

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 4th June, 2025

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor I. McLaughlin (Chairperson);
The High Sheriff, Councillor McAteer;
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, Bunting, de Faoite, S. Douglas,
Duffy, Groogan, Hanvey, Lyons, Maskey, McCabe,
McCallin, McCormick, McKay, R. McLaughlin,
Murray, Nelson and O'Neill.

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;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Ms. L. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Ms. C. Cassin, Markets Development Manager;
Ms. S. Kalke, Client Manager (Physical Programme); and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 7th and 28th May were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 2nd June, 2025.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor Duffy declared an interest in relation to item 2(a) 'Vacant to Vibrant Programme' in that his employer had submitted an application to the scheme and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Councillor Groogan declared an interest in relation to the same item in that her employer was in receipt of a grant through the scheme and that she was acquainted with an applicant to the scheme and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Councillor R. McLaughlin declared an interest in relation to item 5(a) 'Belfast City and Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) Taskforce' and item 6 'Belfast City and Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) 2025/26 Programme' in that he was on the Board of the

Belfast Harbour Commissioners and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Councillor McCabe declared an interest in relation to item 5(b) 'City Events Update' in that her employer had received funding as part of the St Patrick's Day celebrations.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following nine items was 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

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Committee with an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Scheme and outlined the recommendations from the Vacant to Vibrant Assessment Panel following the receipt and assessment of recent applications.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme, which would be supporting up to 64 businesses/organisations to locate or expand into long term vacant units; and
- ii. agreed the recommended city-wide grant award as outlined within Section 3.23 of the [report](#).

Belfast Place-Based Growth Proposition

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the Belfast Regeneration Place Based Growth Proposition.

In response to a Member's query on the potential for regeneration powers to be transferred to local government, the Director of City Regeneration and Development advised the Committee that the Place Based Growth Proposition had outlined an emerging proposition for the devolution of regeneration funding and powers to the Council.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update on the Belfast Regeneration Place Based Growth Proposition, including the updated Place Proposition report and the emerging proposed asks from Government;
- ii. noted the update on strategic engagement with the UK Government, Irish Government, and the Northern Ireland Executive, as part of a strategic engagement programme aligned to the Belfast Place Based Growth Proposition, working with city, regional and national government partners to seek to secure place based and regeneration investment funding;
- iii. noted the continued role for Members in terms of political party engagement at local, MP and Ministerial level; and
- iv. agreed to write to the Minister for Communities requesting an update on what consideration had been given to the transfer of regeneration powers to local government.

Housing Led Regeneration –
PSP Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Committee with an update following the appointment of GRAHAM as the private sector partner (PSP) to work alongside the Council to deliver a housing led regeneration programme.

The Director advised the Committee that the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) had been signed which contractualised the initial Overarching Business Plan (OBP) and the Joint Venture (JV) project governance structures that had been negotiated through the Competitive Dialogue procurement process.

She provided the Committee with further detail in respect of the initial Development Programme, Site Specific Business Plans and the work that had been undertaken by the PSP in respect of potential funding to help deliver the programme.

The Committee was provided with an update on the initial tranche of Strategic Site Assessment (SSA) Phase 2 sites and informed that the SPA provided for the introduction of Additional Opportunity Sites to be considered by the JV.

The Director recommended to the Committee that the existing City Regeneration Members' Working Group be utilised as an appropriate forum to engage with Members on the PSP housing led regeneration programme in advance of matters being brought before the City Growth and Regeneration Committee and the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for approval. In response, a Member suggested that the Working Group to be solely utilised for that purpose and that all other regeneration and development issues be submitted to the Committee for its consideration.

The Member further suggested that a report be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee that would provide an update on the SSA Phase 1 sites.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the progress on the Council's Private Sector Partnership (PSP) for housing led regeneration, including completion of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA); timelines for submission and agreement on the initial development programme; and the Joint Venture (JV) governance arrangements as agreed through the Competitive Dialogue procurement process;
- ii. noted the update in respect of the first tranche of the Strategic Site Assessment (SSA) Phase 2 sites; the potential to consider Additional Opportunity Sites as part of the JV, alongside housing associations, on the basis of a comprehensive approach across a number of sites, and that the detail of any such proposals would be brought back to the Committee;
- iii. noted the initial approach to funding that was being explored by the PSP and that funding detail for individual sites would be brought forward for approval through the site approval process (Site Specific Business Plans) as agreed in the Strategic Partnership Agreement, with reports to be brought back to the Committee;
- iv. noted the potential for further targeted acquisitions aligned to objectives of the JV; the wider placemaking ambitions in the vicinity of Ormeau Avenue, Cromac Street and Stewart Street; and that further reports would be brought back to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee and the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee;
- v. agreed that an update report be submitted to a future meeting in respect of the SSA Phase 1 sites; and
- vi. agreed to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that the City Regeneration Members' Working Group be solely utilised as an appropriate forum to engage with Members on the PSP housing led regeneration programme in advance of matters being brought back to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee and the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for approval, and that all other regeneration and development issues should be submitted to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee for consideration.

**Sandy Row and Grosvenor
Road Revitalisation Update**

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the ongoing work strands in relation to the Department for Communities funded revitalisation of the Sandy Row and Grosvenor Road areas.

The Committee also considered a recommendation, outlined within the report, to amend the eligibility criteria for the Sandy Row Revitalisation Scheme.

During discussion, the Director of City Regeneration and Development and the Senior Development Manager answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to businesses affected by disorder within the City in August, 2024, uptake of the Sandy Row Revitalisation scheme and the potential widening of the scheme's eligibility criteria.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the update on the Department for Communities funded Sandy Row Revitalisation Scheme;
- ii. agreed to amend the eligibility criteria for businesses which sought to avail of the grant to include all businesses, service providers, charities and community organisations trading within the red line boundary area; and
- iii. noted the update on the proposed Grosvenor Road Revitalisation Scheme.

Markets Quarterly Update

The Committee considered a report which provided a quarterly performance and financial update for the period to end June, 2025 and set out future plans for the coming quarter.

The Committee also considered an application for a market licence as part of the Maritime Festival in September, 2025.

During discussion, the Director of Economic Development and the Markets Development Manager answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to St George's Market, the National Market Traders Federation (NMTF) Young Traders Market, support for young traders, the Markets Rights Policy and signage.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the markets update against priority business plan activities;
- ii. noted the update on the financial performance of St George's Market for Quarter 4;

- iii. approved an external market application as part of the Belfast Maritime Festival in September, 2025; and
- iv. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting that would explore the potential of expanding the Young Traders Market events to youth service providers within the city.

Belfast Zoo Q4 Performance Report

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy provided the Committee with an update in relation to the performance of Belfast Zoo for Quarter 4 of the 2024/25 financial year, covering the period January to March, 2025.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor R. McLaughlin,
Seconded by Councillor O'Neill,

Resolved – That the Committee recommends to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that an appropriate Council body be established with a focus on the long-term financial sustainability of Belfast Zoo and complementary assets, and that this body would report to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the Belfast Zoo performance update report for Quarter 4 (January to March, 2025); and
- ii. agreed to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that an appropriate Council body be established with a focus on the long-term financial sustainability of Belfast Zoo and complementary assets, and that this body would report to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee.

Belfast Bikes Q4 Performance Report

The Director of Economic Development provided the Committee with an update on the performance of the Belfast Bikes scheme for Quarter 4 of the 2024/25 financial year, covering the period January to March, 2025.

The Committee noted the Belfast Bikes performance update for Quarter 4, year 10 of operation.

**Belfast Bikes: Tariff Structure
for New Operation**

The Director of Economic Development provided the Committee with an update in relation to the new operation of the Belfast Bikes scheme, including the proposed tariff structure, the proposed corporate membership structure and the launch of the new scheme.

The Committee also considered a recommendation that the Belfast Bikes tariffs be reviewed on an annual basis to align with other Council Scale of Charges, and that prices would be reviewed in line with usage data, inflation and budgetary requirements.

During discussion, the Director of Economic Development and the Client Manager (Physical Programme) answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to the transition from the current scheme to the new operation, the supply of bikes, communications, quality checks, docking stations and the proposed annual review of pricing.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. approved the proposed tariff structure for the new operation of the Belfast Bikes scheme;
- ii. approved an annual review of the pricing of the scheme;
- iii. noted the proposed corporate membership structure for the new operation; and
- iv. noted the update regarding the launch of the new scheme.

**York Street Interchange Placemaking
and Active Travel Development (PATD) –
Committee Response**

The Director of Director of City Regeneration submitted for the Committee's consideration a report in relation to the Council's response to the outcome of York Street Interchange (YSI) Placemaking and Active Travel Review (PATR) as presented to the Committee by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) at its special meeting on 28th May, 2025.

The Committee also considered a request from Mr. M. Hackett to present on the Alternative YSI Design.

The Senior Development Manager presented to the Committee a detailed overview of the YSI scheme, the findings and recommendations of the PATR and a summary of the issues raised by Members following DfI's presentation to the Committee in May.

During discussion, several Member's highlighted the strategic importance of the YSI scheme to Belfast and the need for a comprehensive response from the Council to DfI in relation to the recommendations outlined in the PATR presentation.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the update on the York Street Interchange Placemaking and Active Travel Review;
- ii. agreed to defer consideration of the Committee's response to the Department for Infrastructure in relation to the York Street Interchange to a special meeting in June, 2025; and
- iii. agreed to refer a request from Mr. M. Hackett to present on the Alternative York Street Interchange Design to the North Belfast Area Working Group.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

International Relations – Draft Framework

The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the International Relations Draft Framework to a future meeting to enable further engagement between the Members and officers in relation to the draft framework.

City Events Update

The Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism presented for the Committee's consideration the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with a summary of the:

- St Patrick's Day Celebrations 2025 post event information and forward planning for 2026
- Christmas Planning Update for 2025
- Update on Oireachtas Festival
- Update on Maritime Festival
- Update on Halloween and the Open

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- note the contents of this report on the 2025 St Patrick's Day Programme

- note the outline approach for delivery of the St Patricks Day 2026 Programme
- note the on-going festival contracts position in respect of St Patrick's Day
- note the updates in approach to Christmas 2025 delivery including festive lights
- note the update on Oireachtas festival and approval funding provision to Foras na Gaeilge up to the value of £30,000
- note update on Maritime Festival
- note update on Halloween and the Open.

3.0 Main report

3.1 St Patrick's Day - Background to procurement

Members will be aware that the 2024 procurement was split across a number of lots;

- Lot 1: A Parade / Pageant (£95k)
- Lot 2: City Centre Weekend Music Programme (£70K)
- Lot 3: Cross City Music Showcase (£50k)
- Lot 4: An 'Open Call' (£50k)

With remaining budget retained for parade logistics (circa £25k) and support for programming and marketing activity.

The outcome of this process was that Lot 3 only, was subsequently awarded to Féile an Phobail – for a three - year agreement (2024 to 2026). St Patrick's Day 2026 will be the final year of this contract.

Tradfest were appointed to deliver Lot 2 and approved at SP&R in November 2023, initially for a one-year agreement. Tradfest subsequently secured a new tender for the city centre music programme for 2025, with the option to renew for 2026 and 2027.

In regard to Lot 1 Council Officers took forward the option to deliver the Parade in-house for 2024, This involved engagement with a number of organisations on the provision of professional performance, community engagement, and parade assets. Following the 2024 event, a number of parade specific procurement exercises took place with 2025 being the 1st year of up to three-year arrangements.

3.1.1 2025 Programming

In the lead-up to St. Patrick's Day and the day itself, a series of additional activities were delivered across the city, significantly enhancing the festive atmosphere. These were a combination of curated partners and Council:

Delivered by Féile an Phobail, TradTrail celebrated Belfast's status as a UNESCO City of Music with performances from the best local and national trad musicians from Monday 10th to Monday 17th March, offering free music performances in bars, restaurants, hotels and visitor attractions across the city.

Seachtain na Gaeilge, presented by Conradh na Gaeilge began on Saturday 1st March and continued until St Patrick's Day itself. This included an Irish language family fun day - Spraoi Cois Lao – which took place at Custom House Square on Saturday 8th March, the biggest fun day of its kind. This event included musicians, dancers, activities, games, food and entertainment, celebrating the Irish language, and was free to access.

Belfast TradFest presented the St Patrick's Music Festival – four days of concerts, céilís, displays, taster sessions and workshops in venues throughout the Cathedral Quarter. Combining traditional music with bagpipes, highland dancers, Irish dancing and bodhrán circles, a festival village located at Cathedral Gardens included a host of free performances, alongside food stalls, céilí workshops and more. In addition, there were a number of ticketed performances including:

- Cara Dillon at Ulster Hall
- Afro Celt Sound System at Mandela Hall
- Máirtín O'Connor, Zoë Conway & Dónal O'Connor at St Joseph's Church
- Anúna at St Anne's Cathedral (to an audience of 550)
- Céilí events and workshops across the Cathedral Quarter
- Performances by Glengormley School of Traditional Music, Tír na nÓg Irish Dancers, and various pipe bands

Council provided further family-friendly programming in 2 Royal Ave, via the Council - appointed operator MayWe, which was well attended by families for a day of free events, including art workshops, dance performances, music and a games area.

Council, in partnership with Ards Comhaltas, programmed live music in St George's market on both Saturday 15th and Sunday 16th March, to showcase the asset and profile the successful bid for Fleadh Cheoil in 2026.

The St. Patrick's Day Parade was held on Monday 17th March, a large scale participatory event aimed at providing a family-friendly experience in celebration of cultural heritage. The St Patrick's Day Parade was curated and delivered by the Council Events team incorporating engagement, animation and participation from a number of professional, voluntary and community organisations; dance troupes, schools, community groups and musicians who joined the floats for a free multi-cultural, cross-community celebration. Commencing from Belfast City Hall, the parade followed a circular route and concluded back at the City Hall, ensuring a vibrant celebration which was accessible to the large audience.

The St Patrick's Celebrations were delivered within the budget allocation of £300,000. Members should note that Good Relations funding of £20k was also secured to enhance the community offering within the parade.

Officers are continuing to work with good relations and wider units across council to identify opportunities to enhance the cultural offering and connect communities in how they can be associated and engaged with the St Patricks Day Celebrations. This can provide a pathway into engagement and programming work associated with the delivery of the Fleadh Cheoil given in 2026.

3.1.2 Outcomes

In summary, the programme was delivered on budget, was well attended, and well received. All partners have been very positive in their feedback, and there was less risk with event delivery given that many key creative contractors were working under multi-year agreements.

There was an estimated visitor attendance of 25-30,000 in the City Centre on the 17th for the Parade and Festival Village – similar numbers to 2024, when the weather was better. Over 700 performers and community participants took part in the parade

In 2025, audience response was overwhelmingly positive. Over 16,000 people attended events across 13 venues as part of the St Patrick's Music Festival, with an estimated 12,000 visitors engaging with programming at Cathedral Gardens

alone over the course of the weekend. The festival featured 410 participants, over 60 hours of content, and performances from a diverse range of artists including Cara Dillon, Afro Celt Sound System, Máirtín O'Connor, Zoë Conway, Dónal O'Connor, Anúna, and various traditional pipe bands, dancers, and community music groups.

The TradTrail, delivered by Féile an Phobail, extended across 60 venues citywide, featuring 87 artists, reinforcing Belfast's status as a UNESCO City of Music and supporting businesses in hospitality and tourism through accessible trad programming. The partnership model across venues and artists has proven both sustainable and impactful.

Spraoi Cois Lao – which took place at Custom House Square on Saturday 8th March, the biggest fun day of its kind. Almost 6,000 attended this event.

At 2 Royal Avenue, over 3,550 visitors engaged with a tailored programme of family-friendly activity, including arts, dance

As with previous years, there was clear evidence of elongated dwell time in the city, with footfall clustering in Cathedral Gardens, Writers' Square, and 2 Royal Avenue before and after the parade. This wrap - around experience will continue to evolve, with plans to expand the storytelling element across Council-owned assets in future years. This will align with the future opening of Belfast Stories and the wider place-making strategy.

A key consideration for 2026 will be the redevelopment of Cathedral Gardens, scheduled to begin in October 2025 and lasting approximately 12 months. This will impact use of that site for next year's programme, requiring early planning around alternate locations and infrastructure.

Operationally, while the parade route does have pinch - points due to the high density of the spectators attending; new measures (such as a screen) were introduced in 2025 to mitigate against these particular risks, in consultation with the H&S Advisory and other stakeholders. There was also the addition of audio description for those with limited sight.

3.1.3 Alignment to the Cultural Strategy

The 'City Imagining Strategy' approved by Council has a focus on supporting developing local arts and cultural organisations, through funding, commissioning and capacity building. In this regard, there was engagement with local

arts, voluntary and community organisations to create props or coordinate performances of varying nature to enhance the overall production of the parade and highlight the local arts and culture within Belfast. Additionally, partners worked with the sector in the delivery of the wider programme.

The ongoing development work aligned to an events action plan will continue to consider development opportunities for St Patrick's Day.

3.1.4 Key Findings: Belfast St Patrick's Day 2025 socio-economic survey

Visitor profile:

- 51% of visitors from Belfast City Council area
- 30% from elsewhere in Northern Ireland
- 4% Republic of Ireland; 9% Great Britain, 6% other regions
- 44% of those outside Northern Ireland, the event was the main reason for their trip
- 24% staying in accommodation away from home
- 32% attended the event with children
- 58% had attended a St Patrick's Day event in Belfast before, 42% had not
- 27% heard about the events by family /friends

Visitor Spend:

- 93% ate out during the event, average spend per group £72.95
- Total average spend per group *excluding* accommodation £91.10
- 20% staying in accommodation in Belfast region

Overall estimated direct spend for the St Patrick's Celebrations excluding accommodation £788,062.28

Overall Rating:

- 86% gave the Parade a rating of 8-10, including 30% who rated it as 'Extremely good'.
- 97% of visitors agreed that the event improves NI's reputation as a host for events like these.
- 97% of visitors agreed that the event improves the reputation of NI as a place to visit.
- 90% agree /strongly agree events like this have can help shape a more accepting citizenship in our city.
- 100% of respondents believe that events like this encourage people to come to Belfast.

- 93% said that such events improve their sense of wellbeing and community.
- 96% felt the St Patrick's Celebrations were inclusive for all people from all cultural heritages.
- 94% agreed that there should be more events like this in Belfast.
- 98% would recommend the event to other people.
- 94% likely/very likely to visit St Patrick's Day celebrations in future years.

3.1.5 Marketing and Communications

An integrated marketing and PR campaign was delivered beginning in October 2024 with headline announcements and built to a full programme launch in February 2025.

The marketing and communications campaign achieved widespread positive media coverage across broadcast, print and online media, plus strong interest and engagement on social media.

Coverage spanned BBC, UTV, Cool FM, Q Radio, and major print and digital outlets including the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, and Belfast Live. Notably, Cool FM delivered a 4-hour live broadcast from 2 Royal Avenue.

Council operated a digital and outdoor advertising campaign from 24th February to promote the events taking place under the St Patrick's Celebrations banner, including all partner activity and the events at St George's and 2 Royal Avenue.

The advertising campaign included online advertising, radio and outdoor promotion in the form of adshells, impact wraps, digital hubs, adshel lives and bus T-sides. The campaign directed people to belfastcity.gov.uk/stpatricks where the event information was displayed prominently on the page. Editorial features were also placed with Belfast Media Group and EasyJet magazine.

Additionally, further details could be found on programming at partner and stakeholder websites and social media platforms including Visit Belfast, Tourism NI, TradFest, Conradh na Gaeilge, Féile, Beam Creative and MayWe.

A press release was also issued on 21st February to promote the finer and confirmed details of the event schedule and this was followed by a traffic reminder and update on plans closer to the event. TradFest issued additional press to promote the music activity.

Visit Belfast provided analytics of their Spring campaign which included the St Patrick's Day Celebrations.

This included a double page spread in Belfast City Spring Guide, of which 30,000 copies were printed with a 150,000 Readership.

The St Patrick's Day landing page - live from 24th February <https://visitbelfast.com/ideas/st-patricks-day-in-belfast/> had 21,280 web visits.

Social media advertising was across Meta & Tik Tok - 2x weeks targeted to NI region and Greater Belfast area closer to the event. The final stats:

- Organic Social = 254,458 Impressions, 87,637 Views, 63,625 Engagements
- Content Series = – Best Place for Guinness – 94,277 Views, 187,869 Impressions, 2,879 Engagements
- Paid Social = Meta - 240,370 impressions - 55,877 engagements, 94,100 video plays
- TikTok - 206,486 impressions, 3,220 clicks, 204,912 video views

Additionally, there was a dedicated E-Zine and blog posts, and a small number of organic posts.

3.2 Way Forward 2026

A number of multi-year agreements are now in place with regards to the delivery of the wider St Patrick's Celebrations allowing for earlier planning and programme development for the 2026 event. The budget for the Celebrations is currently as per 2025.

Members are advised that ongoing future developmental approaches will be addressed in the Events Action Plan and findings brought back to Committee in due course. This will address holistically the challenges and opportunities in relation to city events in their current form. For example, we know that SPD in particular requires consideration of a multi year planning approach.

3.2.1 As per the outlined procurement processes:

- Féile an Phobail will progress into Year 3 of their award to deliver Trad Trail
- Tradfest will progress into year 2 of their agreement to deliver the City Centre Music Programme
- The Council will again in 2026 deliver the parade in-house with 'creative' contractors on year 2 of a three - year agreement on parade floats, professional performers and community engagement respectively.

3.3 Christmas Lights Switch On Planning Update

Members will be aware that Officers were asked to consider the engagement of a 'celebrity' to headline a future Christmas Lights Switch On. Officers have considered the proposal and consulted with contracted Health & Safety advisor. There are a number of concerns on how the reintroduction of a celebrity after a number of years would affect the existing crowd dynamics. The current demographic is mainly a family audience, and the inclusion of a celebrity with mass appeal could diversify the audience. Additionally, the current programme of entertainment has proven popular since the return of the switch on event post covid, currently programming demonstrated wide appeal to key audience segments, programming output is almost entirely Belfast based which represents good value for money. This aligns with the Cultural Strategy of supporting the local creative sector. Officers are seeking approval to continue with the existing approach to programming.

Members will be aware that after a large audience descended on the City centre for the 2013 Switch On, it was agreed that the event necessitated ticketing. With the implementation of ticketing the event, officers face the challenge of converting a live city centre into a ticketed event space in a 15–20-minute window. Upon review of the 2024 event, a small number of additional operational measures can be implemented for 2025, including a wider perimeter on the approach to the ticketed zone supported by VMS advisory signage, and restricting parking within the event site on the day of the event. Furthermore, the start time could be 15-30 minutes later when shopping footfall continues to diminish.

With previous years, there is always a high demand for tickets, yet a significant number of no-shows on the evening. This additional capacity does allow the Events team to admit non-ticket holders in the city centre.

In addition to the core programming for the switch on event officers are developing plans to include a weekend animation programme up to the value of £50,000

The Christmas lights switch on event marks the opening of the festive season and is aligned to the opening of the continental market and the implementation of the festive lights scheme.

Members will be aware that an ongoing tender exercise has been underway to appoint a contractor to facilitate and deliver the festive lights programme. A contractor has been appointed with kick off site meetings occurring in early June. As part of the tender process indicative designs, core footprint and critical paths for delivery were sought.

Officers will work with the incoming supplier and key stakeholders to engage with the detail regarding the scheme proposals, with additional support from the BCC estates team to secure the associated wayleaves and bring these under BCC ownership as previous schemes have utilised wayleaves via BCCM.

Following the site visits in June officers propose to bring back a more detailed plan to August committee.

3.4 Oireachtas Festival

Members will be aware of the decision taken at CG&R committee in August 2023 and again in October 2023 to approve proceeding with the Bid and consideration of any subsequent financial commitments to support the delivery of the Oireachtas na Samhna in 2025.

The event takes place from the 29th October to 2nd November 2025. The festival is a significant cultural event that celebrates Irish language, arts and traditions. It is an annual event that attracts as many as 10,000 participants and spectators from across Ireland and beyond. Hosting the festival provides both economic and cultural benefits to the city; namely

- A unique opportunity to celebrate the Irish language
- Attracting visitors and generating economic impact through bed nights and day spend
- Marketing and promotional opportunities
- Community engagement
- Opportunity to engage with a significant number of first time ROI visitors
- Opportunity to build relationships with key media partners ahead of the Fleadh Cheoil

A programme board has been facilitating the event planning as well as identifying opportunities to support wider engagement and development of additional activities which will augment fixed Oireachtas programme.

The event will take place across a number of city centre venues including the ICC & Waterfront Hall, Ulster Hall, City Hall and Europa Hotel. Officers are continuing to engage with the event organisers to support on delivery, marketing and visitor servicing for the event.

To maximize the impact of such a festival, a small grants scheme for community groups has been identified as providing additional benefits. This scheme can provide the necessary financial support to grassroots organisations, enabling them to actively participate and contribute to the festival's success.

The aim of this initiative is to generate community-based arts activity and engagement with civic events being hosted as part of Oireachtas na Samhna 2025 in Belfast city centre.

Through Foras na Gaeilge's *Scéim Forbartha Líonraí Gaeilge* (Irish language Networks Development Scheme, or SFLG), Foras na Gaeilge fund 6 community-based projects in the Belfast City Council area to implement programmes of Irish language activity on a language planning model with a view to increasing awareness and usage of the Irish language in the community.

Due to capacity and restricted timeframes to deliver a small grants programme it is proposed that a small events and activities fund of £30,000 to be divided among these 6 Belfast-based groups in 2025 and administered by Foras na Gaeilge

- Ionad Uíbh Eachach
- Glór na Móna
- Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain
- Ionad na Fuiseoige
- An Droichead
- Croí Éanna

One of the primary benefits of this small grants scheme is the empowerment of community groups. These groups often operate on limited budgets and may lack the resources to participate in large-scale events. By providing small grants,

the scheme enables these groups to develop and implement projects that align both with the festival's objectives and the Belfast Agenda. Community groups can use the grants to organise events, workshops, and performances that highlight different aspects and provide pathways into participation of the competition elements of the event.

Delivering tangible benefits in local communities, in businesses and in tourism, this support for local Irish language groups in Foras na Gaeilge's SFLG scheme will help the Oireachtas na Samhna festival achieve its full potential, creating a lasting and positive impact on the city.

3.5 Maritime festival

Planning is well underway for the Maritime Festival to be delivered across the weekend of the 6-7th September 2025

As per previous years this is delivered in partnership with Maritime Belfast Trust (MTB). The event is supported by a programme board delivery structure with key partners Maritime Belfast Trust, Visit Belfast, Belfast Harbour, DfC. Planning is well underway with new additional activation of the Slipways, Hamilton dock and the City Quays Gardens. This year will be the first year that MTB are delivering co funded programming including a Saturday evening concerts with Hot House Flowers.

Maritime Belfast Trust (MBT) have entered into a delivery partnership with Council under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) to programme Hamilton Dock and Titanic Slipways as part of the Belfast Maritime Festival 2025. Within the existing SLA, MBT will programme daytime activity but have also proposed to extend the Maritime offering to include an evening programme with a food and drink offering and a 'live' concert headlined by 'Hothouse Flowers.'

As in previous years, Council would provide further in-kind support; covering daytime security, medical and health and safety provision, - all of which were in addition to the SLA.

This in-kind support will now also extend to the evening offering, with Council covering security costs to further assist the delivery of the MBT concert. This allocation will be taken from existing project budgets.

3.6 Halloween

In September 2024 members considered and approved proposals from BID one to support enhanced Halloween animation within the city centre.

Officers are continuing to explore partnership proposals and associated costs through the BIDS to support animation activity in 2025 and will bring further details to the August committee.

3.7 The Open

Officers are working in partnership with Tourism NI to support city dressing options at city hall and also with Visit Belfast to deliver visitor servicing:

- With the front of house Visitor Servicing team participating in TNI Get Open Ready customer service training designed to enhance visitor engagement.
- Development of a comprehensive 'Open 153' fact sheet to assist frontline teams across all 4 VB Visitor Information Centres (VICs) in handling inquiries.
- Frontline staff will be kept informed and updated on any promotional offers from partners related to the Open event.
- Key visitor information regarding the Open will be shared in the upcoming Quarterly Industry Briefing at the Visit Belfast Welcome Centre (VBWC) on June 3rd, attended by approximately 40-45 participants.
- Visit Belfast in partnership with Fáilte Ireland hope to have a staffed presence at the Tourism Northern Ireland stand during the Open on July 18th and 19th.
- The VBWC and the Belfast International Airport (BIA) will feature golf-themed branding and VBWC develop a front window display with golf merchandise, in the lead-up to the event.
- Golf-related materials, including 'Made for Golf' leaflets, are available at the VBWC and BIA, along with a selection of golf merchandise for sale.

Publications:

- The upcoming Summer Publication of Belfast City Region Guide (30,000 printed and distributed) will include a 'Beyond the Open' article, highlighting activities and showcasing golf partners for visitors

interested in golfing during their stay. This content will also be adapted into a blog on the website.

Digital Engagement:

- A 'Beyond the Open' blog will be created to provide guidance on navigating the city, including coach and travel information.
- Social media content will be developed, focusing on activities available to visitors during breaks between rounds and after the event, utilising existing footage to streamline content creation. Featuring restaurants, bars and attractions alongside golf theme.
- Open-related Landing page featuring offers and events collated from industry partners will be promoted on the visitor website visitbelfast.com.
- Consumer E-Zine featuring Open-related offers and events, as well as a planning guide for city activities, will be distributed to various databases including Great Britain, Rest of World, and core markets.

Overall, Visit Belfast is actively enhancing visitor engagement and promoting the city through targeted activity, staff and industry briefings, training, city publications, and engaging digital content to maximise opportunities and enhance the visitor experience leading up to and during The Open event.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

Financial resources will be met from within existing departmental budgets.

5.0 Equality & Good Relations Implications /Rural Needs Assessment

The cultural strategy, A City Imagining has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and a Rural Needs Assessment (RNA). Specific initiatives as required will be subject to a further equality screening."

During discussion, the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to St Patrick's Day, the potential expansion of Halloween activities, the potential for a New Years Eve event, the 2025 Christmas Lights Switch On event and the Festive Lighting Scheme.

In relation to the 2026 St Patrick's Day Programme, a Member suggested that a report be brought back to the Committee that would explore the potential to expand the programme of events to additional sites.

A further Member suggested that, given the significance of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 for Belfast, the Committee should be provided with regular updates in relation to the planning and preparation for the festival.

In response to a Member's query on the Festive Lighting Scheme, the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism advised the Committee that following the appointment of the new contractor to deliver the scheme, officers would conduct site visits with the new contractor to undertake a full assessment of existing infrastructure. It was reported that following the site visits, officers would submit further detail in respect of the scheme to the Committee in August.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the 2025 St Patrick's Day Programme; the delivery of the 2026 St Patricks Day Programme; St Patrick's Day contracts; delivery of the 2025 Christmas Lights Switch On including festive lighting; the Maritime Festival; the Oireachtas Festival; Halloween; and the Open Championship;
- ii. approved funding provision to Foras na Gaeilge up to the value of £30,000;
- iii. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting that would explore the potential to expand the 2026 St Patrick's Day Programme to additional sites;
- iv. agreed that regular updates be provided to the Committee in relation to the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026; and
- v. agreed that a report be submitted to a future special meeting in respect of the 2026 festive lighting.

Launch of Cultural Multi-Annual Grants

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

"1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:

- **Update Members on the investment programme that supports the cultural strategy, *A City Imagining 2020-2030*.**
- **Seek approval for the opening of the cultural multi-annual two-year scheme in August 2025 for funding from 1 April 2026 – 31 March 2028.**

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that Members:

- Note the contents of this report and agree to open cultural multi-annual grants in August 2025 for Arts and Heritage organisations and Events and Festivals for funding from 1 April 2026 and 31 March 2028 subject to final recommendations being agreed by Committee in February 2026.

3.0 Main report

Background to Cultural multi-annual grants (CMAG)

3.1 At a meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee on 28 August 2019, a new ten-year cultural strategy for Belfast, *A City Imagining*, was agreed. As part of this strategy a new investment approach was approved including phased implementation of new funding programmes. Similar to the Belfast Agenda, the recommended investment model for culture proposed a new partnership approach to supporting the cultural sector, with the aim of sustaining and developing accessible cultural activity and infrastructure across Belfast. This investment is central to creating positive cultural, social and economic impacts for the city, delivering on our overall targets for the period, positioning Belfast as a regional driver, and creating the conditions for long-term transformation.

3.2 As included in the strategy, the aims of the cultural investment model are to:

- support the cultural life of the city by enabling citizens to be active, dynamic and creative agents of change
- invest in the cultural and creative sectors skills development and capacity for production and innovation
- position Belfast as an international testing ground for new approaches to cultural engagement, development and placemaking
- establish Belfast as a cultural destination.

3.3 The first phased implementation of the cultural investment model commenced with the opening of a competitive funding programme for cultural multi-annual grants for the period April 2020 to March 2024. It was agreed that these multi-annual grants would cover two main areas:

- Arts and heritage organisations, which have a year-round programme of cultural activity (*Anchor* four-year grants and *Enable* two-year grants)
- Festivals and events organisations, which have a festival or event with an audience of 65,000 or more (*Imagine* four-year grants), or an audience of 10,000 or more (*Activate* two-year grants) by end of grant period.

3.4 These two strands of funding, Arts and Heritage and Festivals and Events, each with two tiers of investment available (two-year and four-year) replaced previous core multi-annual funding for arts and heritage and previous one-off funding agreements to events and festivals awarded on an annual basis via the Committee process.

3.5 The Arts and Heritage strand of funding is similar to and replaced the established core multi annual funding first implemented in 2013. It was designed to sustain our existing cultural offer covering both programmes and infrastructure. The Festivals and Events strand of funding was a new element and was designed to develop large events and festivals that will help Belfast become a year-round events destination. Furthermore it created a transparent and open process in line with the arts and heritage funding process.

3.6 Plans and process for launch of Cultural multi-annual funding

In advance of the new financial year in April 2026, it is planned to launch CMAG in August 2025 with approval of awards and contracts by March 2026. A summary of this timeline is included below:

- Open call for application submissions - August 2025
- Information sessions for applicants - August 2025
- Submission deadline for application – October 2025
- Eligibility check, scoring, officer assessment and independent assessment – Oct to Jan 2026
- Committee Approval of awards - February 2026
- Council Ratification approval of awards – March 2026

3.7 Similar to other grants, Cultural Multi-Annual Grants will be advertised widely. This will include:

- Information and application details emailed directly to a GDPR compliant mailing list representing over 370 organisations from across the cultural and creative sectors.

- Information shared with sectoral networks, websites and socials including the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Community Arts Partnership.
- Promotion through Council communication channels
- Three information sessions and one-to-one meetings held in advance of the deadline.

3.8 Criteria for Decision making

Assessments will be made, and scoring applied under three key areas of criteria:

- Quality of programme: this includes their vision, content, audience experience and marketing and audience development.
- Impact of activity: this includes how the programme contributes to the four strategic themes (A City Belonging, A City Challenging, A City Creating and A City Exploring) and how they will monitor and evaluate that impact.
- Readiness for investment: this includes planning, financial management, staff, governance, and environmental impact.

Assessments will be made only based on information supplied by the applicant within their submission. This will include the application form and supporting documentation such as business plans and strategies.

3.9 Principles of the Assessment Process

Applications are received and eligibility checked by the Central Grants Unit before being passed to officers for scoring. Officers undertake a thorough assessment of all eligible applications. Applications and assessments are discussed and agreed at an internal moderation panel. An independent assessment panel co-ordinated by Central Grants Unit and chaired by a Senior Managers is then convened. The role of this assessment panel is 'to ensure that the scoring of applications has been undertaken in an appropriate fashion and to provide verification or validation of sampled applications and the overall process'.

3.10 Financial & Resource Implications

There are currently no financial implications to this report. Funding relating to Cultural Multi Annual Grants will be met from the recurrent budget for Cultural Development subject to Committee approval and confirmation of departmental budgets for 2026-27. Payments and costs won't be incurred until the new financial year.

3.11 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

The cultural strategy, A City Imagining has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and a Rural Needs Assessment (RNA). Specific initiatives as required will be subject to a further equality screening.”

The Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report; and
- ii. agreed to open the cultural multi-annual grants in August, 2025 for Arts and Heritage organisations and Events and Festivals for funding from 1st April, 2026 and 31st March, 2028, subject to the Committee approving final recommendations in February, 2026.

City of Music Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update members on the work relating to the UNESCO City of Music designation and seek approval of the 25/26 workplan related to the music strategy.**

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to:**

- Note the contents of this report and the progress made against areas of the music strategy, ‘Music Matters: A Roadmap for Belfast’
- Agree the actions for 2025/26 as set out in the report and in Appendix 1 including budget implications to be met from existing departmental budgets

3.0 Main Report

- 3.1 At a meeting of City Growth and Regeneration Committee in December 2022, members agreed the ‘Music Matters: A Roadmap for Belfast’. Mirroring A City Imagining cultural strategy the music strategy has four strategic themes, each having four strategic priorities. There are a number of actions and recommendations for each priority addressing various areas of need across the music sector, namely:**

- Theme 1: Place artists at the heart - Recognising the value of creators
- Theme 2: Nurture the sector - Strengthening the structures to support those who guide and invest in creators
- Theme 3: Ignite the live experience - Liberating the live music sector as a major catalyst for cultural and economic growth
- Theme 4: Unlock the unifying power of UNESCO – Connecting Belfast internationally

3.2 Detail on the substantive progress against each of these initiatives in 2024/25 is detailed in Appendix 3.

3.3 The rest of this paper speaks to workplan proposals for 2025/26

The Belfast Music Board

3.4 The Music Strategy recommended establishing a Belfast Region Music Board to oversee the roadmap's implementation. Appointed in April 2023, the board comprises 22 members from diverse backgrounds and has co designed initiatives under the core themes of the strategy.

3.4 Theme 1 - Placing Artists at the Heart

A range of programmes under this theme are recommended. Highlights include the continuation of:

3.5

- Output Belfast - Delivered as a key event within the City of Music programme, the conference is due to take place on 25th September, features a full programme of panels, workshops and conferences, followed by an evening showcase of live music for free to the public.
- Micro Bursaries scheme - This programme provides up to £1,000 to individual musicians, to assist with costs incurred within their artform. In 2023 and 2024, this programme was delivered in Collaboration with Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, through enhancing their existing bursary programme to include a music micro-bursary. 38 musicians have received support to date
- Gradam Ceoil bursary scheme - Running since 2021, the Gradam Ceoil Bursary Scheme is a series of three annual awards awarded to young (18–25-year-old) traditional musicians in Belfast, in partnership with Duncairn Arts Centre, Red Shoe productions and TG4.
- Health and wellbeing - In 2023/24, officials have worked on a range of partnerships with key

organisations such as the Music Leaders Network to co-design practical wellbeing events and initiatives focusing on the physical and mental health of music creators. This has manifested as a number of practical schemes, including a pilot programme with NI Alternatives entitled 'Fit to March' which launched in September 2024.

- Music Industry sessions - In 2024/25, officials delivered 6 industry free industry sessions for musicians. Proposed events thus far include focuses on women in sound design, managing your vocal health, radio plugging and tour booking. The UNESCO City of Music Hannover have agreed to partner with BCC on these sessions, supplying industry experts from their city for relevant topics.

3.6 A new initiative under this years planning would be to introduce Teenage Kicks: Youth Music Programme

The music strategy includes several key commitments aimed at engaging young people in the local music scene. Notably, commitment 1.7 focuses on 'ensuring that music activities are accessible in safe spaces for all ages,' while commitment 4.4 seeks to 'amplify and encourage the influence of young people within the music sector.' Furthermore, the UNESCO Creative Cities network has embraced the principle of 'Bringing youth to the table for the next decade' as a core commitment during the UNESCO 2024 Annual General Meeting.

To fulfil these commitments, we propose the development of a pilot youth music program specifically designed for individuals under 18. This initiative aims to boost attendance and raise awareness of music events among young people in the city. By hosting concerts across a variety of venues, we will showcase the diversity of Belfast's music scene and cultivate a vibrant community of young audiences. Additionally, the program will foster sector engagement through the introduction of micro-grants (up to £2,000) available to promoters, venues, and festivals, enabling them to organize high-quality music events tailored for under-18s in Belfast.

3.7 NI Music Prize/Sound of Belfast

At the City Growth and Regeneration Committee meeting on September 13, 2023, members agreed to support an independent review of the NI Music Prize and Sound of Belfast. Assessing alignment with the music strategy and potential for a long-term strategic partnership, with associated resources. It involved consultations with peers and benchmarking against similar events nationally and internationally, resulting in a series of recommendations that form a roadmap for development. The findings of this review are detailed in Appendix 2 of this report

3.8 The Northern Ireland Music Prize honours and celebrates the best of new, established, and emerging Northern Irish music, serving as a key event for Belfast and its UNESCO City of Music status. Organized annually by the Oh Yeah Music Centre, the awards night takes place at the Ulster Hall during the Sound of Belfast Festival, reflecting similar efforts in other regions of the UK and Ireland.

3.9 It is a significant milestone for Belfast, acting as a regional driver for the music industry in Northern Ireland. Belfast City Council is the primary funder of both the NI Music Prize and the Sound of Belfast programme. In 2023, the £30,000 funding from Belfast City Council was allocated to support the NI Music Prize, increasing to £45,000 in 2024, marking the first time it was shared between both Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize. The additional £15,000 allowed Oh Yeah to enhance its marketing efforts (£5,000) and cover rising travel and accommodation costs for visiting industry professionals (£10,000), which had significantly increased compared to the previous year. Funding acted as a lever for broader partnerships and investments, including Arts Council NI, BBC, PPL, PRS for Music, Arts & Business, Musicians' Union, Help Musicians, Rio Ferdinand Foundation, PRS Foundation, and others, contribute to this initiative.

3.10 The report recommends that:

- Belfast City Council support the NI Music Prize and Sound of Belfast through a multi-year agreement, enabling organisers to plan effectively, strengthen delivery, and focus on long-term goals.
- Funding be increased to enhance, scale, and strengthen the activities delivered at Sound of Belfast, including the NI Music Prize.

- Dedicated marketing and communications campaign to champion artists, promote the events, and engage new audiences with Sound of Belfast and the NI Music Prize.

3.11 Based on the recommendations from this report and consultation with the Music Board, it is proposed to enter into a three-year multi-year agreement covering the event from 2025 to 2028. While the review suggests an investment of £65,000 per annum, it is important to consider the financial pressures on the music development budget across various themes. Therefore, it is recommended to allocate £55,000 annually to the NI Music Prize and Sound of Belfast, ensuring we can support these initiatives while addressing the broader funding needs across the music sector.

3.12 Theme two – Nurture the sector

A range of initiatives are proposed within this theme with highlights including:

- Sounds Atypical Scheme - The Sounds Atypical Music Grant scheme provides funding for d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent musicians to create accessible music events in various performance spaces across Belfast. This initiative was developed in collaboration with the University of Atypical for Arts and Disability (UofA), a disabled-led organization dedicated to arts and disability.
- Music Business Accelerator Programme - partnering with colleagues in Economic Development to develop a Music Business Accelerator Programme tailored to the spectrum of needs within the music industry

3.13 Theme 3 - Igniting the Live Experience

- A range of programmes are recommended for 2024/25, highlights including:
- Strategic Partnership with Music Venue Trust - The Music Venue Trust is a UK wide charity which acts to protect, secure and improve Grassroots Music Venues. The organisation has been a key partner during both the formation of the Music Strategy and at implementation stage.
- Greening the Sector - we have partnered with Native Events on the creation of a Sustainability Toolkit for the music industry. We have completed Stage One where a steering group was formed and a sustainability survey was sent out to the sector to identify needs and priorities.

3.14 Theme 4 – Unlocking the unifying power of UNESCO

Theme 4 of the Music Strategy aims to provide more opportunities for embedding music in all corners and communities of the city and also seeks to position the Belfast City of Music brand on the international stage as a gateway to visitors and investors.

- 3.15** As part of Belfast's application and status as a City of Music, member cities are committed to '*work internationally with the UNESCO Cities Network to deliver shared music, skills and learning opportunities.*'. Between 2023 - 2025, support has been provided for local music creators and industry to undertake international exchanges with other UNESCO Cities of Music such as Kansas City, USA, Hannover, Germany, Brno, Czech Republic, and London, Ontario Canada. In addition, a partnership with the Belfast International Arts Festival has provided a platform for a special UNESCO day each year featuring acts from other UNESCO cities at the Festival. It is proposed to continue this partnership with the Belfast International Arts Festival through hosting a UNESCO City of Music day in November 2025, featuring musicians from Daegu, Korea.

- 3.16** As well as collaboration between cities, UNESCO Member cities are also expected to take part in official UNESCO events, including the annual UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) conference and UNESCO Music subnetwork meetings. The UCCN Annual Conference, a key component of the Network, offers all member cities a unique platform for dialogue and cooperation which has led to the establishment of long-term, impactful international partnerships and initiatives. Attendance at this AGM is a mandatory requirement for creative cities and officials from the Culture Development team will attend this two-day event scheduled on 24th and 25th June at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France.

3.17 UNESCO monitoring and evaluation

It is important to note that 2025 will mark four years since Belfast was awarded the title of UNESCO City of Music. As part of this year, Belfast City Council has to complete and submit its Membership Monitoring Report highlighting each Creative Cities' contribution to UCCN's implementation. This report is mandatory for member cities every four years and will require a detailed analysis of progress against commitments in the music strategy alongside a plan and budget for the following four years. Officials are actively

working on this report which is due for submission in July 2025.

3.18 Finance and Resource Implications

There are no new financial implications. The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2025/26 budget from existing departmental budgets allocated to music development for the Culture and Tourism section of the Economic Development division of the Place and Economy.

3.19 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

The cultural strategy, *A City Imagining* and the Music Matters Music Strategy have both been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and a Rural Needs Assessment (RNA). Specific initiatives as required will be subject to a further equality screening.”

The Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report and the progress made against areas of the music strategy, “Music Matters: A Roadmap for Belfast”; and
- ii. agreed the actions for 2025/26 as set out in the report and Appendix 1, including budget implications to be met from existing departmental budgets.

Strategic and Operational Issues

**City Growth and Regeneration
Final Committee Plan 2025/26**

The Committee considered a report, submitted by the Strategic Director, Place and Economy, which presented the final draft City Growth and Regeneration Committee Plan for 2025/26.

The Committee approved the final draft Committee Plan for 2025/26.

Notices of Motion Quarterly Update

The Committee considered a report which provided a quarterly update on the Notices of Motion that it was responsible for, in line with the agreement of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that all standing committees receive regular updates.

The report outlined that there was currently twelve Notices of Motion and Issues Raised in Advance for which the Committee was responsible for and recommended that the Committee agree to close the following four motions:

Category 1 Recommended Closures:

- Retail Business in Sandy Row;
- Impact of Belfast Grand Central Station on Grosvenor Road and Durham Street; and
- Closure of Connswater Shopping Centre - Support for Tenants.

Category 2 Recommended Closures:

- Women's Safety in the City

The report also provided status updates for the remaining eight motions which remained open.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update on all Notices of Motion and Issues Raised in Advance that it was responsible for as outlined in Appendix 1; and
- ii. agreed to the closure of four Notices of Motion, as outlined in Appendix 1 and section 3.3 of the report.

Presentation

**Belfast City and Region Place
Partnership (BCRPP) Taskforce**

The Director of City Regeneration and Development reminded the Committee that, at its meeting in May, 2025, the Committee had agreed to receive a presentation from representatives of the Belfast City and Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) in order to be provided with an update on the BCRPP programme of work in 2024/25 and the proposed approach in respect of the 2025/26 programme, including priority issues and objectives going forward.

The Chairperson welcomed Mr. J. O'Neill, BCRPP Chair and Chief Executive of Belfast Harbour, and Ms. M. Doyle, Deloitte, to the meeting.

Mr. O'Neill advised the Committee that the BCRPP was a joint public-private initiative to deliver a structured programme of work aimed at attracting inclusive investment for the delivery of regeneration, infrastructure, and a modern built environment for Belfast and the wider city region.

He outlined for the Committee's information the BCRPP objectives, namely:

- to continue to build collaboration and partnership in the city and wider region;
- to continue to promote and market the Belfast region outside Northern Ireland;
- to increase engagement and advocacy with all key stakeholders, in particular, investors and government;
- to support delivery of the Belfast Region City Deal programme of investment by attracting collaborative partners; and
- to support delivery of our shared ambition and drive inclusive, sustainable growth.

He advised the Committee that the BCRPP continued to use a four pillared approach in respect of programming which included, Annual Programme of Activity, Engagement and Advocacy, Media and Communication, and Research.

He highlighted some of the work that had been undertaken to date in relation to Communications and Digital Marketing including the development of a bespoke digital Belfast Region investment guide.

Ms. Doyle provided the Committee with further information on BCRPP's:

- approach to support place-based growth proposition for Belfast;
- support for the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) Stocktake and The Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC);
- engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive, the UK Government and the Irish Government; and
- engagement with local communities.

Mr. O'Neill reported that the BCRPP had attended MIPIM in March, 2025 and the UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum in May, 2025, with a focus on highlighting opportunities across the Belfast region in respect of housing-led regeneration, transport-led regeneration and Tourism. It was reported that attendance at both events had generated strong interest in Belfast and the wider region from both national and global investors and developers.

The representatives concluded the presentation by outlining BCRPP's approach for 2025/26, in line with its four pillared approach and associated objectives, to work collaboratively to support place-based growth proposition for Belfast, positively showcase and position the city region as a place for investment through investor focused events, and positively position the city to attract inclusive investment to deliver regeneration and development.

Following the presentation, the representatives answered questions from several Members in relation to community engagement.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their presentation, and they left the meeting.

The Committee noted the information that had been provided within the presentation.

Belfast City and Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) 2025/26 Programme

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:

- Update members on the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) 2024 / 2025 Programme.
- Seek approval to extend Council's involvement in the BCRPP to 2025 / 2026.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- Note a presentation will be made at Committee from representatives from the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership (BCRPP).
- Note alignment of the BCRPP programme with the draft International Relations Framework which is also being brought to this Committee for approval.
- Approve that officers continue to support the delivery of the BCRPP 2025 / 2026 programme including governance processes, administering programme funded expenditure and entering into associated contracts on behalf of and with oversight from the Taskforce, and in line with Council's procurement processes.
- Approve Council investment (from existing and approved City Regeneration and Development Budget) as part of the wider public private sector partnership contribution towards the delivery of the BCRPP 2025 / 2026 programme.
- Approve attendance by senior officers at MIPIM 2026 as part of the BCRPP 2025 / 2026 programme (which includes attendance by other partners), noting that the BCRPP presence at MIPIM will be funded from the wider public-private sector BCRPP programme budget.

3.0 Background

- 3.1** The Belfast City & Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) is a joint public-private initiative that is delivering a structured programme of work aimed at attracting inclusive investment for the delivery of regeneration, infrastructure, and a modern built environment for Belfast and the wider City Region. It is supported by public, private and key anchor institution partners, including Belfast City Council, all Belfast City Region Deal partner Councils, Belfast Harbour, Translink, Queens University Belfast, and representatives from the local development and regeneration community.
- 3.2** Members will recall that this Committee agreed in May 2025 to receive a presentation from representatives of the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) to this June Committee. The purpose of the presentation is to update Members on the 2024 / 2025 programme of work and proposed approach to the 2025 / 2026 programme, including priority issues and objectives for the Partnership moving forward.
- 3.3** Members may also recall that representatives of the BCRPP previously presented to this Committee in June 2024 and approval was given to Council participation in the 2024 / 2025 Programme of work as part of a wider public-private sector approach.
- 3.4** In terms of context setting, Belfast City Council has been working with public and private sector organisations for the past ten years to proactively promote Belfast to local, national and international audiences to attract capital investment to support realising the growth ambitions as set out in the Belfast Agenda. Over this same period there has been significant development and regeneration in the city, as reported to Committee via the annual Regeneration Tracker update reports and the recent Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy 10 year Stocktake Review, as noted below.
- 3.5** This approach aligns to Council's agreed strategic priority to promote and position the city to compete globally to attract inclusive and sustainable investment. Members will be aware that Positioning the City to Compete is a key deliverable within the 2025 / 2026 City Growth & Regeneration Committee Plan, as agreed at CGR Committee Meeting in May 2025. A separate report is also being brought to this

Committee on the Draft International Relations Framework 2025-2028 and the work of the BCRPP aligns with the Framework, which recognises the role Council plays as a civic leader and a convening role to exploit existing relationships and connections to generate investment; enhance Belfast's global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and offer; coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment and support our partner organisations to deliver their organisational targets with a focus on inclusive economic growth.

- 3.6 Council has an important role as a civic leader to act as convener and facilitator, bringing together public and private sector partners to collectively promote and position the city to compete globally to attract inclusive and sustainable investment, notably in the context of attracting national and international capital investment to support regeneration and development activity across the city and recognising that delivering our collective growth ambitions requires both public and private sector funding.
- 3.7 Members will recall that in 2024, Council undertook a 10-year review stocktake of progress on the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS), which had been published in 2015, with a number of priority policies and proposed projects. The stocktake found that Belfast has exceeded expectations across many BCCRIS regeneration policy areas and delivery by both private and public sectors of significant development across a range of asset classes. It did however also highlight that many challenges remain, including the need for investment, innovative ways of funding and joined up working to unlock regeneration priorities and ensure continued growth. It identified catalytic areas of focus including city centre living; green and climate resilient public realm, sustainable travel and infrastructure related projects; unlocking stalled major regeneration schemes, addressing dereliction and vacancy and taking a multi-agency approach to place keeping and city management.
- 3.8 The Stocktake highlighted that continued partnership working across public, private and third sectors is required to leverage the ambition and further potential of the city. This collaborative and joined up approach is particularly critical given the disparate governance landscape in the city and constrained public finances. It noted that delivering on the Belfast Agenda ambitions, with the city centre identified as a priority, will require investment of c£7.5bn, which will require significant private sector funding alongside public / third sector. It also recognised that innovative approaches to

funding and unlocking investment are required to address the institutional, physical and market issues that act as barriers to inclusive growth and development.

4.0 Main Report

4.1 The 2024 / 2025 BCRPP programme commenced in September 2024 and is delivering a structured programme of work aimed at attracting inclusive investment for the delivery of regeneration, infrastructure and a modern built environment for Belfast and the wider City Region. The presentation being made to this Committee by representatives from the BCRPP will provide an overview of the 2024 / 2025 programme and highlights from the annual programme of activity which is delivering a structured programme of activity to help ensure that Belfast and the wider region are positioned to continue attracting investment and delivering sustainable, inclusive growth.

4.2 Key areas of focus include:

- *Communications* -proactive media engagement throughout the year to reinforce positive messaging around the Belfast region's investment proposition, targeted at the local, national and international real estate and development media.
- *Investment focused events* - The 2024 / 2025 programme included engagement at a local, national and international level and a presence at national and international investment conferences, UKREiIF 2025 and MIPIM 2025 which showcased Belfast and the wider city region proposition to a global investment and development audience. Previous activity also included engagement and attendance at events at a local, national and international level, with specific events including a Dublin Showcase and London based events.
- *Engagement and advocacy* – an increasingly important strand of work of the BCRPP is advocacy and engagement activity to facilitate two-way conversations with policymakers, funders and the public sector and real estate community with a key aim to positively position the Belfast region as a place that is open for business and investment and to support development and regeneration activity. This has included, supporting BCC in relation to the ongoing work on a Regeneration Place Based Growth Proposition for Belfast (with an update report also being brought to this Committee) by supporting engagement with the NI Executive, Irish and

Westminster government, and collaborative initiatives including the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor, the Core Cities Group and Shared Island.

- 4.3 From a Council perspective, participation in the BCRPP programme has delivered a number of benefits aligned to achieving corporate and city level strategic priorities. It is recognised that the joint, collaborative public private partnership working approach used by the BCRPP is an important mechanism to support our agreed priority to 'Position the City to Compete' under the Belfast Agenda. In addition, it complements other city region partnerships including Belfast Region City Deal and Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor; and is an important mechanism to deliver on key regeneration and development priorities, notably accelerating city centre living; and aligned to wider council priorities around innovation, net zero and economic development.
- 4.4 Members will be aware of the strategic focus on housing-led regeneration, including on-going work with our appointed Private Sector Partner, GRAHAM to bring forward a housing-led regeneration programme to support our ambition to substantially grow the number of new homes in the city by 2035. Members are aware of the challenges faced in delivery of housing-led regeneration and Council's participation in the BCRPP, including attendance at UKREiiF and MIPIM, has facilitated introductions and joint meetings, involving GRAHAM, to engage with a number of institutional investment and pension funds who have the relevant experience in partnering with local authorities.
- 4.5 Members will note the separate agenda item for this Committee on the Regeneration Place Based Growth Proposition for Belfast and on-going work with city, regional and national government partners to seek to secure place based and regeneration investment funding for Belfast. Council's participation in the BCRPP has assisted in the strategic engagement with the UK Government in Westminster, the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government to seek to advance this proposition. This has included a meeting of the BCRPP representatives, including Council, with the Minister for the Department of Finance in April 2025 and at his request, a follow up joint Ministerial meeting with the Ministers for Finance, Infrastructure, Economy and Communities is being convened.

- 4.6 Furthermore, attendance at UKREiF conference provided a valuable opportunity for Officers to lobby and engage with UK Government representatives, including the NI Secretary for State and senior officials from Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) and Homes England who have been instrumental in unlocking housing schemes across the UK. Follow up meetings have been arranged with Homes England and MHCLG. In addition, attendance at MIPIM facilitated positive engagement with the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) who were in attendance alongside wide representation from the Irish investment community and government officials. Discussions with ISIF included the potential for a joint funding approach with Belfast and a focus also on the opportunities arising from the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor. A further follow up meeting is planned with ISIF, and there has also been recent meetings with Department of the Taoiseach on joint opportunities. ISIF facilitated the first ever Irish presence at MIPIM through the inaugural Irish Real Estate Investment Pavilion Ireland, which sought to attract foreign investment in Irish property and development market, recognising the important role that international investment must play in delivering the €18 billion annually in investment capital from the private sector to meet the existing and future housing needs of its population and to achieve the ambitious housing targets set out in the Irish Government's Programme for Government. Following the success of this inaugural presence, discussions are on-going with event organisers for a formal Irish Pavilion at MIPIM which seeks to replicate the perceived success of Belfast's presence and other UK cities at MIPIM since 2016.
- 4.7 BCRPP attendance at UKREiF and MIPIM has generated strong interest in Belfast and the wider region from both national and global investors and developers. Following positive engagement at these showcase events previously including in 2024 and more recently in 2025, there has been continued engagement by Council and BCRPP partners with a range of institutional investors, developers and end occupiers. This has included pension funds, housing developers, end users from life sciences, logistics, green technology sectors, and leisure, retail and hotel operators. Regeneration and development schemes at scale can take a considerable period of time to come to fruition and this is particularly so in Belfast where there are specific challenges that other UK cities may not have, including the lack of specific regeneration-based funding pots and the disparate

nature of powers and decision making. Notwithstanding this, development and regeneration in the city has continued over the past few years and the BCRPP are strongly of the view that a continued partnership approach to marketing and promotion of the city including attendance at international real estate showcase events and focused follow ups with interested parties does result in positive outcomes in terms of the positioning the city to attract external capital investment, and in development and regeneration coming forward.

- 4.8 In recent years there have been a number of new funds, including institutional funds, occupiers, developers and first to market brands which have entered the Belfast market, many of which followed engagement at events such as UKREiiF and MIPIM. Whilst it is not always straightforward to make a direct link from attendance at a particular event to new developments or market entrants given that relationships /engagement often take place over a period of time, there is a strong consensus amongst the BCRPP that the consistent joined up approach, marketing and a visible Belfast City Region presence at such events all contribute to success. Partners in BCRPP from the professional and services sector have also highlighted that attendance at UKREiiF and MIPIM has resulted in additional supply chain work for their local companies, supporting local employment and economic growth.
- 4.9 Following recent UKREiiF and MIPIM events there has been on-going follow up by officers (and other BCRPP partners) to include meetings and facilitation of inward visits to Belfast from investors, developers, occupiers and government departments and policymakers including:
- Major housing / residential developers who have not to date delivered projects in Belfast / NI.
 - Institutional investors with a strong interest in housing-led, mixed use and infrastructure projects.
 - End-use occupiers including FDI companies, commercial / leisure operators, innovation hub operators and global hotel operators.
 - Homes England; Westminster Government Departments including Office for Investment, Department for Business and Trade, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Ireland Strategic Investment Fund.
- 4.10 Many UK cities successes in recent years has been through collaborative private and public sector working, with local government taking a lead role in facilitating a collaborative approach to seeking this external investment

required to deliver their growth ambitions. They recognise the important role that national and international showcase events such as MIPIM and UKREiiF play in raising awareness of their city / region's investment proposition and attract global sources of capital. Other UK cities and regions that attend MIPIM and UKREiiF include the Liverpool City Region, Cardiff Capital Region; London; Greater Manchester; Newcastle; and Scottish City Alliance, with delegations comprising of political leaders and private sector partners. Steve Rotherham, Metro Mayor of the Liverpool City Region; Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester; Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London alongside senior officers from the Office for Investment and Department for Business and Trade attended MIPIM 2025. In addition, senior officers from Irish Government's Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage; elected representatives and officers from Dublin City Council also attended MIPIM 2025 as part of the inaugural Irish delegation.

4.11 Proposed approach to 2025 / 2026

The Partnership is governed via a Taskforce comprised of representatives of the public and private sector. The Taskforce has endorsed continuing the Partnership into 2025 / 2026 and continuing to deliver the pillared programme of activity. The presentation to be made at Committee from representatives of the BCRPP will set out the core objectives and proposed programme of activity for 2025 / 2026.

4.12 From a Council perspective, the key aims and objectives of continued participation in the BCRPP Partnership and contributing to the programme include:

- Supporting the Draft International Relations Framework 2025-28.
- Securing investment required to assist with delivery of our shared city ambitions and growth ambitions as outlined in the Belfast Agenda, the Local Development Plan and BCCRIS and noting the wider economic benefits this investment delivers to the city, as well as increased rates generation and delivery on corporate priorities.
- Strengthening additional support and advocacy for the Place Based Growth Proposition for Belfast.
- Maximising the benefits of the Belfast Region City Deal investments and Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor initiative.
- Securing investment in the built environment on a city-wide basis to maximise opportunities to create jobs, support inclusive economic growth alongside

enhancing physical and social infrastructure across the city.

- Securing investment in key city infrastructure schemes including waterfront regeneration, connectivity, net-zero and innovation related projects.

4.13 Council plays a key role in both the strategic and operational management of BCRPP including the development, management and delivery of the Programme of Activity. Members are asked to approve Council continuing to take on this role, with officers supporting the 2025 / 2026 programme including governance processes, administering programme funded expenditure and entering into associated contracts on behalf of and with oversight from the Taskforce, and in line with Council's procurement processes.

4.14 The BCRPP Partnership is supported and funded by public, private and key anchor institution partners, with external funding forming the majority of the overall programme delivery budget. Members are asked to note the proposed approach to the 2025 / 2026 Programme and approve the Council investment (from existing and approved City Regeneration & Development Budget) as part of the wider public private partnership contribution towards the delivery of the 2025 / 2026 Programme.

4.15 Council has facilitated and supported a 'Team Belfast' attendance at MIPIM since 2016. Following positive feedback from MIPIM 2025 the Taskforce has endorsed a Belfast City Region presence at MIPIM 2026 in line with the approach taken by other UK Cities, and its inclusion within the wider BCRPP Programme of activity for 2025 / 2026. The Taskforce feel that in order to successfully showcase Belfast and the wider City Region, it requires the civic leadership and attendance by Belfast City Council. Members are asked to approve attendance by senior officers at MIPIM 2026, noting that the BCRPP presence at MIPIM will be funded from the wider public private BCRPP Partnership budget.

5.0 Financial and Resource Implications

5.1 The BCRPP Partnership is delivered as a public private sector sponsorship fund and is supported by a range of public, private and key anchor institutions who contribute financially towards the 2024 / 2025 programme, with external and private sector funding forming the majority of the overall programme budget. It is anticipated that the majority of the 2025 / 2026 programme budget will again be funded through external funding.

5.2 Council has previously agreed to contribute of £80,000 towards the 2024 / 2025 Programme, and subject to Members agreement it is proposed that Council contribute £80,000 (from existing and approved City Regeneration and Development Budget) as part of the wider public private partnership investment towards the delivery of the 2025 / 2026 programme. To note that this sum is a contribution to the entire 2025 / 2026 programme and not directed towards a particular event.

5.3 Approval is sought for attendance of senior officers at MIPIM 2026. Travel costs for Council attendance at MIPIM 2026 to be met from within existing and approved departmental budgets. All other costs related to the Belfast City Region presence at MIPIM would be met from the 2025 / 2026 BCRPP Partnership programme budget.

6.0 **Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment**

None associated with this report.”

During discussion, a Member highlighted that, at its meeting in June, 2024, the Committee had agreed to request that BCRPP consider the establishment of a sub-group for community engagement with a focus on social value. The Member raised concern at the lack of progress in respect of this request.

In response, the Director of City Regeneration and Development highlighted the partnership’s commitment to community engagement and the continued engagement with Queen’s Communities and Place (QCAP), an initiative based on engagement and partnership between communities, policymakers and academics.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. approved that officers continue to support the delivery of the BCRPP 2025/26 programme including governance processes, administering programme funded expenditure and entering into associated contracts on behalf of and with oversight from the Taskforce, and in line with Council's procurement processes;
- ii. approved attendance by senior officers at MIPIM 2026 as part of the BCRPP 2025/26 programme, noting that the BCRPP presence at MIPIM would be funded from the wider public-private sector BCRPP programme budget; and

- iii. agreed to defer consideration of the Council's investment towards the delivery of the BCRPP 2025/26 programme to a special meeting of the Committee in June, 2025, to enable further detail to be provided in respect of community engagement.

Chairperson