

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 13th January, 2025

MEETING OF THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

- Members present: Councillor Cobain (Chairperson); and
Councillors Abernethy, Black, Bower, Brooks,
Bradley, Bunting, Canavan, Collins, M. Donnelly,
R-M Donnelly, Doran, Flynn, Garrett, Magee,
Maghie, Murray, McKeown and Verner.
- In attendance: Mr. D. Sales, Strategic Director of City and
Neighbourhood Services;
Mrs. S. Toland, Director of City Services;
Mr. S. Leonard, Director of Open Spaces,
Resources, Fleet and Transport;
Mr. J. Girvan, Director of City and Neighbourhood
Services; and
Mr. B. Flynn, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Alderman Copeland.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 2nd December were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 8th January.

Declaration of Interest

Councillor R.M. Donnelly declared an interest under item 2.b. 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls - Regional Change Fund Letter of Offer Extension 2025/26' in that she was employed by an organisation in receipt of funding under the terms of the fund. She left the meeting whilst the matter was under consideration.

Restricted Items

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

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the press and public from the meeting during discussion of the following items as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

The Committee was advised that the content of the 'restricted' reports and any associated discussion should be treated as 'confidential information' and that such information could not be disclosed as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

'Bad Debt' Write Off

The Committee agreed, in accordance with Section M12 of the Council's Financial Regulations, to write off an outstanding debt in the sum of £9,500.

**Ending Violence Against Women and Girls –
Regional Change Fund Letter of Offer
Extension 2025/26**

The Director of City and Neighbourhood Services reported that The Executive Office (TEO) was in the process of developing the next delivery plan in support of its Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework (EVAWGSF). The delivery plan would, subject to ministerial approval, encompass a two year period, from April 2026 to March 2028. He informed the Committee that it was anticipated that the Regional Change Fund would be extended over that period and, accordingly, TEO had requested that the existing arrangement for the disbursement of funding and monitoring arrangements between TEO and the Council would be extended over that period to enable the implementation of the new delivery plan.

The Committee noted the receipt of the request from TEO and agreed that the Council would support the delivery of the EVAWGSF through the continuation of the existing Regional Change Fund contracts and to provide multi-annual funding up to March 2028; and then manage a collaborative process to consider regional provision and identify any additional need for future regional investment. In addition, the Committee:

- noted that the overall Regional Change Fund delivery budget was expected to total a sum of £1,200,000 per annum, however, there existed a potential for that fund to increase, should additional extra need for investment be identified and budget secured;
- noted that, subject to the approval of a business case and budget, TEO would seek to issue the Local Change Fund and Regional Change Fund Letters of Offer to the Council in 2026; and
- accepted the planned extension to the 2025/26 Letter of Offer for the Regional Change Fund to mitigate against any risks to business continuity of programme delivery, noting that that extension was for a period of three months to ensure business continuity and provide security for staff currently in place.

Matters referred back from the Council/Motions

Vital Role of Trees – Update

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 4th February, 2025, it had adopted the undernoted motion, which have been moved by Councillor Abernethy and seconded by Councillor Maghie.

“This Council recognises the vital role of trees in enhancing the health and well-being of people and communities, addressing climate change, and supporting biodiversity; commits to raising awareness among residents about these benefits and to actively support efforts to plant and protect the right trees in the right places and for the right reasons, ensuring that everyone can share in the benefits trees provide; and, will commit to exploring how we can educate and raise awareness of trees, the role they play in all our lives across Belfast.

In addition, the Committee agrees that officers would submit a report which would provide the following:

- an update on the Tree Strategy, including the ‘One Million Trees’ initiative;
- seek to identify sites within the Council’s estate where additional trees and plant could be maintained; and
- an outline as to how communities and electoral areas could become involved further in the life of trees in our city.”

Accordingly, the Committee considered the undernoted report:

The Belfast Tree Strategy

3.3 The Belfast Tree Strategy was produced with the aim of managing and improving the city’s tree-scape over the next 10 years, focussing on protecting, enhancing, and expanding the Council’s woodlands, hedges, and trees, connecting people to nature, and ensuring that they continue to be a major asset to everyone who lives in, works in, and visits Belfast city.

3.4 After an extensive public consultation exercise which involved a public questionnaire and the facilitation of five public workshops at locations across the city, the Belfast Tree Strategy was launched on the 5th October 2023 at Belfast Botanical Gardens.

3.5 The Tree Strategy set out 37 key actions which will be delivered over the life of the Tree Strategy, and aligned with the key actions, a commitment was given to undertake an independent review of the Tree Strategy after year one and thereafter, once every 3 years until 2033.

3.6 In December 2024 the Council completed its first independent review/audit of the Belfast Tree Strategy. The audit process was designed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) to help stakeholders responsible for the planning and management of urban trees and forests, and to ensure trees and forests are accounted for and well-integrated into relevant planning, management and governance activities at the local level. The audit of the Tree Strategy included a scorecard of which Belfast scored a total of 42 points out of 50 which is ‘Very Good’ (71-85%) The next independent audit will be undertaken in 2027.

3.7 Tree canopy cover across Belfast averages 18.6%, as measured by Google satellite data. This ranges from 20.8% in urban and suburban areas, to 15.0% in rural areas. The Ward with the highest tree cover in Belfast is Bellevue, with 43.9% tree cover and the lowest is Ardoyne with just 4.6%. The average tree canopy cover for Northern Ireland is 11.8%. The council’s woodland team will direct attention to increasing tree canopy cover in areas across the city highlighted within the Tree Establishment Strategy.

3.8 An increase in canopy cover will contribute to Belfast’s emission reduction targets – 66% reduction by 2025; 80% by 2030; 100% by 2050. The existing trees in Belfast already store around 319,000 tonnes of carbon and sequester more than 8,890 tonnes of carbon annually (equivalent to approx. 1%

of the City's annual emissions) with associated values of around £290 million and £593,000 respectively. These trees also trap and remove over 210 tonnes of air pollution annually at a value of nearly £7.5 million from reduced healthcare costs (largely from Sycamore, Beech and Ash which have a large canopy). The IUCN Urban Alliance suggests a tree a 30% tree canopy target and the Tree strategy has adopted this as the target for the city.

3.9 As part of the stakeholder exercise on the Councils Belfast Tree Strategy, there was a clear and recurring theme from members of the public, quote:

“A volunteer drive would be fantastic to engage the community in the drive to increase trees, as well as a scheme to teach people how to plant trees in their own gardens safely.”

3.10 In collaboration with the climate team, the council has recently appointed a woodland officer for a fixed period to assist the council's Woodland team in establishing a 'community champions and a tree planting volunteer' network, engaging with local communities across the city with the objective of having tree planting volunteers throughout the city. With a particular focus on areas identified with the lowest tree canopy cover this scheme will look to provide volunteers with the resources and skills to plant trees within community settings.

One Million Trees initiative

3.11 The Belfast One Million Tree initiative was a strong call to action when it was launched in December 2020. It got everyone thinking about trees, their importance, especially in supporting the city to deliver its climate targets and objectives. The ambitious project was inspired by an original idea from the Belfast Metropolitan Residents' Group and is a collaboration between public, private, and voluntary sector partners. The initiative was part of the Northern Ireland-wide 'Forests of our Future' project with the aim of improving the city's resilience to climate change and enhance the quality of life for its residents.

3.12 Public consultation and engagement, followed by the launch of the Belfast Tree Strategy in October 2023, has shown that the city needs to be more sophisticated and targeted in its approach. Rather than focusing purely on a target number of trees, our goal is now to increase overall tree cover in the city – from 18.6% to 30% (set by IUCN Urban Alliance) – taking in woodlands, hedges and trees. To achieve the 30% canopy target will require increased tree planting and the one million trees initiative has an important role to play in this regard. It will also require a strong focus on managing our existing stock for example dealing with extreme weather conditions and managing the impact of diseases like ash die back.

3.13 Since the inception of the One Million Trees initiative in 2020 161,240 new trees and 2,761m new hedgerows have been planted, and 6,285 people have been engaged in the programme across the city, including schools, sports and community organisations. This has been achieved in collaboration with external partners and organisations such as the Belfast Hills Partnership, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Woodland Trust.

3.14 However, in terms of the Council's own estate council officers are finding it increasingly difficult to identify suitable areas to undertake 'large scale' tree planting. Locations suitable for large scale tree planting going forward are necessary if the city is to meet both the ambitions of the One Million Trees

initiative and achieve 30% canopy cover by 2050. Whilst the council will continue to plant new trees and hedges where it can within its own estate, it should be emphasised that the One Million Trees is a city-wide project. We now need more engagement with other landowners to identify and develop sites that would permit larger scale tree planting opportunities. The Nature Towns & Cities initiative provides an opportunity for Council to engage with partners on this and similar initiatives to support both programmes. Officers will begin these conversations with the relevant stakeholders in 2026.

The management of street trees on behalf of the Department for Infrastructure

3.15 The council has been managing the city's street tree population on behalf of the Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) for the past four decades. During this time, this partnership has delivered over seven thousand new street trees and has ensured their establishment and ongoing maintenance within the greater Belfast Area.

3.16 The Council has been receiving 'professional fees' to cover the management of Dfi street trees, however over recent years this has put an increasing strain on existing resource capacity within the councils Woodland unit, due primarily to the introduction of the Belfast Tree Strategy and the delivery of the councils 37 key actions over the next 10 years. The council has secured additional funding from the Dfi to recruit three new Woodland officers on a fixed term basis and in addition to this, has increased its income generation to cover the management of the new Woodland officers. This will allow the council to continue to work on the management of street trees and sustain this ongoing and successful partnership.

Biodiversity

3.17 We want to create a sustainable, nature-positive city – it's a key goal in our own Corporate Plan, as well as the Belfast Agenda community plan. This will protect our environment and wildlife, help to combat climate change, encourage people to spend more time outdoors to boost health and wellbeing, and improve the appearance and vibrancy of our city. It also compliments other projects including:

- securing £850,000 of funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Nature Towns and Cities Initiative to co-design plans for nature recovery in Lagan Valley Regional Park and the Belfast Hills.
- receiving £472,000 of funding from DAERA Challenge Fund towards the development of a Nature Recovery Network across Belfast, alongside £100,000 set aside to support biodiversity work £50,000 already set aside from council towards four wildflower meadows city-wide.
- being selected as one of 50 finalists for Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors' Challenge for our project to reimagine the city's alleyways as new shared community assets for neighbourhoods.
- 23 of our parks already carry the Green Flag accreditation for quality and good park management.

- exploring new and emerging opportunities to enhance the city's blue and green infrastructure as agreed in the Local Development Plan.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided within the report, together with a range of Members' comments in relation to the matter.

Department for Infrastructure Roads Service **Draft Road Noise Action Plan 2023 to 2028**

The Committee noted the contents of a report which provided an overview of the Department for Infrastructure's draft Road Noise Action Plan for 2023/28. In addition, the Committee adopted a Council response to an associated consultation exercise in the matter and agreed that it be submitted in advance of the closing date of 22nd January, subject to further amendment, if any, by the Council at its meeting on 2nd February, 2026.

Blackstaff Residents' Association **Request re: John Stewart Bell**

The Committee considered correspondence which had been received from the Blackstaff Residents' Association requesting that consideration be given to erecting a metal arch incorporating the wording 'John Stewart Bell Entrance' over the Olympia Drive entrance to Olympia Leisure Centre. The Members were reminded that, at its meeting on 10th October 2017, the Committee had acceded to a request to rename that particular entrance to the centre in honour of John Stewart Bell. That decision had been taken after consultation with the local community and in recognition of Mr. Bell's achievements as a world-renowned physicist; and to mark his links to the Village area. Accordingly, a plaque had been erected at the site, however, the residents' association was now requesting that a more fitting and permanent tribute be erected.

The Committee agreed, in principle, to support the request subject to a further report being submitted for consideration that would outline, amongst other things, planning considerations and projected costs. It was noted that the report would provide also an overview of the corporate policies and processes which oversaw the consideration of such ad hoc requests.

Operational Issues

Proposals for Dual Language Street Signs

The Committee agreed to erection of a second street nameplate in Irish at Delhi Street, Lagmore Downs and Rosetta Avenue.

Off-Street Car Parking

The Committee noted the progress which had been achieved to date in respect of the Draft Belfast Off-Street Parking (Public Car Parks) Order 2026. The Committee noted also several updates which related to city centre off-street car parks, debt recovery matters relating to unpaid Penalty Charge Notices and a graduated approach to parking enforcement.

St. Patrick's Day Parking

Arising from discussion, a Member reminded the Committee that, on St. Patrick's Day 2025, forty-seven individuals had received fines for parking in Council-managed off-street car parks. That was despite the fact that the Department for

Infrastructure (DfI) had opted not to enforce parking penalties on individuals who had been fined for parking in its on-street carparks on that date. He indicated that the situation had caused confusion, given that the date was a bank holiday, and he proposed that the Council consider providing free parking in its off-street carparks on St. Patrick's Day in 2026.

The Committee was reminded that such a proposal, if approved, would result in a loss of income to the department and that Members were unaware of the actual extent of that loss. It was suggested that the Committee might defer consideration of the matter to enable a report to be considered outlining how such a loss of income could be offset from within a departmental underspend.

After further discussion, it was agreed that a report be submitted to the meeting in February outlining how off-street car-parking charges might be waived on St. Patrick's Day 2026, subject to the identification of an appropriate underspend from within the departmental budget to offset any loss of income.

It was agreed also that a letter be forwarded to Translink requesting that consideration be given to providing additional services along arterial routes on St. Patrick's Day to cater for service users and to encourage additional use of public transport on that date.

City Protection Role in Planning

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 4th November 2025, it had agreed that a report be submitted for consideration that would outline the current staffing and capacity levels relating to the Environmental Health Service, particularly regarding roles associated with responding to planning consultations; and that the report would include also reference to the role of the Building Control Service in enforcement matters.

Accordingly, the Director of City Services outlined the main aspects of a report in this regard and, after discussion, the Committee noted the information which had provided, together with a range of Members' comments in relation to the matter.

Alleygate Delivery – Update

The Committee noted an amendment to the location of an alleygate in Rosetta Park.

Requests for Annual Funding 2026/27

The Director of Open Spaces, Resources, Fleet and Transport outlined the principal aspects of a report which sought approval for funding allocations to be included within the estimates of expenditure for 2026/27, subject to approval by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee as part of the rate-setting process. The requests are set out below:

- **Belfast Hills Partnership (BHP)**

The Committee was reminded that the Council had, since 2011, supported the BHP by providing annual funding in the sum of £36,900. The Director highlighted that the Partnership had indicated that was operating under increasing budgeting constraints which BHO had sought to address by cutting operating costs and securing additional funding. He added that both Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council had indicated that that it would increase its contribution to

BHP by 30% in 2026/27. Accordingly, it was recommended that the Committee authorise a contribution to BHP in 2026/27 in the sum of £47,970, which represented an increase of 30 per cent.

The Committee adopted the recommendation and agreed that an annual funding contribution of £47,970 be provided within the departmental estimates for the Belfast Hills Partnership in 2026/27.

- **Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB)**

The Committee was reminded also that, since 2014, the Council had provided annual funding to KNIB in the sum of £55,000. The Director reported that KNIB had advised that its current financial model was no longer sustainable and, accordingly, a request had been made that the Council consider increasing its contribution in 2026/27 by 10 per cent, which represented an increase £10,250, bringing the annual contribution to £65,250.

The Committee agreed that an annual funding contribution of £65,250 be provided within the departmental estimates for 2026/27 for Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful.

- **Belfast Healthy Cities**

The Committee was informed that Belfast Healthy Cities had requested funding in the sum of £81,294 for 2026/27, which remained unchanged from the amount which had been provided in 2025/26.

The Committee agreed that an annual funding contribution of £81,294 be provided within the departmental estimates for 2026/27 for the Belfast Healthy Cities. The Committee agreed also to accede to a request from Belfast Healthy Cities that a letter of endorsement be provided by the Council to assist in its application to partake in Phase VIII of the European Healthy Cities Network.

Item Raised in Advance

Bin Collections over the Christmas Period

In accordance with notice on the agenda, Councillor R.M. Donnelly requested that a report be submitted to a future meeting that would outline the reasons for a number of missed bin collections which had been reported over the Christmas period, particularly with regards to the north and west of the City.

The Committee agreed that a report be submitted in this regard. Arising from discussion, it was agreed also that an invite be extended to representatives of Bryson Recycling to attend a future meeting to discuss recent delays which had been encountered in the provision of collection services across Belfast.

Chairperson