

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 11th February, 2026

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor I. McLaughlin (Chairperson);
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, Bunting, de Faoite,
S. Douglas, Duffy, Groogan, Hanvey, Lyons,
McAteer, McCabe, McCallin, McCormick, McKay,
R. McLaughlin, Meenehan, Nelson and Ó Néill.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and
Development;
Mr. K. Forster, Director of Economic Development;
Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was received from Councillor McDonough-Brown.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 14th January and 9th February, 2026, were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that the minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 9th February, 2026.

Declarations of Interest

In relation to the item 'Vacant to Vibrant Programme Update', Councillor McCallin declared an interest in that a member of her family was employed by an organisation which had applied to the scheme, Councillor Duffy declared an interest in that he had assisted an organisation with an application to the scheme, and Councillor Groogan declared an interest in that her employer was in receipt of a grant through the scheme. As this item did not become the subject of debate, the Members were not required to leave the meeting.

In relation to the item 'City Imagining Investment Programme - Cultural Multi-Annual Grants', Councillors McCabe and Groogan declared an interest in that they were associated with organisations which had applied for funding and left the meeting whilst this item was under consideration.

Councillor R. McLaughlin declared an interest in relation to the item 'Request to Present – Belfast Harbour Commissioners', in that he was on the Board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and left the meeting whilst this item was under consideration.

Presentation

Belfast One Business Improvement District

The Director of Economic Development submitted for the Committee's consideration the following report:

"1.0 Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of the report is to:

- Introduce the plans for the BID One ballot which closes on 5 March 2026
- Secure Committee approval to submit council votes for properties located within the BID One boundary.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- Note the update on the ballot for the third term of the Belfast One BID (Business Improvement District)
- Agree to return yes votes for the Council properties located within the boundary.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Members will be aware that there are three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Belfast city centre: BID One which covers the main retail core and runs from the City Hall down to the junction of Royal Avenue and North Street; Linen Quarter which covers the office district to the north the City Hall including the new Transport Hub and Destination CQ which covers the Cathedral Quarter including the Ulster University campus.

3.2 Under government legislation, all BIDs operate on a five-year term. At the end of each term, a ballot must take place in order for the BID to continue its work. BID One is the longest standing of the three BIDs and began operations in April 2016. The ballot for the third term of BID One opened on 22 January 2026 and all votes must be submitted by 5 March 2026.

3.3 In order for the proposal to be successful at ballot, the result will need to meet, as a minimum, three independent criteria, namely:

- 1. There must be more yes votes than no votes (volume)**

2. Total rateable value of yes votes must exceed total rateable value of no votes (value)
 3. The turnout of ballot papers returned must be no less than 25% of the eligible rate payers entitled to vote in the ballot and total no less than 25% of the eligible rateable value.
- 3.4 The BID One area contains around 700 units that are eligible for votes. Each property must pay an annual mandatory BID levy – depending on the NAV (Net Annual Value) of the property. The council has seven properties within the BID One boundary including City Hall, 2 Royal Avenue and the former Digital Services building in Gloucester Street. The combined levy total for all properties is around £23,000 annually. The expected levy total for all properties (assuming 100% payment) is around £1million annually. This expenditure will be allocated in line with business plan priorities.
- 3.5 BID One works closely with the council on a range of issues related to safety, cleanliness and vibrancy in the city centre. The team and the Board are also represented on a number of city centre forums and working groups and, given their mandate, represent a strong conduit for engagement with city centre businesses operating in this geographical area. Their five-year business plan for the upcoming term proposes focusing resources on four main areas of work, namely:
- Promoting Belfast city centre
 - Enhancing the visitor experience
 - Supporting local businesses
 - Shaping a better city centre.
- 3.6 Given the ongoing collaboration, the planned engagement and the direct contribution of the BID (both financially and in terms of staff resources) towards shared priorities with the council, it is recommended that members support a yes vote on behalf of the council in the current ballot process.
- 4.0 **Financial Implications**
- Belfast City Council will be liable for levy payments relating to its properties and assets located within the BID One boundary. These levies are already included in recurring Council budgets.
- 5.0 **Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment**
- No specific equality or good relations implications. The Belfast One designated boundary has been approved by

DfC. Visitor insights demonstrate that the city centre is accessed by visitors from all parts of Northern Ireland and beyond.”

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Belfast One Business Improvement District (BID) Chair, Ms. L. Barr, and Chief Executive, Ms. M. Connolly.

Ms. Connolly presented the Committee with further information in relation to the work of the Belfast One BID over the previous term, 2021-2026, and set out its plans for the proposed third term, 2026-2031, subject to the BID receiving the required support in the ballot.

She stated that Belfast One BID had been established in 2016 and represented a diverse economic mix of over seven hundred businesses located within approximately one square mile of the city centre.

She outlined the BID's work over the previous term which contributed to the city's priorities and complemented statutory services. She stated that the work included partnership working within the city to improve safety, increase footfall, strengthen visitor experience, help address anti-social behaviour and improve confidence in the city for people to work, live and visit. She also outlined the BID's work in relation to the delivery of year-round animation and events to support local businesses.

It was reported that the BID's Business Plan for 2026-31 had been developed through extensive consultation with the business community and reflected the key priorities which had been identified, which included the need to strengthen collaborative working within the city centre to improve cleanliness and safety, enhance the environment, support local businesses and trading conditions, and help shape future development.

Ms. Connolly highlighted the BID's continued work with the Council on a range of initiatives within the city centre and requested that the Council's support Belfast One BID in the ballot for a third term to deliver its plan for 2026-31.

The Chairperson thanked the Belfast One BID representatives for their attendance at the meeting and the information provided within the presentation, and they left the meeting.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update on the ballot for the third term of the Belfast One BID; and
- ii. agreed to return yes votes for the Council properties located within the BID's boundary.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following eight items is restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the press and public from the meeting during discussion of the following items as,

due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Members were also reminded that the content of 'restricted' reports and any discussion which took place during closed session must be treated as 'confidential information' and that no such information should be disclosed to the public as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Code of Conduct.

Vacant to Vibrant Programme Update

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme, and which sought approval for citywide grant awards as recommended by the Vacant to Vibrant assessment panel following receipt of recent applications.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme, which would be supporting up to seventy-five businesses and organisations to locate or expand into long-term vacant units; and
- ii. agreed the recommended citywide grant awards as outlined within the report.

2 Royal Avenue Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided an update on the ongoing Expression of Interest (EOI) exercise for the future long-term use of the ground floor of 2 Royal Avenue.

The Director reminded the Committee that, at its meeting in November, 2025, the Committee had agreed a new two-stage EOI process, and associated criteria, which would be undertaken for the long-term future use of the ground floor of 2 Royal Avenue. She advised the Committee that the new EOI process had commenced on 6th January, 2026, and that a further report would be brought back to the Committee following completion of the EOI. She also drew the Committee's attention to correspondence which had been received from an organisation which had used 2 Royal Avenue raising concern in relation to its future use.

During discussion, the Director answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to the EOI process, meanwhile use of the building, financial sustainability, and the need for the ground floor use to be complementary and compatible with the LGBTQIA+ Hub proposed for the first floor of the building.

In response to a Member's question in relation to the condition of the building and potential works that may be required to be undertaken by the Council, the Director advised that a building survey would be progressed. She highlighted that, at its meeting in October, 2025, the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee had agreed that 2 Royal Avenue Capital Works be added as a 'Stage 1 – Emerging' project within the Council's capital programme. She advised that this would allow for a business case to

be developed to consider any potential capital works required, and enable the Council, as the landlord, to meet its obligations to prospective occupiers and ensure that the building would be fit for purpose.

After discussion, the Committee noted:

- i. the update on the ongoing expression of interest (EOI) process for the future long-term use of 2 Royal Avenue's ground floor; and
- ii. that a report would be brought back to a future meeting following the closure and review of Stage 1 of the EOI exercise.

Housing Association Grant (HAG) Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided an update on the ongoing assessment of the Department for Communities' changes to the Total Cost Indicator (TCI) and Housing Association Grant (HAG) rates.

The Director outlined the emerging implications for the delivery of social housing within the city, particularly in respect of the city centre, and set out the scope of the detailed analysis which would be brought back to the Committee following engagement with relevant delivery agents. She highlighted that the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) had been engaged to support the Council's work alongside the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA), two Housing Associations with experience of development within the city, and private sector partners to undertake an analysis of the impact of the policy changes.

The Committee:

- i. noted the interim findings and emerging issues outlined within the report;
- ii. noted the ongoing engagement with the Housing Associations, NIFHA (Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations) and private sector partners to inform an upcoming report which would be undertaken in conjunction with the UUEPC (Ulster University Economic Policy Centre);
- iii. agreed that officers would continue to develop the detailed evidence base and options and that a report would be brought back to a future meeting;
- iv. agreed that, following the completion of the work with the UUEPC, a Members' workshop would be held; and
- v. agreed that officers continue to engage with the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to ensure the city's position is reflected in the ongoing review of social housing grant rates.

A Bolder Vision for Belfast Update

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the 'A Bolder Vision (ABV) for Belfast' strategy; set out the key moves to deliver ABV; outlined proposed supporting interventions, aligned to the Belfast Agenda 2024-28 and the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022; and highlighted the opportunity to use ABV to frame the Council's response to the upcoming Eastern Transport Plan and other future consultation plans in relation to public realm, mobility and connectivity.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Groogan and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to write to the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister for Communities to request a meeting in relation to the ABV, the Eastern Transport Plan, the Belfast Streets Ahead Programme and the Belfast Rapid Transit Phase 2 project.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the update on 'A Bolder Vision' (ABV) which included the schemes already delivering on the vision and the previously agreed key moves; and
- ii. agreed the proposed updated supporting interventions to enable the finalisation of the strategy as the Council's position on major infrastructure and policy consultations, with the understanding that any consultation responses would be brought back for Committee's approval prior to submission; and
- iii. agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister for Communities to request a meeting in relation to the ABV, the Eastern Transport Plan, the Belfast Streets Ahead Programme and the Belfast Rapid Transit Phase 2 project.

City Imagining Investment Programme – Cultural Multi-Annual Grants

The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the item to enable further information to be submitted to a special meeting to be held on 24th February, 2026.

Belfast Castle and Malone House Scale of Charges 2026/27

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the proposed scale of charges for Belfast Castle and Malone House for 2026/27, and which sought approval for price increases for booking fees.

The Committee agreed the price increases for booking fees for Belfast Castle and Malone House, which would take effect from 1st April, 2026

Belfast Zoo Scale of Charges 2026/27

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the proposed scale of charges for Belfast Zoo for 2026/27, and which sought approval for price increases for existing categories of ticket types and products/services.

The Committee agreed the price increases for existing categories of ticket types and products/services for Belfast Zoo, which would take effect from 1st April, 2026.

Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 Update

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 in relation to operational planning, communication and engagement.

The Committee noted the update and that, at its meeting in January, the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee had:

- noted the progress to date on the development of the Fleadh Cheoil;
- agreed that an Expression of Interest exercise be undertaken in relation to a food market for local businesses; and
- agreed that a report be submitted to a future Committee in relation to Camp Site provision and Licensing requirements for traders.

Requests to Present

Visit Belfast

The Committee acceded to a request from Visit Belfast to present its annual Business Plan at the Committee meeting on 11th March, 2026.

Belfast Harbour Commissioners

The Committee acceded to a request from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners to present its draft Masterplan 2025-50 at the Committee's special meeting on 25th March, 2026.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

Events Update - Festive Lights

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 **To provide members with a report and overview of the 2025 festive lighting scheme.**

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Note the contents of this report and request to facilitate a Members workshop for planning for 2026.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Background and Programme Context

The Culture Team currently led on the delivery of the Council's Christmas Lighting Scheme, working in partnership with appointed contractors, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), internal Estates and Property teams, and private landowners to deliver a city centre-wide festive lighting programme.

In March 2025, a new tender was issued inviting proposals from contractors to deliver the city's Christmas lighting provision. This procurement process reflected a shift in approach, recognising the importance of festive lighting not only as seasonal decoration, but as a strategic cultural and economic intervention supporting city centre vitality.

The tender placed particular emphasis on the role of Christmas lighting in contributing to economic recovery, reinforcing Belfast City Centre's position as a major retail, leisure and cultural destination, encouraging increased footfall, and enhancing the overall visitor experience during the peak winter trading period.

This approach aligns with the broader principles of the City's Lighting Strategy, which positions lighting as a core component of public realm quality, place identity, safety, and the activation of the night-time economy.

3.2 Strategic Objectives of the Christmas Lighting Scheme

One of the core objectives of the Christmas Lighting Programme is to improve connectivity and coherence across the city centre, creating strong visual and experiential linkages between key destinations, including:

- Belfast Christmas Market at City Hall
- Victoria Square Shopping Centre
- CastleCourt Shopping Centre
- Primary pedestrian corridors such as Royal Avenue and Donegall Place

The lighting scheme is therefore not intended as a series of isolated installations, but as a coordinated city centre network that supports pedestrian movement, wayfinding, and

dwelling time across multiple retail, leisure and cultural anchors.

3.3 2025 Programme Delivery and Performance

2025 Infrastructure Uplift and Enhancements

As part of the 2025 programme uplift, Department for Infrastructure (DfI) lighting columns were upgraded in line with current electrical and safety standards. This enabled the safe addition of column-mounted Christmas lighting features across the city centre.

Additional lighting was installed along Royal Avenue, including illumination of street trees. This intervention was widely recognised by BIDs and private landowners as having a positive impact on the inner-city core, contributing to improved ambience and increased evening activity.

New lighting curtain installations were introduced on Castle Place and Fountain Lane, alongside colour-controlled festoon lighting on Garfield Street. Going forward, both the Fountain Lane lighting curtain and the Garfield Street festoon installations will remain in situ, with no additional cost to the Council, providing ongoing value from the initial investment.

Some minor issues were recorded during the season, primarily relating to servicing and loading vehicles coming into contact with lighting elements. In total, there were approximately 6 contractor call-outs related to maintenance and minor repairs.

Festive Lighting Commission and Switch-On Event

The full festive lighting programme was safely installed and fully operational in advance of the official Christmas Lights Switch-On event. Delivery was achieved within required timescales and in compliance with all relevant health and safety requirements.

The Culture Team worked closely with: City Centre BIDs, Council Estates and Property Teams, and Private landowners and managing agents to secure approximately 84 wayleave agreements for the installation of eyebolts and fixings, enabling lighting infrastructure to be installed across privately owned frontages and buildings.

The successful completion of these agreements in advance of the Christmas period was critical to programme delivery and is acknowledged as a significant collaborative achievement across multiple stakeholders.

3.4 Issues for Long-Term Sustainability and Improvement

While the 2025 programme was delivered successfully, a number of structural and strategic issues have been identified which require longer-term planning and intervention to ensure future viability and growth of the programme. Delivery of enhancements as part of the future strategy would be dependent on additional finance being available

Benchmarking and Tourism-Led Lighting Models

Comparable cities such as Dundalk have demonstrated the economic value of treating festive lighting as a tourism product, capable of attracting regional visitors and extending dwell time.

In December 2025, representatives from the Culture Team, BIDs, the Night Czar's Office, Belfast Chamber and CGR committee undertook a benchmarking visit to Dundalk to review their Christmas programme and large-scale lighting installations, including programme structure, infrastructure models and governance arrangements.

Learning from this model will inform future strategic direction for Belfast's Christmas lighting offer.

It is suggested that a future strategy should address four critical and interdependent components:

- **City Spectacle:** Developing a format and programme capable of functioning as a large-scale tourism product.
- **City-Wide Reach:** Exploring how to achieve greater lighting density and presence beyond the core city centre.
- **Pathways:** Building local skills, knowledge and career pathways within cultural sector for lighting and production
- **Infrastructure:** Addressing key infrastructure challenges and mitigating future operational risks.

3.5 Infrastructure Challenges and Electrical Supply

The current Christmas lighting infrastructure is heavily reliant on private electrical feeds, which presents a number of risks:

- Increased health and safety considerations
- Reduced operational control for the Council
- Vulnerability to changes in property ownership, tenancy, or redevelopment

In addition, ongoing city centre development has led to the gradual loss of previously available fixing points and electrical connections. This has resulted in a resource-intensive annual process to maintain lighting density and secure new permissions and access arrangements.

This environment limits the Council's ability to plan multi-year installations or invest in more permanent and resilient infrastructure solutions.

Future Technologies and Adaptive Approaches

There is a need for a more agile and future-focused approach to festive lighting, recognising that:

- Lighting technologies are evolving rapidly
- Energy efficiency and sustainability expectations are increasing
- Audience engagement is shifting towards immersive and interactive experiences

Any future strategy should therefore allow flexibility to adapt to emerging technologies, sustainability standards and new artistic approaches over the next decade, rather than relying on static formats or short-term installations.

City-Wide Approach: Geographic Spread and Equity

At present, festive lighting remains heavily concentrated within the city centre core, with limited provision across city neighbourhoods and local high streets.

This raises concerns regarding:

- Equitable distribution of cultural investment
- Support for neighbourhood retail centres
- Opportunities for community-led festive identity and participation

Future models should explore scalable and adaptable approaches that allow festive lighting to support local place-making across a wider geographic footprint, while maintaining overall programme coherence and quality.

3.6 Stakeholder Engagement and Current Actions

The Culture Team is currently working with:

- City Centre BIDs to gather structured feedback from businesses
- The lighting contractor to evaluate operational improvements

- Internal Council departments to review infrastructure and permissions processes

This feedback is being collated to inform refinements to the 2026 programme and longer-term strategic considerations.

In addition, the Culture Team is developing a Members' Workshop, which will provide an opportunity to:

- Review current challenges and constraints
- Consider alternative delivery and infrastructure models
- Explore funding and partnership opportunities
- Begin development of a longer-term Christmas Lighting Strategy for the city

Next Steps and Strategic Direction

The intention is to move towards a more strategic, sustainable and place-based approach to Christmas lighting, which:

- Supports economic regeneration objectives
- Enhances the city's cultural offer and visitor experience
- Reduces operational and safety risks
- Builds local creative and technical capacity
- Enables more equitable city-wide participation

Following the Members' Workshop and further stakeholder engagement, officers will bring forward proposals outlining potential strategic options, investment requirements and delivery models for Member consideration.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

There are currently no financial implications attached to this report.

5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

There are no Equality or Good Relation Implications attached to this report."

The Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report; and
- ii. agreed that a Members' workshop be held on the Festive Lights planning for 2026.

Culture Night 2026

The Director of Economic Development submitted the following report for the Committee's consideration:

"1.0 Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the proposed approach to the delivery of Culture Night 2026. The recommendations are informed by the draft independent evaluation of Culture Night 2025 undertaken by Thrive and build on the delivery model approved by Committee in April 2025.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

Note the contents of the report in relation to the delivery of Culture Night 2025.

Approve the proposed approach for Culture Night 2026 as outlined in this report including £150,000 commitment to delivery of Culture Night 2026 through a procurement process including an option to extend the contract to cover delivery of Culture Night 2027 upon successful delivery in 2026.

3.0 Culture Night 2025 Review & Recommendations

3.1 Background

Culture Night returned to Belfast in September 2025 following a six-year absence precipitated by the Covid crisis, and the host organisation (Cathedral Quarter Trust) folding operations. The 2025 event was delivered as a venue-led, city-wide programme, prioritising free, accessible and family-friendly activity and operating through a receiving house model. As a pilot to supporting a new approach to Culture Night delivery a number of artists, cultural organisations and venues were financially supported to participate, and no street-based programming or road closures were included. In August 2025, Belfast City Council commissioned Thrive to undertake an independent evaluation of Culture Night 2025. The evaluation assessed audience experience, participation, accessibility, economic impact and delivery effectiveness, and identified learning to inform future iterations.

3.2 Key Findings from Thrive Evaluation

The evaluation concluded that the pilot for a new approach to Culture Night 2025 was a success, generating positive audience experiences, sector goodwill and an estimated attendance of 50,000 people. Audiences valued the safe, welcoming and family-friendly atmosphere, while participants reported high levels of satisfaction and willingness to take part again

Areas identified for further development included improved signage and navigation between sites, earlier engagement with the cultural sector, including artists, venues and organisations, and continued strengthening of activity across all areas of the city beyond the city centre and Cathedral Quarter. Key findings are:

Economic Impact

- Estimated attendance of approximately 50,000 people across the city.
- Average spend per attendee who spent money was £33.33.
- Estimated total economic impact of approximately a minimum £1.67 million for the city.

Audience Feedback

- 86% of audiences rated their overall experience as good or very good.
- 95% of attendees spent two or more hours at Culture Night, with 33% spending five or more hours.
- 44% of audiences reported visiting venues or places they had not previously visited.
- Audiences particularly valued the safe, welcoming and family-friendly atmosphere.

Audience Profile

- Audiences were younger and more diverse than typical arts audiences in Belfast.
- 14% of attendees lived in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland.
- 20% of respondents identified as disabled, including people with invisible and neurodivergent conditions.
- 14% of respondents identified as LGBTQ+.

Geographic Spread

- Events took place across all parts of the city, including North, South, East and West Belfast.
- 43% of events were located in Cathedral Quarter and 28% in the city centre.
- Venues outside the city centre experienced lower footfall, reflecting the event's first year back in a new format, and need to build on city-wide offer.

Programme and Participation

- A total of 158 events were delivered by 182 participating organisations, venues and artists.
- 73% of participants delivering events were taking part in Culture Night for the first time.
- 75% of events were suitable for all ages, reinforcing the family-friendly focus.
- Music was the most represented artform, accounting for 51% of events.

Funding and Artist Support

- 48% of events submitted for the programme requested financial support to participate.
- £49,482 was distributed to support artists and venues.
- 93% of participants stated they would like to take part again in future Culture Nights.

Safety and Management

- No incidents were recorded by Council or PSNI that were directly linked to Culture Night 2025.
- Audiences reported feeling safe across the city, supported by coordinated stewarding and emergency planning.

3.3 Proposal for Culture Night 2026

Culture Night 2026 is proposed to take place on Friday 18 September 2026, in line with other Culture Night events across the island of Ireland. The event will continue to build on the successful 2025 delivery model, while addressing areas for development identified through the Thrive evaluation.

Recommendations for Culture Night 2026

- **Improve signage and site information through clear, visible and consistently branded signage across all event locations. This requirement can be embedded within the updated event specification.**
- **Continue strengthening Culture Night activity across all areas of the city by engaging working group and existing forums in North, South, East and West Belfast. These groups will support information sharing, coordination and collaborative event planning with local venues and participants.**
- **Provide increased lead-in time for artists, venues and organisations via an early 'Save the Date' communication will be issued for Culture Night 2026 to raise awareness and enable advance planning in tandem with the procurement process for a delivery contractor.**
- **Maintain and build upon the successful event model by continuing to prioritise a free, accessible and family-friendly programme delivered through a receiving house approach, similar to Dublin Culture Night where activity is venue-based. This ensures most of the available budget is directed towards the payment to the cultural sector and artists for delivering the programme rather than large-scale production costs which come with increased risk and health & safety considerations.**
- **Plan proactively for any changes to key event locations. With the uncertainty of 2 Royal Avenue and ongoing construction at Cathedral Gardens, alternative suitable city centre locations for main event activity will be identified in advance to ensure successful delivery in 2026.**
- **Ensure city-wide engagement and participation through partnerships with neighbourhood cultural venues in North, South, East, West and community consultation.**

3.4 Next Steps

- **Subject to Committee approval, officers will commence planning for Culture Night 2026 from March, including initial engagement with cultural sector and opening the procurement process for**

Culture Night Delivery Contract via tender, this will include an option for contract extension to deliver 2027 Culture Night upon successful delivery of 2026.

- Officers will also explore options for an early engagement/ launching focused on 'Save the Date' messaging to secure diary holds and increase public and cultural sector awareness of the event in anticipation of the contractor coming on board for delivery by April.
- Officers will continue to engage with Department for Communities to understand possibility of any financial support within the 2026/27 financial year (see appended reply to previous correspondence).

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

We are seeking approval for £150,000 Culture Night 2026 Delivery budget from the 2026/2027 Culture budget.

5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

- Culture Night 2026 will continue to align with Belfast City Council's statutory duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and its commitments to equality, diversity and good relations under the EQIA for our city's Cultural Strategy 2020-2030.

The evaluation of Culture Night 2025 highlighted that audiences were younger and more diverse than typical arts audiences in Belfast, with participation from people living in areas of higher multiple deprivation, disabled audiences (including those with invisible and neurodivergent conditions), and LGBTQ+ communities. The free, city-wide and venue-led nature of the event supported broad access and positive shared experiences across communities.

For 2026, the continued emphasis on a family-friendly, accessible and free programme, alongside improved signage, clearer information and strengthened activity across North, South, East and West Belfast, will further support inclusive participation. Early engagement with venues and organisations will also allow for better consideration of accessibility requirements and community needs at a local level."

During discussion, a number of Members thanked officers for the work that had been undertaken to deliver the successful Culture Night 2025 event.

A Member highlighted the correspondence which had been received from the Department for Communities in response to the Committee's request for the Department to provide funding support for Culture Night going forward. The Member requested that, given the success of the 2025 event, the Committee write again to the Department to request that it provide funding support to help further enhance Culture Night going forward.

In relation to participation, a Member highlighted the importance of continued engagement with communities to promote participation and inclusion of people from all backgrounds in Culture Night.

In response to a Member's question, the Director of Economic Development advised that he would explore the potential for the Belfast Bikes operator, Beryl, to offer discounted rates on Culture Night to encourage participation.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report in relation to the delivery of Culture Night 2025;
- ii. approved the proposed approach for Culture Night 2026 as outlined within the report, which would include a commitment of £150,000 to the delivery of Culture Night 2026 through a procurement process, with an option to extend the contract to cover delivery of Culture Night 2027 upon successful delivery in 2026; and
- iii. agreed to write to the Department for Communities to request that it provide funding support for Culture Night.

Markets Licence Approval

The Committee considered a report which sought approval for the granting of a market licence to Artisan Markets NI to hold a number of markets at Belfast Castle over the period April to November, 2026.

The Committee approved the granting of a licence to Artisan Markets NI.

Belfast Place Based Growth Proposition

The Director of City Regeneration and Development submitted the following report for the Committee's consideration:

"1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the Belfast Regeneration Place Based Growth Proposition.**

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- I. Note the update on the Belfast Place Based Growth Proposition, including the completion of the business Case for Place-Based Investment which has been forwarded to UK Government for consideration.
- II. Note the update on ongoing strategic engagement with the UK Government in Westminster, including recent attendance at the Scottish Cities Alliance Devolution focused roundtable.
- III. Approve attendance of the Chair of the City Growth & Regeneration Committee and the Council's nominated Elected Member / Chair of the BRCD Council Panel to attend UKREiiF as part of the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership Delegation. As noted below this would include attendance at a planned Devolved Nations Political Leaders Meeting, and also provide an opportunity to participate in advocacy and engagement activities to support the Belfast Place Based Growth Proposition.
- IV. Note the continued role for Members in terms of political party engagement at local, MP and ministerial level.

3.0 Background

3.1 The Committee will recall receiving an update in September 2025, followed by a further report to the SP&R Committee in November 2025, on the Belfast Place-Based Growth Proposition. The Proposition sets out the case for enhanced regeneration funding consistent with other UK cities, and aligned with a growth proposition which is underpinned by a full Business Case and aligned to city regeneration priorities.

3.2 As previously reported to Committee, Belfast faces a structural regeneration deficit that cannot be addressed through existing funding mechanisms. The city has experienced long-term underinvestment specifically aimed at regeneration, limited devolved powers and stalled development activity. Public spending on regeneration is approximately half that of comparable English cities, and key funding streams available elsewhere in the UK have not been extended to Northern Ireland, resulting in missed economic and social opportunities. The English Devolution White Paper signalled a significant shift in funding and powers for

English cities. Without parity of targeted regeneration investment, Belfast risks falling even further behind in terms of growth and city competitiveness.

- 3.3 The Proposition seeks to secure targeted regeneration funding from the UK Government to support housing-led regeneration across all tenures; tackle dereliction; enhance infrastructure, connectivity, public realm and placemaking; unlock major regeneration schemes; and deliver high quality public and green spaces.
- 3.4 Development of the Proposition has been informed by extensive engagement with cross-sector stakeholders and aligns with the findings of the Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) Stocktake, which received political and stakeholder endorsement.

4.0 Main Report

4.1 Belfast Business Case for Place-Based Investment

As noted to Committee in September 2025, the Place Proposition is supported by a full five-part business case outlining the strategic, economic, commercial, financial and management cases supporting the request to Westminster. It sets out how the Council has spent the past 18 months laying the groundwork to develop the Proposition and establish the conditions for successful delivery.

- 4.2 The business case sets out that the Council is seeking the powers and responsibilities required to drive growth and investment in the city, including the establishment of a new £250m City Regeneration Fund (CRF). The Fund is designed to deliver catalytic change through targeted investment in housing-led regeneration, green urban infrastructure, placemaking and the unlocking of strategic regeneration schemes. The Proposition and business case are framed as a Barnett Bypass, meaning it will not affect the core settlement, while highlighting that the Council remains committed to working in partnership with the Executive if successful, through a new model of collaboration.

Advocacy & Engagement

- 4.3 Engagement and advocacy activities to support the Proposition are ongoing, including engagement with the NI Executive and Westminster via Belfast MPs, government officials and elected representatives.

- 4.4 Attendance at the UK Government Investment Summit in September 2025 and the Labour Party Annual Conference in October 2025 facilitated engagement with senior party officials and representatives from HM Treasury, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), and the Northern Ireland Office.
- 4.5 Following completion of the business case in November 2025, it was submitted to the UK Government for consideration. Work continues at official and political levels to advance the Proposition, including a forthcoming meeting with the Northern Ireland Secretary of State. An update on the Proposition was provided to Belfast MPs in January and follow up discussions are on-going to support continued engagement at Westminster.
- 4.6 As previously reported, a joint Ministerial meeting with the Ministers for Finance, Economy, Infrastructure and Communities, held in conjunction with the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership, took place in September 2025, and the business case has been shared with senior departmental officials for consideration.
- 4.7 A wider communication and engagement plan, supported by messaging aligned to the business case findings, is being progressed. Continued support from Members in advocating for the Proposition, particularly through party political channels, will be important in raising its visibility within the NI Executive and Westminster at local, MP / MLA and Ministerial levels.

Scottish Cities Alliance

- 4.8 Following approval at SP&R Committee in November 2025, the Lord Mayor, the Council's nominated Elected Member BCRD Lead, and senior officers attended a devolution-focused roundtable with city leaders from Scotland and Wales in London in January 2026. The meeting was convened by the Scottish Cities Alliance (SCA), a collaboration between Scotland's eight cities and the Scottish Government. It brought together representatives from the SCA, the Cardiff Capital Region, and Belfast City Council to discuss evolving city-regional governance and devolution arrangements across the UK.
- 4.9 The discussion considered the implications of the accelerating programme of English devolution, particularly the establishment of Mayoral Combined Authorities, for the competitive positioning, investment prospects, and reform capacity of cities in the devolved nations. Attendees noted the increasing momentum behind English devolution deals,

the continued extension of mayoral powers, and growing alignment between English city regions and UK Government funding, policy development, and institutional focus.

- 4.10 The meeting concluded that, without coordinated action, the pace and scale of English devolution has the potential to reshape the UK's economic and institutional landscape in ways that could disadvantage cities in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. It was recognised, however, that through joint case-making, strategic advocacy, and confidence in diverse governance models, there is a strong opportunity to secure deeper, fairer, and more effective city-level devolution across the devolved nations, reflecting their respective strengths and circumstances.
- 4.11 Work is ongoing with representatives of the SCA and Cardiff Capital Region on a continued programme of engagement including plans for a follow-up Political Leaders meeting at UKREiiF.
- 4.12 UKREiiF, the UK real estate, investment and infrastructure Forum, will take place in Leeds from 19 to 21 May 2026. The annual event brings together more than 16,000 representatives from local authorities, government, institutional investors and developers to drive regeneration, development, and infrastructure investment. It is a key investment focussed showcase event within the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) annual programme of activity, which the Council supports.
- 4.13 The Scotland and Wales delegations at UKREiiF will include central government officials, city leaders and senior officers from their respective devolved nations and cities. Committee approval is sought for the Chair of City Growth and Regeneration Committee and the Council's nominated Elected Member / Chair of the BRCD Council Panel to attend UKREiiF. Senior Council officers will also be in attendance. It is proposed that Members will attend a planned Devolved Nations Political Leaders Meeting and participate in wider BCRPP activity at UKREiiF, including attendance at a Belfast City Region Showcase event.
- 5.0 **Financial and Resource Implications**
- 5.1 Financial impact directly associated with the proposition and business case recommendations will be brought back to Committee in due course following consideration by UK Government.

5.2 Costs including travel and subsistence for Members attendance at UKREiiF will be met from the existing City Regeneration & Development Budget.

6.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

None associated with this report.”

The Committee:

- i. noted the update on the Belfast Place Based Growth Proposition, including the completion of the business Case for Place-Based Investment which had been forwarded to the UK Government for consideration;
- ii. noted the update on the ongoing strategic engagement with the UK Government, including the recent attendance at the Scottish Cities Alliance Devolution focused roundtable;
- iii. approved the attendance of the Chairperson, and the Council's nominated elected Member/Chair of the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) Council Panel, to attend the UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum (UKREiiF) as part of a Belfast City and Region Place Partnership delegation, which would include attendance at a planned Devolved Nations Political Leaders meeting and provide an opportunity to participate in advocacy and engagement activities to support the Belfast Place Based Growth Proposition; and
- iv. noted the continued role for Members in terms of political party engagement at local, MP and ministerial level.

Issues Raised in Advance

Newtownards Road Corridor – Vision and Intervention (Councillor R. Brooks to raise)

(Councillor R. Brooks attended in connection to this item.)

With the permission of the Chairperson, Councillor R. Brooks addressed the Committee in respect of a number of issues relating to the Newtownards Road.

Councillor R. Brooks reminded the Committee that she had attended its meeting in March, 2025, to speak in relation to the closure of the Connswater Shopping Centre and the impact on the local community. She highlighted that, following the closure of Connswater Shopping Centre, there had been further commercial properties which had closed on the Newtownards Road, which included the recently closed Wyse Byse store. She highlighted the impact of that the closures on the Newtownards Road and the local community, and the need for urgent interventions to address issues including land

banking, dereliction and deterioration of buildings, to help restore confidence and footfall in the area.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor S. Douglas,
Seconded by Councillor Bunting,

“That the Committee agrees that Council officers convene an urgent meeting of the key strategic partners of the ‘Our Vision for Newtownards Road 2030’ Plan; that the current position of the plan be reviewed against the actions set out therein, with any necessary time-bound interventions identified; and that a report be brought back to provide an update on the plan’s delivery to date and proposed next steps.”

During discussion, a Member requested that the proposed report include also further information on the Council’s statutory powers and functions in respect of addressing such issues across the city.

During further discussion, a Member highlighted the recent closure of the Wyse Byse store on the Cregagh Road and highlighted the potential impact to confidence and footfall on the Cregagh Road and Woodstock Road. The Member requested that Council officers engage with Members from the Lisnasharragh and Titanic District Electoral Areas (DEAs) in relation to the Cregagh Road and Woodstock Road and the impact of the recent commercial property closures.

Accordingly, the Committee agreed:

- i. that officers convene an urgent meeting of the key strategic partners of the ‘Our Vision for Newtownards Road 2030’ Plan;
- ii. that the current position of the plan be reviewed against the actions set out therein, with any necessary time-bound interventions identified;
- iii. that a report be brought back to provide an update on the plan’s delivery to date, the proposed next steps, and further information in respect of statutory powers and functions; and
- iv. that officers engage with Members from the Lisnasharragh and Titanic DEAs in relation to the Cregagh Road and Woodstock Road and the impact of recent commercial property closures on those areas.

Chairperson