



Subject:	Update on the UPSURGE project
Date:	11th April 2025
Reporting Officer:	John Tully, Director Organisational and City Strategy
Contact Officer:	Debbie Caldwell, Belfast Climate Commissioner Mura Quigley, Adaptation and Resilience Advisor

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? Yes No

Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes No

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
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1.1	To provide an update on progress on the Horizon UPSURGE project.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Progress made in delivering the UPSURGE project; ii. Programme of activity under the Place Lab Action Plan for the remainder of the project up to February 2025; iii. The use of the project and the city as part of the TalX2 climate adaptation research project; iv. Risks and mitigations in place for the successful close out of the project in February 2026.
3.0	<p>Progress on UPSURGE</p> <p>The UPSURGE project has been running now since September 2021 and is now in its final year. The project is an action research project developing a model for cities across Europe through testing nature based solutions for renaturing urban space, addressing challenges of cities' carbon footprint and air pollution. Belfast is one of five cities developing a demonstrator and testing different nature-based solutions and support learning on how adaptive practices and management of green spaces in the city can support pollution alleviation, citizen health and climate resilience.</p> <p>The main demonstrator site is at Lower Botanic Gardens and has been working in partnership with QUB, Friends of the Field, Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens and more recently the All Island Climate Co+ Centre to deploy and test the following nature based solutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A research site testing soil contamination and urban growing 2. An agroecological community growing space and tree nursery 3. A climate resilience garden 4. Habitat restoration and improvement <p>In the past twelve months the community growing space has been established with a polytunnel, raised beds, compostable toilet, an outdoor learning space, mixed species hedgerow planting. A range of open days and volunteering days are facilitated by all the partners to enable greater stewardship of the space and build capacity and learning about urban growing. Habitat restoration works have taken place on the grassland to introduce wetland areas to boost biodiversity, improve soil quality and enable natural flood resilience on the site.</p> <p>A range of visits to the space have also taken place to facilitate learning and knowledge exchange. In September, the city hosted 50 delegates from across the project partners and 5 cities as part of a Project Group Meeting. In March 2025, the DAERA Minister visited the site and met many of the community groups involved in growing in the area and learned of the partnership approach to building place based research into nature based solutions. A range of demonstrations have taken place including hydroseeding, scything, hedgerow planting, habitat restoration, cooking demos, and more. In September 2024, the project also supported the certification of 12 community growers in the city in Permaculture Design by running the first course of its kind in Northern Ireland, recognising the large skills and capacity gaps that currently exist in climate friendly practices in urban growing.</p> <p>The four nature based solutions being tested on site are underway. Works still to be completed this year include the installation of environmental sensors, solar PV, fit out of the polytunnel, establishment of rainwater collection and harvesting, establishment of the climate resilience garden and development of a tree nursery.</p>

3.1**Place Lab Action Plan**

As part of the project a Place Lab Action Plan has been developed with partners to engage with citizens on five key themes related to nature based solutions. In Belfast the following five objectives were set. They are:

1. Ecosensitisation: demonstrating the benefits of nature friendly land management to increase biodiversity. This will be delivered through open garden days, bioblitzes, engagement with schools, universities and citizen science projects.
2. Social Benefits: fostering greater engagement and equality of marginalised groups, when engaging with green spaces to support health and wellbeing. This is being delivered through growing workshops, cooking and sharing events, tree planting etc.
3. Gender based NBS: identifying and engaging with the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and QUB Working Group to understand systemic issues relating to women and girls' experience and engagement in green spaces in Belfast.
4. Economic Opportunities: understanding how community growing spaces could become economically sustainable, supporting skills development, training and more resilient funding models, whilst teaching skills in food production, composting, cooking, renewable energy etc.
5. Political Capital: increasing understanding of what nature based solutions are and the multiple co-benefits that they can deliver for communities. This will be achieved through visits, interpretation and knowledge sharing throughout 2025.

3.2**Request for Belfast to be used for a Living Lab as part of the TalX2 project**

The Climate Team has been approached by Climate NI who are one of the partners on the TALX 2 project to request Belfast be used as one of three living labs for testing climate adaptation with communities, along with Dublin and Mayo. Talx 2 builds on the outputs of TalX1 to develop place-based adaptation partnerships, by building 'living labs' to engage communities and government to plan and adapt for an uncertain future. To achieve this the research has four objectives:

1. Identify and analyse a range of place-based climate action partnerships both nationally and internationally and identify key principles employed in successful partnership working including the co-benefits and trade-offs;
2. Establish living labs across the island of Ireland and using the TALX framework, work to advance climate action partnerships in these real world settings, unlock co-benefits, and identify no regret adaptation pathways in line with local, regional and national plans and policies;
3. Identify cross-border areas where transboundary dialogue facilitation would enhance partnership working and provide a programme of activities to help to exploit potential opportunities for partnership working and minimising cascading/ transboundary risks;
4. Evaluate and reflect on how the living labs and the cross-border programme of activities have developed over the course of the project and how engaged and embedded research/researchers can better enable place-based climate action partnerships, develop local adaptive capacity and support decision-making for climate action in Ireland by providing guidance and recommendations for other organisations and communities.

Following discussions with UPSURGE and UP2030 teams it is proposed that this Living Lab work alongside the UPSURGE Place Lab to share greater learning and knowledge exchange on how to deliver effective climate adaptation in Belfast. The project will run to March 2027 and can provide continuation of the learning in UPSURGE, which is due to end

<p>3.3</p>	<p>in February 2026. This partnership will include workshops, capacity building and co-developing communication materials for communities around climate adaptation.</p> <p>Close out of the project and the future of the demonstrator site at Botanic Gardens</p> <p>The project has experienced a number of delays to the deployment of the capital works and sensor technology, due to a number of factors affecting demonstrator cities. As a result the project has been given a no cost extension to February 2026 by the funder, Horizon Europe.</p> <p>As part of the close out of the project, the future of the site as a space for demonstration and learning for climate change should be considered as part of wider strategies for the redevelopment of the PEC at Queen's, the Pitch Strategy and the 200th anniversary celebrations of Belfast's Botanic Gardens in 2028.</p>
<p>3.1</p>	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no financial implications for Belfast City Council.</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>None.</p>
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Appendices - None</p>