vibrant cities.’ So culture is not just an add on or on our wish list in terms of attracting major investment into our city. People, powerful investors, arrive in cities and make investment decisions. So those from elsewhere come here, and they look at the place over three to four days and they get a sense of the city. So that cultural vibrancy is vital to future investments. Belfast clearly has it but it needs to be fed and sustained through the existing cultural institutions and engagement with communities to ensure that that is an authentic experience.”

Has Belfast got what it needs to deliver its 2035 vision?

“Using Stephen Covey’s circle of control versus circle of influence model, I’d say that at a city level, we have a small circle of control, but a need for a large circle of influence,” explains Reid with some circumspection. “For the benefit of the city and the broader NI economy, I think there’s a strong case for looking at how to expand the current regeneration functions of Belfast City Council.”

“The funny thing – well less funny and more ironic – is that I began these plans for cities in the 80s when the plans were all, every single one of them, called 2020 Vision. Now we’re in 2021 and one thing I am still committed to is that these plans need to be clear and deliverable. Our process has some rigour to it – we’re looking to set it up as its own statutory instrument and the plan is currently going through independent examination. Some visions can be seen as a piece of fluff, but this is a plan that we want to be very real for us. Our plan is to implement the Belfast agenda through existing community planning, resources and partnerships, but also through the local development plan.”

Is there a risk that all the growth is outside-led?

“Not at all. I think that there’s a great opportunity for the likes of the University of Ulster to attract the young local child who travels past the University on the top deck of a bus coming into town and asks ‘what’s that mummy?’ or ‘what’s that daddy?’. The aim being to convert that into ‘Yes, that’s the University and that’s a place that you can go.’ And I think that’s the real-life challenge: building the scale of the university and at the same time making sure that the community which it’s adjacent to is part of the future life of that university building.”

“As I say, I’m optimistic about the future of cities generally. And those cities that have ambition and track record and competitive product will continue to thrive. And there’s no doubt that Belfast falls into that category of city. It’s not a certainty, but I think that we’ve put the right bits in place to ensure that Belfast is well positioned. The planning system has been a bit overhauled and so is now a function of the local authority. In the last two years, we’ve managed to bring down the amount of time it takes to deal with major planning applications from 50 weeks to 34 weeks. It’s still too long, but it’s much better than it was. That makes it much more attractive to developers – it gives them robust certainty.”

But there’s more to be done on the planning front?

“Sure. As well as planning conversations with developers around height, scale, or mass, I think we need them to be about the right buildings for our city. Everyone comes and they want to build height now, but funding height is difficult and sometimes people forget that. Plus, there’s a there’s a fine line between height and blight. So if we are too liberal, in terms of granting height, we’ll give permission to schemes that will never actually be funded. So there’s a need for some very robust conversations around planning in terms of quality, community engagement, building green environments, and not thinking there’s an easy answer just to just give the developer what they want. Because there is that gap between us giving planning permission and things being built.”

One last thing, did you still get to go to Africa before you started in Belfast?

“I did. From the trip, I took a real degree of personal resilience. So, whilst we’re surrounded by Covid at the moment, there are certain home comforts that are still available to all of us that are just not available there. The resilience that you gain from cycling across the Sahara Desert is something you can reflect on while you’re standing in a queue for Sainsbury’s.”

If anything brings down the curtain on the Third Act, surely it’s this: a man whose desire to prove himself still burns brightly, stood in a line outside a shop, contemplating quite how far he’s travelled. For the sake of our city’s future, let’s just hope that that recruiter doesn’t call again.

“Suddenly, we could move it up a gear in terms of things like private finance. Pre-merger, we possibly could have done the bond issue but it would have been less attractive to the investors. We were the first to come out of Ireland to do this and we were 300% oversubscribed. I’ve no doubt when we go back again, as we will do in future, that that figure will be higher as people have more confidence and knowledge of our sector and our organisation.”



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