

**Democratic Services Section
Legal and Civic Services Department
Belfast City Council
City Hall
Belfast
BT1 5GS**



**Belfast
City Council**

1st August, 2025

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

The above-named Committee will meet in the Lavery Room, City Hall and remotely via MS Teams on Wednesday, 6th August, 2025 at 5.15 pm, for the transaction of the business noted below.

You are requested to attend.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

AGENDA:

1. Routine Matters

- (a) Apologies
- (b) Minutes
- (c) Declarations of Interest

2. Restricted Items

- (a) Vacant to Vibrant Programme (Pages 1 - 16)
- (b) Artist Studio Organisational Grant 2025/26 (Pages 17 - 28)
- (c) Financial Reporting - Quarter 4 2024/25 (Pages 29 - 34)

3. Requests to Present

- (a) Belfast Waterfront Task Group (Pages 35 - 38)
- (b) Northern Ireland Housing Executive (Pages 39 - 46)

4. Positioning Belfast to Compete

- (a) Events Update (Pages 47 - 52)
- (b) International Engagement - Proposed Approach (Pages 53 - 78)

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By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 6
of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

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Subject:	Request to Present - Belfast Waterfront Task Group
Date:	6 th August 2025
Reporting Officer:	Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place & Economy Cathy Reynolds, Director City Regeneration & Development
Contact Officer:	Sean Dolan, Senior Development Manager, City Regeneration and Development

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.	
Insert number <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Information relating to any individual 2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information) 4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter 5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained 6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction 7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime 	
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision After Council Decision Sometime in the future Never	<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 40px; margin-bottom: 2px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 40px; margin-bottom: 2px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 40px; margin-bottom: 2px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 40px;"></div>



Call-in		
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes	No

☒

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to advise Members that the Waterfront Task Group has submitted a request to present to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee to provide an update on the progress of the Belfast Waterfront Framework. It is proposed that a paper and update presentation will be made to the September meeting of the CG&R Committee
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Agree to receive a presentation from the Waterfront Task Group to the September meeting of the CG&R Committee. II.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p><u>Background</u></p> <p>As reported to the CG&R Committee in October 2023 a Waterfront Task Group was established to develop a focused approach to the Belfast waterfront, aligned to A Bolder Vision key move 'Embracing the River'. The Task Group, chaired by BCC Chief Executive and consisting of Maritime Belfast Trust, BCC officers, Belfast Harbour Commissioners, local community groups, Titanic Quarter Ltd, DfC, DfE, Tourism NI, Odyssey Trust and DEARA commissioned a detailed analysis of the waterfront area from the Ormeau Road Bridge to Thompsons Dock.</p>
3.2	<p>Consultants, Schulze + Grasso undertook a detailed analysis of over 10km of the waterfront, compiling analysis on the completed and pending developments, as well as identifying the catalyst opportunities and gaps in infrastructure to maximise the social, economic and environmental opportunities that exist along the waterfront. This work also undertook to identify the existing and proposed projects emerging from within the adjacent communities, and to identify catalyst opportunities to connect these projects and the local communities to the wider education, employment and leisure facilities along the waterfront corridor. This work was carried out in consultation with a range of stakeholders including local communities through online surveys and a dedicated charrette style design workshop.</p>

3.3	Following a detailed analysis of over 10km of the waterfront Members of the CG&R Committee received a presentation on the Framework in October 2023 and approved the Belfast Waterfront Framework (Link to October Committee Meeting & Framework).
3.4	This Committee has received updates on projects emerging from A Bolder Vision and the Waterfront Framework, including Under the Bridges, the Sailortown Bridge and the Queens Quay Kiosk. Members were also invited to attend a presentation update and boat tour of the Framework area in October 2024.
3.5	A request has been received from the Waterfront Task Group to attend the September meeting of the CG&R Committee to provide an update on completed and emerging projects under development, and to provide an update on potential future funding mechanisms and plans to realise the scale of the ambition of the Waterfront Framework. A report will accompany the presentation.
4.0	<u>Financial and Resource Implications</u> No additional financial or resource requirements are associated with this paper.
5.0	<u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> None associated with this report.
6.0	Appendices - Documents Attached None

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Subject:	Request to Present – Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Date:	6 th August 2025
Reporting Officer:	Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place & Economy
Contact Officer:	Cathy Reynolds, Director, City Regeneration & Development

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted?

Yes

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No

☒

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

Insert number

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

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision

After Council Decision

Sometime in the future

Never

☐
☐
☐
☐

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?

Yes

☒

No

☐

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to highlight the recent correspondence from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) on the City Centre Waiting List, which is understood to have been sent to BCC Elected Members and seek approval to invite the NIHE to the special meeting of the CG&R Committee on 27 August to discuss this. It is proposed to extend the invitation to this special meeting to Elected Members from the People & Communities and Planning Committees.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. Agree to invite the NIHE to the special CG&R Committee meeting on 27 August to discuss the City Centre Waiting List and to extend invites to the Elected Members of the People & Communities and Planning Committees.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	The development of the Belfast City Centre Waiting list for social housing has been raised by Elected Members at this Committee, the People & Communities and Planning Committees, as well as various other fora including working groups.
3.2	<p>The NIHE very recently issued correspondence to Elected Members as attached at Appendix One. The NIHE have confirmed that with new social housing being completed within the Loft Lines development later this year they are now in a position to implement the Belfast City Centre Waiting List. Furthermore, they advise that during the week beginning 7th July 2025 they were to write to all households who have expressed an interest in living within the Belfast area on their application for social housing, to make them aware that new apartments at Dargan House, Loft Lines are due to be allocated before the end of the year. In the letter they have advised they will ask those households who are interested in living within the new Belfast City Centre Common Landlord Area to get in touch with them by the 31 August 2025 to update their preferences. The NIHE have advised this is similar to an exercise they undertook in March 2020, when all applicants and transfers on the waiting list across the Belfast City Council area were invited to register their interest in city centre living. Following this exercise, 862 households joined a 'virtual city centre list'. The NIHE have set out that the Dargan House development has been identified as a potential "Housing for All" Shared Housing Development scheme and have set out further information as to what this could entail.</p>
3.3	Given the timings as set out in the correspondence from the NIHE it is proposed that they are invited to attend the special meeting of the CG&R Committee on 27 August, to update

	Elected Members on feedback to date, and to provide an opportunity for Elected Members to table any questions they may have. It is proposed that an invite to the special Committee meeting is extended to all Elected Members on the People & Communities and Planning Committees given the synergy across this topic.
4.0	<u>Financial and Resource Implications</u> None associated with this report.
5.0	<u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> None associated with this report.
6.0	Appendices - Documents Attached Appendix One – Correspondence from NIHE to BCC Elected Members

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Dear Councillor,

Update on Belfast City Centre Waiting List

I am writing to update you on the development of the Belfast City Centre Waiting List for social housing. You will be aware that this is a topic which we have discussed with elected members on a number of occasions. It entails creating a new Common Landlord Area under the Housing Selection Scheme. Importantly, given the priority attached to this issue in 'Belfast Agenda', it allows households to express an interest in social housing in the city centre.

The development of the waiting list for the city centre is an important step in increasing housing supply and addressing housing need, and is a key delivery lever for the housing ambitions set out in 'Belfast Agenda'. It will contribute to the regeneration of the city and, as the establishment of this waiting list will draw on a wide and diverse range of households, will help promote balanced and sustainable residential communities in the city centre. All of these are key aspects of 'Belfast Agenda' and the Local Development Plan.

I am pleased to say that, with new social housing being completed in the city centre later this year, we are now in a position to implement the Belfast City Centre Waiting List.

Commissioned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and funded by the NIHE and the Department for Communities, Clanmil Housing Association is developing 81 new social housing apartments at Dargan House, Loftlines, in the Titanic area. These are part of a larger mixed tenure development and will include 1, 2, and 3-bedroom homes, as well as 8 specially designed wheelchair-accessible 2-bedroom units. This development has been identified as a potential 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Development and is expected to complete by late 2025.

During the week beginning 7th July 2025 we will write to all households who have expressed an interest in living within the Belfast area on their application for social housing, to make them aware that the new apartments are due to be allocated before the end of the year. In the letter we will ask those households who are interested in living within the new Belfast City Centre Common Landlord Area to get in touch with us by the 31 August 2025 to update their preferences. This is similar to an exercise we undertook in March 2020, when all applicants and transfers on the waiting list across the Belfast City Council area were invited to register their interest in city centre living. Following this exercise, 862 households joined a 'virtual city centre list'.

Housing For All

In the letter we will also make households aware that the Dargan House, Loftlines development has been identified as a potential 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Development.

The 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Programme has its origins in the NI Executive 'Together: Building a United Community Strategy' which reflects the Executive's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. Good Relations Support will be invested not just in this new development but in surrounding communities through a Good Relations Plan.

Applicants who decide to accept an offer of a home within a Shared Housing development must sign and comply with a 'Shared Housing Good Neighbour Agreement'.

Further information

If you or any of your constituents have queries about the Dargan House, Loftlines development or the Shared Housing Good Neighbour Agreement, please contact Clanmil Housing Association directly.

People who have any questions about their housing application should get in touch with their Housing Advisor in the Housing Executive or their Housing Association if they are currently a Housing Association tenant with a transfer application.

We have also put together a FAQs section on our website which can be accessed through this link [Belfast City Centre CLA FAQs](#)

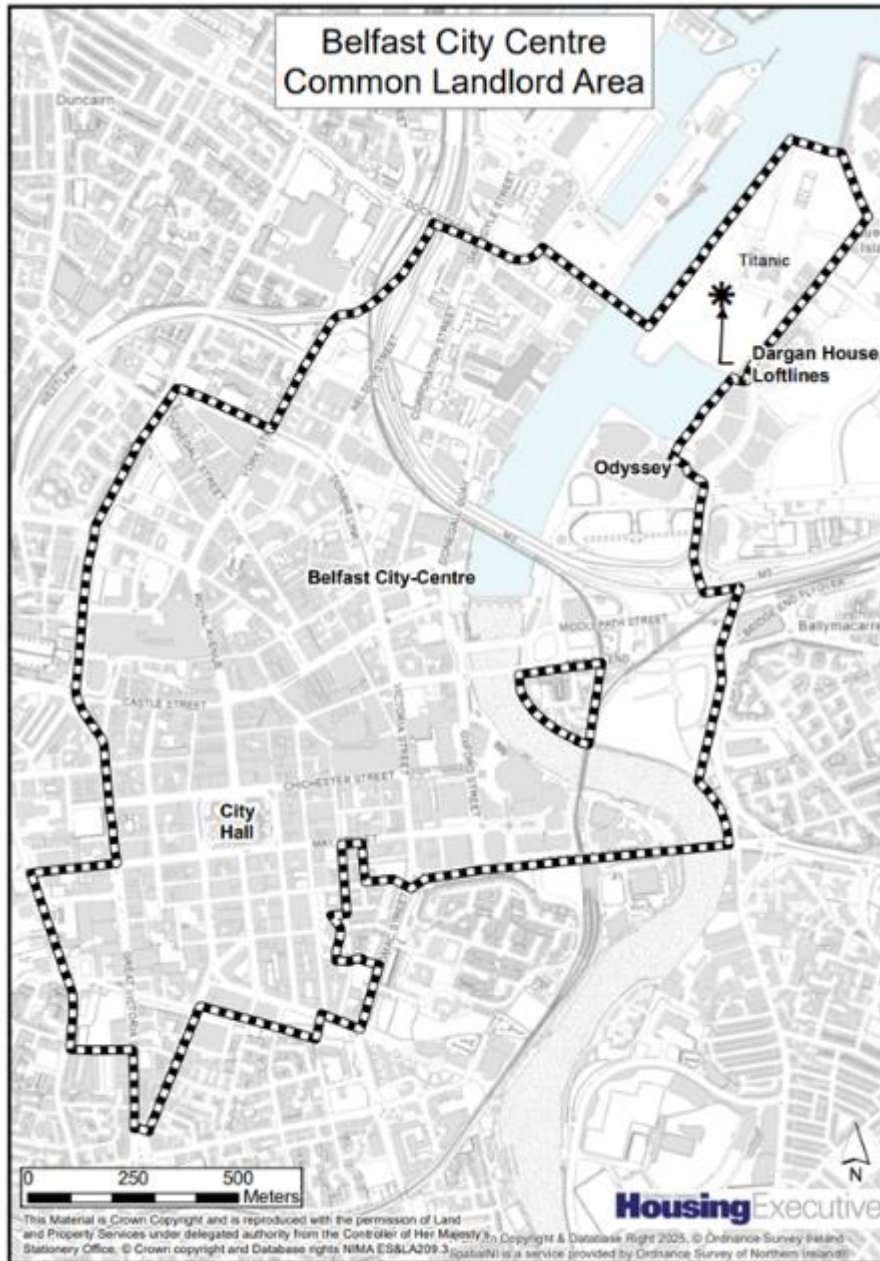
Given the scale of housing need across Belfast, I am delighted that progress is being made in the development of much needed social homes in the city centre, and the development of the Belfast City Centre Waiting List is an important milestone in our partnership to deliver on the ambitions as set out in 'Belfast Agenda'.

Yours sincerely,



Grainia Long
Chief Executive

Belfast City Centre Common Landlord Area (CLA)



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Subject:	Events Update
Date:	August 2025
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture & Tourism

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The purpose of this report is <ul style="list-style-type: none">to provide a programme update on the 2025 Belfast Maritime Festival.to provide members with an update on Halloween
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	Members are asked to <ul style="list-style-type: none">note the contents of the Maritime Programmeconsider and approve funding to Bid One for Halloween activity
3.0	Main report
3.1	Maritime Festival 2025 Programme

	<p>Planning is well advanced for the Maritime Festival to be delivered across the weekend of the 6-7th September 2025. Officers continue to work with internal and external stakeholders on a range of matters to ensure the successful delivery of this signature project.</p>
	<p>Titanic Quarter is all set for a weekend of free fun from 11am-6pm each day. Organised by Belfast City Council's Events team, in partnership with Maritime Belfast Trust, the Belfast Maritime Festival is also supported by Belfast Harbour, Titanic Quarter Limited, Titanic Belfast, Department for Communities, Tourism NI and the Odyssey Trust.</p> <p>People of all ages are invited to dive deep into a celebration of Belfast's rich maritime past and innovative future along the Maritime Mile – from Sailorstown/City Quays to HMS Caroline.</p> <p>Visitors can hop on board visiting ships docked at Queen's Quay and the Abercorn Marina, including the stunning Andalucía – a Spanish galleon replica. Sailability will also operate from the marina, offering accessible sailing, and educational tours.</p> <p>Queens Quay will also host Science Street, back by popular demand, transforming the waterfront into a space for hands-on learning and discovery – from marine biology and climate change to biodiversity. Close by is Kids Cove, where younger visitors will enjoy arts and crafts, circus and dance and pirate play time.</p> <p>'Maritime Presents Festival of Fools by the Sea' at the Arc; a mix of live street circus, theatre and walkabout animation. Close by the Nomadic, the Hamilton Dock Maritime Village will celebrate past and future with immersive technology, interactive exhibits and boat building exhibitions.</p> <p>The historic Slipways is the venue for a music programme & funfair with an extended Saturday evening programme (with headline Act 'Hothouse Flowers' backed by 'Honey Feet') delivered in partnerships with Maritime Belfast Trust. The Slipways Street Food Market is also located here, with regional producers showcasing and selling their goods supported by DAERA, through the NI Regional Food Programme (NIRFP).</p> <p>New to the programme for 2025, is 'City Sensations', an Accessible & Inclusive programme of activities held on the Antrim side of the river in the recently developed City Quays Gardens. Between City Quays and the footbridge, DRIFT, a legacy project from 2024, will be located at Donegal Quay. This unique floating installation will provide workshops.</p> <p>To compliment the musical offering at the Slipways, there will be three further performance spaces along the Maritime Mile, extending from Donegall Quay, to the Soundyard, and finally as far as HMS Caroline/Titanic Distillers.</p>

	<p>A Community Co-design project engaging Sailortown Regeneration, The Met and Passers by will provide programme enhancements in the form of public art, theatre or performance. There has also been ongoing engagement across the industry to showcase local offerings in conjunction with the overall festival programme. Our media partner Bauer Media Group will be on site with prizes, games and giveaways.</p> <p>Visitors attending the Belfast Maritime Festival are encouraged to walk, cycle, take the Glider from Belfast city centre directly to the Titanic Quarter, or travel by train to Titanic Quarter Halt. Cycle parking is available outside Titanic Belfast and at Belfast Bike docks at the SSE Arena and SS Nomadic.</p>
3.2	<p>Halloween</p> <p>Members will be aware of support that was offered to BID one to deliver Halloween activity in 2024 and a revised proposal has been submitted for 2025. 2024 activity delivered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monster Installations - 7 Giant inflatable monsters adorned prominent city buildings, drawing a remarkable 1 Million + total views and 500,000 reach across social media platforms. These installations encouraged footfall, inspired social media content, and instilled a sense of community pride. Local businesses such as Thompsons and Lush participated by creating complementary displays. • Pumpkin Patch- In collaboration with Belfast City Council, the Pumpkin Patch distributed 1,600 pumpkins and hosted approximately 5,000 visitors. The event was widely praised for its value and organisation. Attendees received maps and brochures highlighting other Halloween activities and attractions in the area. • Spooktacular Activity Centre - Located at 2 Royal Avenue, the centre hosted over 5,000 visitors throughout the weekend. Activities included pumpkin painting workshops, face painting, Halloween decoration creation, and a Creepy Crawly Farm featuring snakes and spiders. Quiet sessions each morning catered to children with additional needs, ensuring inclusivity <p>2025</p> <p>The proposal for 2025 is a continuation of this activity with an ask to uplift the proposed number of monster installations to 10. The Halloween offering, including the rooftop monsters and city-wide installations has the potential to be expanded further to bring a real sense of fun and animation across the city centre. This will not only enhance the visitor experience but also strengthens city vibrancy during a key festive period.</p> <p>The return of the pumpkin patch will again offer families an economical and engaging reason to come into the city. This type of activity encourages footfall and translates into spend across our retail and hospitality sectors, helping drive economic benefit while reinforcing the city centre as a welcoming, diverse family-friendly space for all.</p>

Monster Installations



- 10 Large, inflatable monsters placed on buildings throughout the City Centre.
- These award-winning installations are visually impactful, sharing, and proven to attract footfall in other cities.

Belfast One Pumpkin Patch – City Hall Grounds

- A two-day free ticketed event hosted at City Hall.
- Visitors will receive a pumpkin and be encouraged to visit 2 Royal Avenue, where they can decorate or carve at dedicated design stations and avail of activity similar to that delivered in 2024 – with 2 Royal Avenue becoming a dedicated ‘fun hub’ for the period
- This format encourages city movement and adds an interactive creative element to the overall experience.

Total costs to deliver extended monster installation and pumpkin patch including install, derig, insurances, event management, performers and staffing is estimated to be £80,000.

Members should note BID one are also seeking to deliver other activities including:
Cultural Engagement – Halloween Stories from Around the World & Living Window Animations

- Olive Tree House animated with projections acting out folk tales (e.g. Japanese yokai, Indian Diwali, Dia de Los Muertos).
- Window displays combine projection and theatrical storytelling.
- Performances run in loops across evenings.

Dia De Los Muertos Procession

- A twilight procession with music, dance and processional sculpture. The route for this could be in and around the Corn Market area.

BID one have advised that many businesses have expressed enthusiasm for getting involved again this year. They’ve made clear that investment from partners like Belfast City Council and Belfast One provides them with the confidence and support to contribute meaningfully to the event with their own in kind activation.

	<p>Outcomes & Impact For 2025</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive city experience for families and residents through interactive, safe, and festive events. • Broader cultural engagement through stories and displays celebrating Halloween across global traditions. • Increased footfall across the City Centre during Halloween. • Support for local businesses through increased visibility and targeted promotions. • High social media engagement via visual installations and visitor content. <p>Funding of 50K would support the increased number of monster installations as proposed and the pumpkin patch, including the hub at 2 Royal Avenue, with BID one funding the remaining costs. This would be an uplift of last year's support of £40,000.</p> <p>Members had raised previously about potential for provision of support for Halloween activities in communities however capacity, timelines and resources has proved challenging in this area. Halloween activity can already be supported through the community festivals fund currently with one applicant being successful in receiving funding for activity with The Beat Carnival delivering Tales and Traditions: A Neighbourhood Festival of Global Halloween Heritage. The CFF grant is now closed and officers will continue to highlight that Halloween activity is eligible for future years.</p>
4.0	<p>Financial and Resource Implications</p> <p>Financial resources will be met from within existing departmental budgets and from specified reserves.</p>
5.0	<p>Equality & Good Relations Implications /Rural Needs Assessment</p> <p>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.</p>
	Appendices – Documents Attached
	None.

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Subject:	International engagement – proposed approach
Date:	6 August 2025
Reporting Officer:	Damien Martin, Strategic Director, Place and Economy
Contact Officer:	Laura Leonard, EU and International Relations Manager

Restricted Reports	
<p>Is this report restricted?</p> <p style="margin-top: 20px;">If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">After Committee Decision</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">After Council Decision</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Some time in the future</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Never</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <div style="margin-top: 20px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> </div>
<p>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</p> <p>Insert number <input style="width: 40px;" type="text"/></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Information relating to any individual 2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information) 4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter 5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained 6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction 7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime 	

Call-in	
<p>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
	The purpose of this report is to set out a proposed approach to the council's engagement in international activity for the coming three-year period, with a view to focusing resources on areas that can generate most investment for the city and its partners and adding value to planned activity through our civic resources and networks.
2.0	Recommendations
	Members are asked to approve the proposed approach to council activity in international engagement work for the coming three years, as well as the annual action plan for the current financial year.
3.0	Main report
3.1	At the March 2025 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members received an update on engagement with internal and external partners around the development of a new approach to international engagement for the council, following the previous international relations framework that had been in place from 2017-2021.
3.2	Since the conclusion of that framework, there have been significant internal and external shifts that require a change of focus. Some of these present opportunities while others are potential threats. The global operating environment is facing significant headwinds and is highly volatile at the present time. Macro-level factors mean that it can be difficult to plan activities with any degree of certainty given that changes such as the introduction of tariffs can impact directly on commitments and ambitions around trade and FDI activity, visa restrictions impact on student mobility and research, and cuts in international funding may impact on international cultural activities.
3.3	At a regional level, The Executive Office is expected to issue a new International Relations Strategy in the coming period aimed towards using its resources – including the international office network and the Invest NI overseas teams – to deliver PfG priorities, principally to “Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy”. Invest NI has also released a new business strategy, including an enhanced focus on both FDI and international trade activity. That strategy also places a significant focus on sub-regional growth, ensuring that all parts of the region are supported.
3.4	Locally, the recent Belfast Agenda refresh and collective commitment to a series of agreed priority actions means that any future approach needs to align with and support these actions. Within the council, the changing operational structures – with new teams established

	<p>over recent years focusing on activities such as Innovation, Climate and City Regeneration and Development mean that many officers are engaging in international networks and partnerships as part of their “business as usual”. This would not have been the case when the original international relations framework was established in 2017. In addition, the increased focus on international events such as One Young World and Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, as well as the planned investment in Belfast Stories demonstrate an enhanced focus on attracting international visitors to Belfast. This presents additional opportunities not only for developing and implementing a strong city narrative for key audiences, but also to consider opportunities for “layering” business and cultural investment opportunities.</p>
3.5	<p>Over the last number of months, officers have been engaging with internal teams and external partners (including Invest NI; Visit Belfast; British Council; TEO, local universities and Catalyst) to understand how the council’s work in this area can add most value to their core workplans. Feedback from these engagement sessions included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals and organisations are involved in many international networks; collaborations; partnerships; joint ventures and exchanges. It’s built into “business as usual” or is resourced through specialist teams e.g. university research/student attraction • Partners would benefit from shared resources e.g. publications; website – an integrated economic proposition supported by authentic cultural offering and also positive quality of life considerations. They see significant value in multiple voices carrying consistent messaging – and would welcome council support in pulling this together • Acknowledgement of need to “sharpen the ask” and be clear about what is unique in Belfast – many narratives look similar. There is a consistent view that emerging assets such as the City Deal portfolio of investments have the potential to add something unique to the offer – need to ensure that these are integrated and that the USPs are clear • Potential to do more with existing relationships in line with city priorities – subject to resources (and reliant on reciprocal support from partner city). Positive experiences of engaging in international relations team-led activity, including recent Nashville mission (additional feedback set out below) • Complexities and opportunities of EU exit identified – for business; students and research activity • KPI tracking – can be challenging but all partners recognise need to do better at this. Some partners have recently introduced new systems e.g. CRM to do this more effectively – potential for shared resources of this type.

3.6	<p>The draft approach to council-led international engagement activity for the coming three-year period is set out in Appendix 1 and the supporting delivery plan for year one (2025-26) is set out in Appendix 2. The three-year “framework” document is intended to be a supporting document to other key strategies and plans such as the Belfast Agenda, the Corporate Plan and Local Development Plan – setting out how priority objectives and ambitions in those documents can be supported through international connections, networks and opportunities. Its purpose is to identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that can maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities.</p>
3.7	<p>The role of the council is positioned as using our civic leadership and convening role to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilise existing relationships and connections to generate investment, both in our business and in key infrastructure such as housing, increase trade and tourism • Enhance Belfast’s global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and offer • Coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment • Support our partner organisations to deliver targets aligned with the Belfast Agenda ambition – with a focus on inclusive economic growth.
3.8	<p>Evolving from the 2017-2021 document, the draft framework comprises three key pillars around which activity is likely to focus, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade and investment • Innovation and knowledge exchange • City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development. <p>Each pillar contains a series of headline actions and the specific deliverables against each of these in the 2025-26 financial year is set out in Appendix 2.</p>
3.9	<p>One element that came out strongly in the engagement sessions was the value of the Lord Mayor and the wider civic offices – including access to City Hall and engagement of elected members through events, receptions and visits. This is seen as a unique element of added value that the council can bring to city-level international engagement activities. It is something for us to build on through this new approach, including additional avenues for engagement and access to elected members – subject to availability and based on an assessment of whether this is required for the specific case in point and is a good use of resources.</p>

3.10	<p>In reviewing the previous framework and looking ahead to what should happen with the new approach, ways of working were discussed. While these are largely operational matters that may have limited visibility to elected members, it is hoped that they will improve overall delivery. Key considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing a better mechanism for “qualifying” opportunities for engagement in international events/activities, to ensure that resources are focused on activities that can have greatest impact • Improving the tracking of outcomes and results – taking account of the fact that outcomes may take some time to be realised. We recognise that this is a challenge that all locations face and we have taken some learning from partners and will introduce a new CRM system to help with this, as well as continuing to collate case studies and impact testimonies. • Need for greater accountability and visibility of “what comes next” as a result of international engagement activity. Officers are proposing six-monthly updates to committee along with improved communication of outcomes once these are identified • Maximising the value of existing partnerships: there was a consistent view that we should focus on exploiting existing partnerships and relationships instead of seeking (initially at least) to develop new formal partnerships. Feedback from the recent Nashville mission demonstrated the fact that some existing relationships have additional opportunities that can be explored further e.g. strong focus on business-to-business opportunities and R&D and VC investment that had not previously been considered – with positive outcomes for those participating. However, partners also conceded that – in a rapidly-changing environment, it is important to remain alive to new opportunities, including enhanced trading relationship with the EU, emerging markets, and consider these on their merits, where appropriate.
3.11	<p>As noted above, council officers across a range of teams – as well as our partner organisations – are involved in numerous international networks for the purposes of information exchange and partnership development. Members will be aware that, for many years, Belfast has been a partner city in the Eurocities network. While the policy insights and access to EU institutions presented by our membership of the network were important and insightful for us at a time, there has been less engagement in and value from that particular network, particularly since EU exit. The network’s unique offer is its lobbying role to the EU institutions regarding legislation and policy and this is clearly not as relevant to us at this point. However, as outlined in the framework there is the potential need for enhanced EU engagement with partners in relation to innovation and research. Officers are therefore engaging on the value of maintaining membership (fee is £16000 per annum) and potential alternative uses in relation to EU engagement.</p>

3.12	<p>The draft framework is a three-year document and this will be supported by an annual plan, focusing on priority activities for that year. In 2025-26, those activities will include:</p> <p>Trade and investment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on external engagement to profile opportunities for capital investment to bring forward critical projects (e.g. housing, place making, net zero) • Delving deeper on sister city links to support business to business engagement and trade development opportunities (with Invest NI), including north-south linkages and support for collaborative projects with Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor partners • Leveraging VC support and expertise for local businesses, particularly from US-based investors, to raise the ambition of local businesses and to help them build an international footprint. <p>Innovation and knowledge exchange</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewed focus on maximising inclusive innovation opportunities through Innovation City Belfast – building international partnerships and showcasing emerging opportunities (linked to City Deal and net zero projects). Focus on engagement in key events and networks e.g. Smart Expo – integrating project-based opportunities and wider city promotion messaging • Supporting local universities and colleges in their international innovation, research and student attraction work, with a focus on our sister city connections. <p>City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing and refining existing assets (digital; print) to build stronger, more coherent city narrative to support further investment in agreed priority areas – creating new products and ensuring that these are shared with and used by all local partners to maximise impact • Developing an international engagement plan to promote Fleadh Cheoil na h-Éireann in key markets – exploring potential to sharpen the tourism narrative to reflect this significant investment.
3.13	<p>Nashville visit February 2025 – summary and initial feedback</p>
	<p>The Lord Mayor led a civic and business delegation to our sister city of Nashville in February this year. Invitations were extended to a number of city partners that were interested in exploring new linkages or building on existing partnerships – under the umbrella of the sister city partnership The Lord Mayor’s input to a Peace Summit being hosted by Fisk and Belmont universities, in partnership with Queen’s University Belfast was also a key focus for the visit.</p>

3.14	<p>Key highlights of the visit included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition and celebration of the 30-year Sister City milestone through meetings with the Mayor of Nashville, and wider civic and local partner engagement • Programme of business-to-business engagements for companies and support organisations working in the tech and digital fields as well as collaborative engagements and presentations to stakeholders in Tennessee’s Life and Health Sciences, Innovation and Tech sectors, alongside venture capital partners • Supporting university partners in planning future student and research collaborations – work to be taken forward directly by the universities • Engagement with tourism and cultural support bodies, including building connections for 250th Anniversary of the USA (July 2026) and promotion of tourism opportunities relating to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.
3.15	<p>Partners are responsible for their own follow-up with respective partner organisations and officers are aware of connections that are currently being pursued as a result of the visit. We will continue to work with Nashville and with our local partners to support individual opportunities and to explore the potential for future missions – subject to agreeing objectives and ensuring alignment with the new approach, as well as resource availability.</p>
4.0	Financial and Resource Implications
4.1	<p>The EU and International Relations budget was approved as part of the 2025-26 estimates setting process. Budgets for individual activities are the responsibility of the respective teams.</p>
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment
	<p>No specific equality or good relations implications. Activities will focus on support for Belfast-based organisations and companies.</p>
6.0	Appendices
	<p>Appendix 1: Draft International Relations Framework – 2025-28</p> <p>Appendix 2: International Relations Delivery Plan – 2025-26</p>

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Appendix 1: Draft International Relations Framework 2025-2028

Background

For many years, Belfast City Council has been actively engaged in international relations activity – working with and in support of our local partners. The nature of that work has changed over time and in response to changes in the internal and external operating context.

The most recent framework document (2017-2021) set out a strategic approach for engagement, focused on three key pillars, namely:

- Business – investment (including capital), export/trade activity and supporting the development of business-to-business collaboration
- Tourism development and promotion – for both business and leisure markets
- Education – professional development partnerships, research and innovation exchanges, student mobility and global education initiatives.

Global changes in the last number of years have been unprecedented in recent history. This makes long-term planning more challenging – and requires flexibility and responsiveness to adapt to the new ways of working. In response, our proposal is for a three-year framework approach, supported by a series of one-year action plans. We are mindful of the need to remain responsive to opportunities that can help deliver on strategic objectives, in the context of limited resources. We note the need to develop a more rigorous approach to the assessment of emerging opportunities, ensuring that these support the city's inclusive growth ambitions as set out in the Belfast Agenda.

In addition to external changes, there have been significant internal changes since the previous framework was established. New teams are focused on international engagement activity as part of their day to day working. The EU and International Relations Unit (EUIRU) is likely to remain the focal point for the council's international civic engagement work, coordinating the critical civic engagement activities (alongside the office of the Lord Mayor), managing key sister city relationships and facilitating relevant inward visits. Individual teams will be responsible for leading out on their own areas of work and will be accountable for associated outcomes.

This current framework provides a strategic approach that seeks to focus our financial and staff resources to position Belfast as a globally-connected, forward looking city that is open, inclusive and

ambitious, attracting trade, investment, talent and visitors while sharing the city's unique story and values with the world.

Our international partners

As with all International Relations activity, the success of transnational partnership working is dependent on a mutual willingness of partners to reciprocate and support project initiation and development.

Given the resources available (both human and financial), Belfast City Council has strategically focussed a significant element of its international relations activity on its established Sister City relations. However, it remains open to partner with other cities and locations on strategic initiatives where this collaboration fulfils council's objectives as outlined in the Belfast Agenda, Corporate Plan and associated plans and frameworks . An example of this flexible approach is the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2023 with Sejong which supports city-city working in the field of innovation.

Belfast City Council has three established Sister City partnerships:

- Nashville (Tennessee) – council's oldest Sister City relationship signed in 1995
- Boston (Massachusetts) – signed in 2014
- Shenyang (China) – agreed in 2016

The Council has also engaged in other networks such as Eurocities (incorporating more than 200 cities and municipalities across Europe) as well as other sector-specific and issue-based networks that are critical for learning, information-sharing and city promotion. The June 2025 UK/EU Reset along the unique NI trading relationship offered through the Windsor Framework presents new opportunities for European engagement overall – working alongside partners such as the Northern Ireland Executive team in Brussels.

As previously noted, international connectivity is not restricted to the work of the EUIR team and this framework and supporting action plan encompass and profile the international engagement work across other departments and units such as Innovation City Belfast, the City Innovation team, Climate and Resilience team, and the City Regeneration and Development team.

Strategic Context

Belfast City Council's International Relations Framework is not a stand-alone document. It is, rather, a supporting document, creating opportunities for the delivery of city priorities as set out in critical strategies such as the Belfast Agenda and the new Corporate Plan in particular.

Our approach in developing the framework

In developing this new framework, the EU and International Relations team undertook extensive engagement with a range of internal teams involved in this work. They also engaged directly with key city partners such as the universities, Invest NI, Visit Belfast, British Council, TEO and Catalyst. The findings from these engagements have formed the basis of this revised framework, shaping not only the content but also considerations on ways of working and opportunities for data-sharing and resource maximisation, as well as focusing on what specific areas of added value the framework can support.

The vision, purpose and strategic objectives are set out below and delivery against these is to be focused on three key work pillars, namely:

- Trade and investment
- Innovation and knowledge exchange
- City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development.

Vision

To position Belfast as a globally-connected, forward looking city that is open, inclusive and ambitious, attracting trade, investment, talent and visitors while sharing the city's unique story, culture and values with the world.

Purpose

The purpose of this framework is to identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that can maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities.

Council's Role

Belfast City Council will work alongside its strategic partners to :

- Develop and utilise international relationships and connections to generate investment, trade and tourism
- Enhance Belfast's positive global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and attractions
- Coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment
- Support delivery of priority activities aligned with the Belfast Agenda's vision for inclusive economic growth.

Our priority work pillars

Building on our work on international relations to date as well as our analysis of emerging market issues and taking account of the discussions through our engagement with internal and external partners, we have identified three core pillars of activity to focus our work under this framework.

Pillar 1: Trade and investment

While FDI investment may have dominated the narrative in more recent years, there is an increasing focus on trade development. An emerging regional entrepreneurship strategy is likely to include a specific focus on high-growth businesses – Innovation Driven Enterprises (or potentially AI Driven Enterprises). These businesses are global by nature and need new sources of capital and international research and business partnerships. There is an opportunity to explore how Belfast's existing civic relationships can support greater business to business collaborations – with a focus on creating jobs; driving productivity and building new joint ventures and partnerships.

Successive economic strategies have noted that export-led growth is a key economic driver. In 2023, external sales by NI companies were estimated to be £33.3 billion, a 15.7% increase from the previous year. The USA is a critical sales market for Belfast-based Invest NI client companies, accounting for more than half of all sales by value (£). Despite the current headwinds, it is likely to remain a strong market for Belfast-based businesses – in particular opportunities aligned to our growth sectors (tech and digital; life and health sciences). New relationships – still in their infancy – with partners in our sister city of Nashville have the potential to generate positive business-to-business connections.

The need for external capital is not confined to trading businesses. It is also critical for bringing forward key infrastructure and investment projects.. As the council and its city partners double down on the delivery of its high-level ambitions set out in the Belfast Agenda – particularly focusing on job and

population growth – developers and project promoters are increasingly exploring opportunities for international mobile, patient capital to support delivery. In the short term, the need to drive investment in housing is a strategic priority and will be a priority activity in the coming year, following previous progress in relation to Grade A office, Purpose Build Student Accommodation and Hotels.

Pillar 2: Innovation and knowledge exchange

Belfast Region City Deal is a £1billion programme of investment that aims to create more than 20,000 new jobs over the next decade. Digital transformation and sectoral growth are at the heart of many of the Belfast-based projects. These emerging centres of excellence present an opportunity not only to compete globally on collaborative research activities but also to attract additional talent and investment to the Belfast Region. As these centres are established, they will become critical components of the city's investment narrative, enabling a focus towards higher-value jobs and helping drive productivity in line with city ambitions.

There has been a recent resurgence of work through Innovation City Belfast – a partnership focused on bringing together public and private sector partners along with academia to generate investment; maximise the societal and economic impact of the innovation ecosystem; improve the reach and quality of the city's digital infrastructure and grow the entrepreneurial ecosystem to support the development of more innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs). Active engagement in global networks to support this work is critical to ensuring that our investments are world-class and that the Belfast offer is heard and understood among key decision-makers. ICB is currently mapping out an engagement plan to take account of critical events and activities. We will work with them to consider shared and consistent messaging and to explore opportunities for participation by relevant partners. One specific angle that we want to learn from and share learning on is “inclusive innovation” – in keeping with our commitments to support inclusive economic growth.

Belfast has a number of FDI and indigenous companies across a range of growth sectors that are world leading in their field and competing in a global marketplace – as illustrated through the Invest NI trade statistics. Sectors include net zero; life and health sciences and digital technology. The challenge is to drive more businesses to think and operate globally. We will work closely with Invest NI and sector support organisations to identify opportunities for market access and market engagement activities as well as opportunities to secure capital to support growing businesses in these sectors – including through our sister cities, wider civic connections in the USA, and rebuilding European relations to exploit the unique trading position secured through the Windsor Framework.

Belfast is home to two leading universities – both of whom are extremely active in international markets for the purpose of developing research collaborations, attracting talent and increasing international student numbers. Through this framework, we will explore opportunities to support this work, principally through the civic office and by identifying new opportunities with our partner cities.

Pillar 3: City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

Belfast is a culturally vibrant destination that attracts growing numbers of visitors each year. It is a UNESCO city of music – one of only 59 across the world and the only one on the island of Ireland. The rich cultural traditions – and the music in particular – are at the core of our unique and authentic tourism product.

Attracting international visitors (either for conferences, other business or leisure) is an important element of any international relations framework. Belfast is the gateway for most visitors to Northern Ireland and the council has already demonstrated its commitment to growing tourism numbers by investing in ICC Belfast – to drive new and high-value business tourism to the city. As a new business tourism strategy emerges, it is critical that the role of Belfast is reinforced. For leisure tourism, the value of large-scale events in attracting visitors – particularly Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann – is likely to present significant opportunities in the coming two years in particular. Early engagement and promotion in key markets – working closely with partners in Visit Belfast, Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland – will be essential if we are to deliver on the economic regeneration benefits from this large-scale event.

A recurring insight from international partners is the strength of the networks in Belfast and the value of the “Team Belfast” approach in helping them to access key decision-makers and expediting decision-making. A priority for the period of this framework will be to develop a suite of assets that can be shared by all partners involved in international activity, including Belfast Region partners, focusing on the key investment messaging – both the ask and the offer.

The important role of the Lord Mayor and the civic office

In addition to playing a convening and complementary role with our partners, Belfast City Council’s civic role in international relations is a critical one. It enables and facilitates access to key influencers and networks. The role of the Lord Mayor, in particular, is a critical asset that can elevate the messaging and create a positive experience of engagement in outward visits and in hosting delegations that visit the city. This factor was widely recognised and acknowledged by our city partners as providing

significant added value. Likewise, the ability to involve our elected members in conversations with investors and visitors to the city is seen by our partners as a key part of the “Team Belfast” ethos. We will ensure that our elected members play a key civic leadership role where their involvement supports our strategic objectives and will continue to work with the Lord Mayor and the team to identify opportunities for involvement in critical inward visits and international engagement activities.

How we work

In addition to considering **what** we do, it is equally important to consider **how** we do it. Through our engagement with partners, we have identified a number of key principles that sit behind our activity plan and that, if properly considered, can help make our individual and collaborative efforts more effective. These include:

Objective assessment of opportunity

A recurring discussion during our engagement with internal and external partners was the need to create a consistent approach to due diligence around requests to host inward visits; attend international events and enter into new formal partnerships.

The scale of interest in Belfast from external partners is welcome. In the last year alone, the EU and International Relations Team supported more than 45 inward visits. In the context of constrained resources across all partners, it is clear that a more robust process of evaluating and assessing opportunities presented in order to make recommendations as to how (and whether) these are supported is essential. Work has already been undertaken on a new approach and this will be further refined before being introduced across all teams in the coming year.

Measuring and communicating success

Another recurring theme in engagement meetings was the challenge associated with assessing and measuring impact directly related to specific international engagement activities.

Our research into experiences from other locations highlighted that this was not unique to Belfast and it is something that most locations are challenged by. This is because the relationships required to attract capital investment or develop new research or business-to-business partnerships can often take a long time to develop and are reliant on relationship-building – rather than being simple transactions. Likewise, engagement at a single event will rarely deliver an immediate outcome; it may take a number

of follow up engagements or it could be that fortuitous connections are made which ultimately lead to outcomes that had not been previously foreseen.

Given that the framework is a supporting document rather than a stand-alone strategy, the outputs and benefits delivered by this framework will support and are aligned to outcomes from the Belfast Agenda and other key strategies highlighted elsewhere in this framework. These are likely to include securing additional investment for local businesses; increasing investment in innovation; supporting delivery of housing targets (through investment attraction) and increasing visitor numbers. The supporting action plan that sits with this framework will identify relevant outputs and performance measures and progress against these will be reported back to Committee on a regular basis (suggested six-monthly).

In order to help track outputs and benefits from inward and outward visits, a new CRM system will be introduced. This will enable officers to record support offered and identify outputs and outcomes as a result of that support (where information is available). It will enable us to take a more informed approach to how we deal with requests that have not, to date, generated a return and will support better information-sharing across the various teams involved in this work.

Accountability

While the CRM system will help coordinate and manage data better, it can only be effective if officers can get access to the information they require from other partners. This document and the associated action plan provide an overarching perspective of the council's international engagement activity across a number of teams. Each team is accountable for securing delivery against their stated objectives and associated reporting through committee. The EU and International Relations team may generate connections for businesses and organisations, but the responsibility and accountability for follow-up sits with the individual organisation. Likewise, the EUIR team will endeavour to track progress and collate information on outputs and outcomes associated with this work, but it is reliant on other parties to secure that information.

Maintaining strong partnerships

Belfast's international focus aligns well with the emerging approach from the NI Executive and that of key city and Belfast Region partners. Recent years have seen a new impetus behind our Sister City agreements in North America in particular as well as China. There has been a revitalisation of support for the work of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and there are numerous opportunities for collaboration with partners along the corridor to support inclusive economic growth, positioning this

seamless cross-border corridor in a global context. Maximising the outcomes from these agreements, rather than developing new partnerships, will be a focus throughout the period of this framework. Complementing their activity and amplifying its impact is both a core role of the Council and a key principle of this framework.

We will work with these partners to ensure our role contributes to theirs for the benefit of the city; our measures of success will be developed in conjunction with these partners to further cement this 'additionality' role and ensure our resources are deployed towards shared outcomes. In practical terms, this will mean continuing to work closely with our partners through formal and informal relationships – including the stakeholder engagement groups that provide opportunities for information-sharing and forward planning for collaborative activities.

Appendix 1: Case studies from recent international relations engagement work

Case Study: Nashville Economic and Civic Mission Feb 2025

Objectives:

- Mark 30 years Sister City Relationship
- Meet economic leaders and explore business, partnership and investment opportunities
- Support Queens, Fisk and Belmont Universities' led Peace Summit

Highlights:

- Recognition and celebration of the 30-year Sister City milestone through meetings with the Mayor of Nashville, and wider civic and local partner engagement
- Programme of business-to-business engagements for companies and support organisations working in the tech and digital fields as well as collaborative engagements and presentations to stakeholders in Tennessee's Life and Health Sciences, Innovation and Tech sectors, alongside venture capital partners
- Supporting university partners in planning future student and research collaborations – work to be taken forward directly by the universities
- Engagement with tourism and cultural support bodies, including building connections for 250th Anniversary of the USA (July 2026) and promotion of tourism opportunities relating to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

Case study: Aflac

"Belfast, the 'city of talent and innovation' became the standout choice for company investment due to its talent pool, digital capability, and alignment with the company's overall strategy. Not to mention the personality of the city felt by the key decision makers on a fact-finding trip.

The start up and ongoing success of Aflac NI has been strongly supported and elevated with the continued backing of Belfast City Hall, which has been greatly appreciated by the company. The council ensures that VIP global visitors from Aflac are given a special City Hall welcome to show how the city values the investment, job creation, and further growth".

Case study: TalentSensus

“The International Relations function is an invaluable asset to Belfast City Council and the businesses it supports. It has been instrumental in driving significant growth for my business, Upskill Enterprise, in the USA.

It has provided invaluable support in hosting numerous high-profile delegations from the United States and played a crucial role in facilitating an important trade mission to Northern Ireland for a delegation from Pennsylvania.

The impact of these visits has been truly remarkable. Thanks to the connections fostered, our company, Upskill Enterprise, and our TalentSensus Technology have gained direct access to key individuals in the US public workforce system. This has resulted in an impressive \$4.2 million in revenue for 2025.”

Case study: Friendship Four

The Friendship Four tournament is the first and only NCAA Division One Hockey tournament to be held outside of the United States. The tournament brings up to 1,000 Bostonians to Belfast for a week over the Thanksgiving period.

The tournament is important to Belfast as it aligns to a number of corporate objectives:

- Economic development: on a number of occasions, a business delegation has accompanied the sports teams, through the office of The Boston Irish Business Association (BIBA)
- Education and skills: in addition to participating student athletes’ mobility, the players also undertake education outreach. Visits to Belfast schools profile how sport can support educational pathways and community cohesion. University partnerships have also spun out of tournament participation e.g. Northeastern University has developed a partnership with Queen’s University Belfast, bringing almost 200 students to study in Belfast for a semester over the last two years
- Tourism development: taking place during the tourism “off-season”, spend by international guests in Belfast during the week of Friendship Four amounts to £500,000 and generates 3,000 bed nights for local hotels. During game intermissions, Belfast is profiled directly into millions of Canadian and American households through a series of promotional messages aired on TV channel NESN.

From 2026, the tournament will encompass four women’s teams – building on the prior success and reach of the female Friendship Series which engaged two colleges - proof that the appetite for

these quality experiences for international visitors, and Belfast's reputation for delivering them continues to grow.

Case study: St Mary's University College

"As a small institution with limited international resources, St Mary's struggled to engage with the US market or make significant connections. Introductions made through Belfast City Council to Nashville Sister Cities changed that.

Positive PR created through undertaking outward and inward visits with Nashville has been priceless - positioning St Mary's University College as an international, outward looking institution with talented students – both domestically across Northern Ireland and in the States. The development of our students' skillset has been phenomenal. The relationship also gave St Mary's the confidence to launch our International Summer school.

St Mary's would like to acknowledge the incredible work of Belfast City Council's International Unit who have been invaluable to the development of a footprint for St Mary's in the US".

Case study: Eurocities

Belfast hosted a three-day Eurocities Culture Forum in September 2025, attracting 136 participants from 64 cities and 23 countries. The Forum focussed on "Culture as the Connector: how cities recreate to adapt and thrive" - exploring how integral culture is to city regeneration and competitiveness.

Belfast as host city showcased 14 Belfast 2024 projects, 22 venues and spaces, and engaged 33 local artists and culture sector representatives. The economic impact of hosting the Forum in the city was estimated to be over £350,000 (based on the official recognised rate for each out of state delegate staying overnight). Delegate and partner feedback was very positive, with a number of potential partnerships being explored and activated as part of the Forum's legacy. This will help to maximise Belfast 2024's legacy and that of council's investment in projects which can be showcased in other cities in the coming years.

Appendix 2: Belfast City Council – International engagement activity: Delivery Plan 2025-2026

Trade and Investment					
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
New York, New Belfast 2025	Annual event and supporting side programme focused on engaging with key east coast USA economic “champions” and pipeline FDI companies considering investing in Belfast and potential trade opportunities for local companies. Also opportunity to position Belfast’s latest Tourism messaging (Fleadh 2026) and capital assets for investment	EU and International Relations Team (EUIRT)	Event organisers Invest NI US office and Belfast Chamber	June 2025	Investment leads for City assets and trade leads for Belfast businesses Support Invest NI for investment and trade pipeline Promotion of major events
Homecoming 2025	Business conference promoting Belfast to diaspora communities, particularly US-based.	EUIRT	Event organisers	October 2025	Depending on audience profile, can adjust messaging but likely focus on trade and investment opps and capital investment leads; cultural promotion
US Sister City collaboration engagement	Development work to explore re-engagement with Boston, using same successful “Team Belfast” model used for Nashville mission. Boston focus will also be Life and Health Sciences including access to innovation partnerships/VCs	EUIRT; Enterprise and Business Growth Team	ICB; universities; Catalyst; individual businesses	Date tbc	Partnerships and access to finance for Belfast businesses and innovation ecosystem, with focus on L&HS Promotion of Belfast as a study and tourism destination

Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
Belfast City and Region Place Partnership	Joint public and private sector-led initiative focused on place positioning to attract investment and deliver on inclusive growth. Key events include MIPIM (France, March each year) and UK ReiiF (Leeds, May each year). Other special/one-off events may also be involved, in line with opportunities. The Partnership also produces resources such as a website and investment prospectus	City Regeneration and Development team	Other BRCD councils, Belfast Harbour, Universities, Invest NI, developers, construction companies, legal and financial services	Annual programme of work	Leads generated in support of investment attracted and developments supported
Develop and maintain updated Belfast's city proposition messaging	Review and update of existing collateral to focus on key investment messaging for specific target markets – complement innovation proposition (below)	Internal BCC teams (EU; Comms; Research; ED; CRD)	Invest NI; universities and colleges; City Deal project leads	Review current: Q2; revised products: Q4	High quality products identifying unique investment opportunities
Inward Delegations: facilitate requests for presentations on Belfast's ED proposition	Facilitating inward visits, and using opportunity to showcase opportunities for investment, trade collaboration and good practice across a range of ED areas	EUIRT (coordinate); input from relevant council and other partner leads	Range of city partners – depending on area of priority	Ongoing	Follow up engagement leading to more specific plans for investment /trade or collaboration
Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor	Work in collaboration with 8 councils along the corridor to take forward collaborative projects across a number of areas including sector development; research and innovation; skills development	Enterprise and Business Growth team	EUIR Team; other DBEC council partners; universities; NI/RoI government depts	Ongoing work programme agreed with partner councils	Funded project activity in priority areas (circular economy; sector development; skills development)

Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
EU Trade and Investment	Develop updated approach to EU engagement with City and Regional Partners, building on work of Universities, Innovation and Smart teams. Including review of Eurocities membership	EUIRU City Innovation Office ICB Enterprise and Business Growth team	Invest NI and TEO	Q3 2025	Agreed approach to enhancing EU engagement

Innovation and Knowledge Exchange					
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
Belfast Innovation value proposition	Developing a shared investable value proposition for the Belfast innovation ecosystem – including the City Deal funded investments	City Innovation Office	Innovation City Belfast partners	Draft proposition to be tested at Smart Cities World Congress (November 25)	Greater coherence and clarity of messaging to priority market segments
Bloomberg Philanthropies 2025 Mayors Challenge	A two phase, 12-month programme with 50 other cities aimed at delivering urban innovation solutions	City Innovation Office	Innovation City Belfast and challenge partners	First workshop planned for late Spring 2025	Collaborative proposals for solving urban innovation challenges
Sejong Memorandum of Understanding	City-city cooperation on innovation and technology. Includes a potential visit by Sejong Mayor in Q3	City Innovation Office	ICB	Ongoing	Support for partner workstreams
Smart City World Congress (Barcelona)	Promotion of city messaging, focusing on opportunities for partnership, investment, research and trade in relation to digital innovation	Innovation City Belfast	ICB Partners	Q3	Leads in relation to partnerships, investment, research & funding opportunities
Upsurge Initiative	EU Funded climate demonstrator project linking Belfast to Maribor, Budapest, Breda, Katowice	Climate Team	CNS Team; Neighbourhood Services; QUB; EU Partners; Community orgs	Ongoing	Inform and evidence viability of nature-based solutions for sustainable food production
Support education partners international activity (focus on sister city links)	Support enhanced international collaborations in innovation and research and attraction of international talent	EUIRT, City Innovation, ICB	Third level education partners	Ongoing	Education partners secure research income; attract international students

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development					
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
Supporting strategic tourism stakeholders in attracting and promoting major tourism and cultural events	Collaborating with Visit Belfast, Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI to drive sectoral growth and positioning Belfast as a host city for major events and international exhibitions – focus on Fleadh Cheoil for coming year	Tourism and Fleadh teams	Visit Belfast Tourism Ireland Tourism NI	Ongoing	International positioning and profiling opportunities; increasing visitor numbers
Friendship Four – Men and Women’s Tournaments	US College Ice Hockey Tournaments linked to Boston Sister City; associated STEM Festival and promotion of city via US TV airtime	EUIRU Tourism team	Odyssey Trust NI Connections DfC Tourism NI	Q3	Economic impact on city – bed nights, Arena venue, US and global press coverage value, socially and also impact on schools and community groups making US ice hockey links for future cooperation
Your Roots Are Showing	Folk music conference and trade fair which attracts over 100 artists – scheduled for January 2026	Culture Team	Visit Belfast ICC Belfast	January 2026	Improved city positioning (focusing on music/culture)
Celebrate Chinese New Year	Participation in city partner events to mark New Lunar year	Civic Offices (esp. Lord Mayor) EUIRT	Good Relations Team; Chinese Welfare Assoc.; Chinese Chamber and Consulate, Confucius	Q4	Enhances civic relations with Chinese players locally and internationally at civic, business and community level

In addition to above workstreams, Council teams currently participate in strategic thematic networks aligned to the above themes including:

Council for Global City CIOs	Information and opportunity exchange between innovation cities across the world
European & UK Learning Cities Networks	Exchanging best practice and developing initiatives to support community learning
UNESCO City of Music	Active participation in UNESCO cultural networks with reciprocal benefits between the cities including but not limited to partnerships with UCoM cities Kansas City (US) Hannover (Germany) Daegu (South Korea), Conde (Brazil), Ghent (Belgium) and Bologna (Italy)
Eurocities	Network of 200+ European cities focusing on lobbying, advocacy and exchange of good practice in a range of areas including climate and environment; culture; digital; economic development and social inclusion