



Subject:	City Events Update
Date:	June 2025
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
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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	<p>The purpose of this report is to provide Members with a summary of the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• St Patrick's Day Celebrations 2025 post event information and forward planning for 2026• Christmas Planning Update for 2025• Update on Oireachtas Festival• Update on Maritime Festival• Update on Halloween and the Open
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• note the contents of this report on the 2025 St Patrick's Day Programme

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • note the outline approach for delivery of the St Patricks Day 2026 Programme • note the on-going festival contracts position in respect of St Patrick's Day • note the updates in approach to Christmas 2025 delivery including festive lights • note the update on Oireachtas festival and approval funding provision to Foras na Gaeilge up to the value of £30,000 • note update on Martime Festival • note update on Halloween and the Open.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p>St Patrick's Day - Background to procurement</p> <p>Members will be aware that the 2024 procurement was split across a number of lots; .Lot 1: A Parade / Pageant (£95k)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lot 2: City Centre Weekend Music Programme (£70K) • Lot 3: Cross City Music Showcase (£50k) • Lot 4: An "Open Call" (£50k) <p>With remaining budget retained for parade logistics (circa £25k) and support for programming and marketing activity.</p> <p>The outcome of this process was that Lot 3 only, was subsequently awarded to Féile an Phobail – for a three - year agreement (2024 to 2026). St Patrick's Day 2026 will be the final year of this contract.</p> <p>Tradfest were appointed to deliver Lot 2 and approved at SP&R in November 2023, initially for a one year agreement. Tradfest subsequently secured a new tender for the city centre music programme for 2025, with the option to renew for 2026 and 2027.</p> <p>In regards to Lot 1 Council Officers took forward the option to deliver the Parade in-house for 2024,. This involved engagement with a number of organisations on the provision of professional performance, community engagement, and parade assets. Following the 2024 event, a number of parade specific procurement exercises took place with 2025 being the 1st year of up to three year arrangements.</p>
3.1.1	<p>2025 Programming</p> <p>In the lead-up to St. Patrick's Day and the day itself, a series of additional activities were delivered across the city, significantly enhancing the festive atmosphere. These were a combination of curated partners and Council:</p> <p>Delivered by Féile an Phobail, TradTrail celebrated Belfast's status as a UNESCO City of Music with performances from the best local and national trad musicians from Monday 10th</p>

to Monday 17th March, offering free music performances in bars, restaurants, hotels and visitor attractions across the city.

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

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

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

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

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

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

	<p>The St Patrick's Celebrations were delivered within the budget allocation of £300,000. Members should note that Good Relations funding of £20k was also secured to enhance the community offering within the parade.</p> <p>Officers are continuing to work with good relations and wider units across council to identify opportunities to enhance the cultural offering and connect communities in how they can be associated and engaged with the St Patricks Day Celebrations. This can provide a pathway into engagement and programming work associated with the delivery of the Fleadh Cheoil given in 2026.</p>
<p>3.1.2</p>	<p>Outcomes</p> <p>In summary, the programme was delivered on budget, was well attended, and well received. All partners have been very positive in their feedback, and there was less risk with event delivery given that many key creative contractors were working under multi-year agreements.</p> <p>There was an estimated visitor attendance of 25-30,000 in the City Centre on the 17th for the Parade and Festival Village – similar numbers to 2024, when the weather was better. Over 700 performers and community participants took part in the parade</p> <p>In 2025, audience response was overwhelmingly positive. Over 16,000 people attended events across 13 venues as part of the St Patrick's Music Festival, with an estimated 12,000 visitors engaging with programming at Cathedral Gardens alone over the course of the weekend. The festival featured 410 participants, over 60 hours of content, and performances from a diverse range of artists including Cara Dillon, Afro Celt Sound System, Máirtín O'Connor, Zoë Conway, Dónal O'Connor, Anúna, and various traditional pipe bands, dancers, and community music groups.</p> <p>The TradTrail, delivered by Féile an Phobail, extended across 60 venues citywide, featuring 87 artists, reinforcing Belfast's status as a UNESCO City of Music and supporting businesses in hospitality and tourism through accessible trad programming. The partnership model across venues and artists has proven both sustainable and impactful.</p> <p>Spraoi Cois Lao – which took place at Custom House Square on Saturday 8th March, the biggest fun day of its kind. Almost 6,000 attended this event.</p> <p>At 2 Royal Avenue, over 3,550 visitors engaged with a tailored programme of family-friendly activity, including arts, dance</p> <p>As with previous years, there was clear evidence of elongated dwell time in the city, with footfall clustering in Cathedral Gardens, Writers' Square, and 2 Royal Avenue before and</p>

	<p>after the parade. This wrap - around experience will continue to evolve, with plans to expand the storytelling element across Council-owned assets in future years. This will align with the future opening of Belfast Stories and the wider place-making strategy.</p> <p>A key consideration for 2026 will be the redevelopment of Cathedral Gardens, scheduled to begin in October 2025 and lasting approximately 12 months. This will impact use of that site for next year's programme, requiring early planning around alternate locations and infrastructure.</p> <p>Operationally, while the parade route does have pinch - points due to the high density of the spectators attending; new measures (such as a screen) were introduced in 2025 to mitigate against these particular risks, in consultation with the H&S Advisory and other stakeholders. There was also the addition of audio description for those with limited sight.</p>
3.1.3	<p>Alignment to the Cultural Strategy</p> <p>The 'City Imagining Strategy' approved by Council has a focus on supporting developing local arts and cultural organisations, through funding, commissioning and capacity building. In this regard, there was engagement with local arts, voluntary and community organisations to create props or coordinate performances of varying nature to enhance the overall production of the parade and highlight the local arts and culture within Belfast. Additionally, partners worked with the sector in the delivery of the wider programme.</p> <p>The ongoing development work aligned to an events action plan will continue to consider development opportunities for St Patricks Day.</p>
3.1.4	<p>Key Findings: Belfast St Patrick's Day 2025 socio-economic survey</p> <p><u>Visitor profile:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 51% of visitors from Belfast City Council area • 30% from elsewhere in Northern Ireland • 4% Republic of Ireland; 9% Great Britain, 6% other regions • 44% of those outside Northern Ireland, the event was the main reason for their trip • 24% staying in accommodation away from home • 32% attended the event with children • 58% had attended a St Patrick's Day event in Belfast before, 42% had not • 27% heard about the events by family /friends <p><u>Visitor Spend:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 93% ate out during the event, average spend per group £72.95 • Total average spend per group <i>excluding</i> accommodation £91.10 • 20% staying in accommodation in Belfast region

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

Overall Rating:

- 86% gave the Parade a rating of 8-10, including 30% who rated it as 'Extremely good'.
- 97% of visitors agreed that the event improves NI's reputation as a host for events like these.
- 97% of visitors agreed that the event improves the reputation of NI as a place to visit.
- 90% agree /strongly agree events like this have can help shape a more accepting citizenship in our city.
- 100% of respondents believe that events like this encourage people to come to Belfast.
- 93% said that such events improve their sense of wellbeing and community.
- 96% felt the St Patrick's Celebrations were inclusive for all people from all cultural heritages.
- 94% agreed that there should be more events like this in Belfast.
- 98% would recommend the event to other people.
- 94% likely/very likely to visit St Patrick's Day celebrations in future years.

3.1.5 Marketing and Communications

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

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

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

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

The advertising campaign included online advertising, radio and outdoor promotion in the form of adshels, impact wraps, digital hubs, adshel lives and bus T-sides. The campaign directed people to belfastcity.gov.uk/stpatricks where the event information was displayed

	<p>prominently on the page. Editorial features were also placed with Belfast Media Group and EasyJet magazine.</p> <p>Additionally, further details could be found on programming at partner and stakeholder websites and social media platforms including Visit Belfast, Tourism NI, TradFest, Conradh na Gaeilge, Féile, Beam Creative and MayWe.</p> <p>A press release was also issued on 21st February to promote the finer and confirmed details of the event schedule and this was followed by a traffic reminder and update on plans closer to the event. TradFest issued additional press to promote the music activity.</p> <p>Visit Belfast provided analytics of their Spring campaign which included the St Patrick's Day Celebrations.</p> <p>This included a double page spread in Belfast City Spring Guide, of which 30,000 copies were printed with a 150,000 Readership.</p> <p>The St Patrick's Day landing page - live from 24th February https://visitbelfast.com/ideas/st-patricks-day-in-belfast/ had 21,280 web visits.</p> <p>Social media advertising was across Meta & Tik Tok - 2x weeks targeted to NI region and Greater Belfast area closer to the event. The final stats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organic Social = 254,458 Impressions, 87,637 Views, 63,625 Engagements • Content Series = – Best Place for Guinness – 94,277 Views, 187,869 Impressions, 2,879 Engagements • Paid Social = Meta - 240,370 impressions - 55,877 engagements, 94,100 video plays • TikTok - 206,486 impressions, 3,220 clicks, 204,912 video views <p>Additionally, there was a dedicated E-Zine and blog posts, and a small number of organic posts.</p>
3.2	<p>Way Forward 2026</p> <p>.</p> <p>A number of multi-year agreements are now in place with regards to the delivery of the wider St Patrick's Celebrations allowing for earlier planning and programme development for the 2026 event. The budget for the Celebrations is currently as per 2025.</p> <p>Members are advised that ongoing future developmental approaches will be addressed in the Events Action Plan and findings brought back to Committee in due course. This will address holistically the challenges and opportunities in relation to city events in their current form. For example, we know that SPD in particular requires consideration of a multi year planning approach.</p>

3.2.1	<p>As per the outlined procurement processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Féile an Phobail will progress into Year 3 of their award to deliver Trad Trail • Tradfest will progress into year 2 of their agreement to deliver the City Centre Music Programme • The Council will again in 2026 deliver the parade in-house with 'creative' contractors on year 2 of a three - year agreement on parade floats, professional performers and community engagement respectively.
3.3	<p>Christmas Lights Switch On Planning Update</p> <p>Members will be aware that Officers were asked to consider the engagement of a 'celebrity' to headline a future Christmas Lights Switch On. Officers have considered the proposal and consulted with contracted Health & Safety advisor. There are a number of concerns on how the reintroduction of a celebrity after a number of years would affect the existing crowd dynamics. The current demographic is mainly a family audience, and the inclusion of a celebrity with mass appeal could diversify the audience. Additionally, the current programme of entertainment has proven popular since the return of the switch on event post covid, currently programming demonstrated wide appeal to key audience segments, programming output is almost entirely Belfast based which represents good value for money. This aligns with the Cultural Strategy of supporting the local creative sector. Officers are seeking approval to continue with the existing approach to programming.</p> <p>Members will be aware that after a large audience descended on the City centre for the 2013 Switch On, it was agreed that the event necessitated ticketing. With the implementation of ticketing the event, officers face the challenge of converting a live city centre into a ticketed event space in a 15–20-minute window. Upon review of the 2024 event, a small number of additional operational measures can be implemented for 2025, including a wider perimeter on the approach to the ticketed zone supported by VMS advisory signage, and restricting parking within the event site on the day of the event. Furthermore, the start time could be 15-30 minutes later when shopping footfall continues to diminish.</p> <p>With previous years, there is always a high demand for tickets, yet a significant number of no-shows on the evening. This additional capacity does allow the Events team to admit non-ticket holders in the city centre.</p> <p>In addition to the core programming for the switch on event officers are developing plans to include a weekend animation programme up to the value of £50,000</p> <p>The Christmas lights switch on event marks the opening of the festive season and is aligned to the opening of the continental market and the implementation of the festive lights scheme.</p>

	<p>Members will be aware that an ongoing tender exercise has been underway to appoint a contractor to facilitate and deliver the festive lights programme. A contractor has been appointed with kick off site meetings occurring in early June. As part of the tender process indicative designs, core footprint and critical paths for delivery were sought.</p> <p>Officers will work with the incoming supplier and key stakeholders to engage with the detail regarding the scheme proposals, with additional support from the BCC estates team to secure the associated wayleaves and bring these under BCC ownership as previous schemes have utilised wayleaves via BCCM.</p> <p>Following the site visits in June officers propose to bring back a more detailed plan to August committee.</p>
3.4	<p>Oireachtas Festival</p> <p>Members will be aware of the decision taken at CG& R committee in August 2023 and again in October 2023 to approve proceeding with the Bid and consideration of any subsequent financial commitments to support the delivery of the Oireachtas na Samhna in 2025.</p> <p>The event takes place from the 29th October to 2nd November 2025. The festival is a significant cultural event that celebrates Irish language, arts and traditions. It is an annual event that attracts as many as 10,000 participants and spectators from across Ireland and beyond. Hosting the festival provides both economic and cultural benefits to the city; namely</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A unique opportunity to celebrate the Irish language • Attracting visitors and generating economic impact through bed nights and day spend • Marketing and promotional opportunities • Community engagement • Opportunity to engage with a significant number of first time ROI visitors • Opportunity to build relationships with key media partners ahead of the Fleadh Cheoil <p>A programme board has been facilitating the event planning as well as identifying opportunities to support wider engagement and development of additional activities which will augment fixed Oireachtas programme.</p> <p>The event will take place across a number of city centre venues including the ICC & Waterfront Hall, Ulster Hall, City Hall and Europa Hotel. Officers are continuing to engage with the event organisers to support on delivery, marketing and visitor servicing for the event.</p> <p>To maximize the impact of such a festival, a small grants scheme for community groups has been identified as providing additional benefits. This scheme can provide the necessary financial support to grassroots organisations, enabling them to actively participate and contribute to the festival's success.</p>

	<p>The aim of this initiative is to generate community-based arts activity and engagement with civic events being hosted as part of Oireachtas na Samhna 2025 in Belfast city centre.</p> <p>Through Foras na Gaeilge's <i>Scéim Forbartha Líonraí Gaeilge</i> (Irish language Networks Development Scheme, or SFLG), Foras na Gaeilge fund 6 community-based projects in the Belfast City Council area to implement programmes of Irish language activity on a language planning model with a view to increasing awareness and usage of the Irish language in the community.</p> <p>Due to capacity and restricted timeframes to deliver a small grants programme it is proposed that a small events and activities fund of £30,000 to be divided among these 6 Belfast-based groups in 2025 and administered by Foras na Gaeilge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ionad Uíbh Eachach • Glór na Móna • Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain • Ionad na Fuisgeoige • An Droichead • Croí Éanna <p>One of the primary benefits of this small grants scheme is the empowerment of community groups. These groups often operate on limited budgets and may lack the resources to participate in large-scale events. By providing small grants, the scheme enables these groups to develop and implement projects that align both with the festival's objectives and the Belfast Agenda. Community groups can use the grants to organise events, workshops, and performances that highlight different aspects and provide pathways into participation of the competition elements of the event.</p> <p>Delivering tangible benefits in local communities, in businesses and in tourism, this support for local Irish language groups in Foras na Gaeilge's SFLG scheme will help the Oireachtas na Samhna festival achieve its full potential, creating a lasting and positive impact on the city.</p>
3.5	<p>Maritime festival</p> <p>Planning is well underway for the Maritime Festival to be delivered across the weekend of the 6-7th September 2025</p> <p>As per previous years this is delivered in partnership with Maritime Belfast Trust (MTB). The event is supported by a programme board delivery structure with key partners Maritime Belfast Trust, Visit Belfast, Belfast Harbour, DfC. Planning is well underway with new additional activation of the Slipways, Hamilton dock and the City Quays Gardens. This year will be the</p>

	<p>first year that MTB are delivering co funded programming including a Saturday evening concerts with Hot House Flowers.</p> <p>Maritime Belfast Trust (MBT) have entered into a delivery partnership with Council under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) to programme Hamilton Dock and Titanic Slipways as part of the Belfast Maritime Festival 2025. Within the existing SLA, MBT will programme daytime activity but have also proposed to extend the Maritime offering to include an evening programme with a food and drink offering and a 'live' concert headlined by 'Hothouse Flowers.'</p> <p>As in previous years, Council would provide further in-kind support; covering daytime security, medical and health and safety provision, - all of which were in addition to the SLA.</p> <p>This in-kind support will now also extend to the evening offering, with Council covering security costs to further assist the delivery of the MBT concert. This allocation will be taken from existing project budgets.</p>
3.6	<p>Halloween</p> <p>In September 2024 members considered and approved proposals from BID one to support enhanced Halloween animation within the city centre.</p> <p>Officers are continuing to explore partnership proposals and associated costs through the BIDS to support animation activity in 2025 and will bring further details to the August committee.</p>
3.7	<p>The Open</p> <p>Officers are working in partnership with Tourism NI to support city dressing options at city hall and also with Visit Belfast to deliver visitor servicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the front of house Visitor Servicing team participating in TNI Get Open Ready customer service training designed to enhance visitor engagement. • Development of a comprehensive "Open 153" fact sheet to assist frontline teams across all 4 VB Visitor Information Centres (VICs) in handling inquiries. • Frontline staff will be kept informed and updated on any promotional offers from partners related to the Open event. • Key visitor information regarding the Open will be shared in the upcoming Quarterly Industry Briefing at the Visit Belfast Welcome Centre (VBWC) on June 3rd, attended by approximately 40-45 participants. • Visit Belfast in partnership with Fáilte Ireland hope to have a staffed presence at the Tourism Northern Ireland stand during the Open on July 18th and 19th.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The VBWC and the Belfast International Airport (BIA) will feature golf-themed branding and VBWC develop a front window display with golf merchandise, in the lead-up to the event. • Golf-related materials, including "Made for Golf" leaflets, are available at the VBWC and BIA, along with a selection of golf merchandise for sale. <p>Publications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The upcoming Summer Publication of Belfast City Region Guide (30,000 printed and distributed) will include a "Beyond the Open" article, highlighting activities and showcasing golf partners for visitors interested in golfing during their stay. This content will also be adapted into a blog on the website. <p>Digital Engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A "Beyond the Open" blog will be created to provide guidance on navigating the city, including coach and travel information. • Social media content will be developed, focusing on activities available to visitors during breaks between rounds and after the event, utilising existing footage to streamline content creation. Featuring restaurants, bars and attractions alongside golf theme. • Open-related Landing page featuring offers and events collated from industry partners will be promoted on the visitor website visitbelfast.com . • Consumer E-Zine featuring Open-related offers and events, as well as a planning guide for city activities, will be distributed to various databases including Great Britain, Rest of World, and core markets. <p>Overall, Visit Belfast is actively enhancing visitor engagement and promoting the city through targeted activity, staff and industry briefings, training, city publications, and engaging digital content to maximise opportunities and enhance the visitor experience leading up to and during The Open event.</p>
4.0	<p>Financial and Resource Implications</p> <p>Financial resources will be met from within existing departmental budgets.</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>
	<p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p>
	<p>None.</p>