



Subject:	International engagement – proposed approach
Date:	4 June 2025
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Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted?

Yes

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No

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If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision

After Council Decision

Some time in the future

Never

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☐
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☐

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

Insert number ☐

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

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?

Yes

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No

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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 a new 3 year International Relations Framework and annual action plan of council wide international activity.
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	<p>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.</p> <p>At a regional level, The Executive Office is expected to issue a new International Relations Strategy in the coming period aimed towards using our international engagement to deliver PfG priorities and council teams have been working closely with officials to ensure that our thinking is aligned in this area.</p> <p>Invest NI has 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 – with a focus on sub-regional growth. There have also been significant developments in relation to the trading relationship with the EU.</p>
3.3	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 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

	<p>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>
3.4	<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 what the role and purpose of the new international framework should be and what priority areas of focus would add 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 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 – business; students; research • KPI tracking – can be challenging but all 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.
3.5	<p>The draft International Relations Framework is set out in Appendix 1 and the supporting delivery plan for year one (2025-26) is set out in Appendix 2. The framework document is</p>

	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.
3.6	<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.
3.7	<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 (including promotion of education and skills pathways offer) • Tourism development and city positioning.(including promotion of cultural, music, and major events) <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>
3.8	<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 framework, 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>

3.9	<p>In reviewing the previous framework and looking ahead to what should happen with the new framework, 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 regular (half yearly) updates to committee along with improved communication of results and deliverables 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.
3.10	<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> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade and investment: 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 trading opportunities (with Invest NI). An emerging area of interest/ potential is leveraging VC support for local small businesses, particularly in US markets • Utilising international links to encourage and support ODI – Outward Direct Investment for local businesses.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation and knowledge exchange: renewed focus on maximising inclusive innovation opportunities through Innovation City Belfast – building international partnerships; 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. <p>The importance and value of international students, as well as the unique offering providing by the skills academies component of our investment proposition will also be supported within this.</p> <p>Reviewing membership and enhancing engagement with Eurocities, particularly for untapped economic and innovation opportunities, in partnership with Universities and INI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism development and city positioning: 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; 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.
3.11	Nashville Trade & Civic Mission February 2025 – summary and initial feedback
	<p>Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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
	<p>Highlights;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 Year Sister City milestone-strengthened long standing civic diplomacy through official LM engagements, including with the Mayor of Nashville, and high level meetings • Trade & Innovation-connected Belfast start-ups, researchers and civic leaders with over 40 stakeholders in Tennessee's Life & Health Sciences, Venture Capital, Tech, Sports and Culture • Education & Research -laid groundwork for bilateral student exchanges, collaborative research and medical education partnerships • Culture & Heritage – deepened creative and heritage links including connections for 250th Anniversary of the USA, country music programming and Scots Irish initiatives
4.0	Finance & Resource Implications

4.1	The EU and International Relations budget of £100K which supports the work of the EU and IR Team was approved as part of the 2025-26 estimates setting process.
4.2	Budgets for individual activities will be approved by the relevant Committees.
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment
	No specific equality or good relations implications.
6.0	Appendices
	Appendix 1: Draft International Relations Framework – 2025-28 Appendix 2: International Relations Delivery Plan – 2025-26