



Subject:	Belfast Stories Update
Date:	20 June 2025
Reporting Officer:	Wendy Langham, Programme Director, Belfast Stories
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Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? Yes ☐ 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 ☐

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

<input type="checkbox"/>
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Call-in

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

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	Purpose of the report <ul style="list-style-type: none">- To update Members on the Belfast Stories programme as part of the Belfast Region City Deal including findings of the public consultation as part of RIBA stage 2 Concept Design development.- To outline activity to support the next phase of development with regards to story gathering, engagement and communications.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To update on the development of a draft ethical framework and the process for developing the story gathering programme including curatorial guidelines. - To update on key findings from consumer testing.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Note the contents of this report and update on progress against the delivery of the Belfast Stories programme. - Note the findings of the consultation exercise and the equality impact assessment and the rural needs screening as summarised in the report and detailed in Appendix 1 and 2. - Note the consumer testing findings. - Agree the actions set out in the work plan detailed in Appendix 3. - Note the <i>draft</i> ethical framework detailed at Appendix 4 and agree to receive a detailed report in September 2025.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	Members will be aware that Belfast Stories is the Council's flagship project under the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) and is due to open in 2030. Positioned as a tourism anchor, Belfast Stories is set to deliver significant economic and social impact for Belfast and beyond helping to regenerate the city centre and connect the tourism offer to the neighbourhoods.
3.2	In August 2024, Members of Committee received an update on plans for a public consultation to take place in late 2024 / early 2025.
3.3	<p><u>Belfast Stories Programme</u></p> <p>All programme activities have been underpinned by a programme of ongoing engagement that recognises that the success of Belfast Stories hinges on the active participation and input of those who know the city best—its residents, local communities, cultural groups, business owners and visitors. Engaging with these diverse stakeholders through a structured consultation process is crucial to ensuring that the project reflects the collective vision and meets the needs and aspirations of all who will use and enjoy Belfast Stories.</p>
3.4	<p>A first public consultation on Belfast Stories was delivered from August to November 2022 running for 14 weeks. The consultation focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raising awareness of Belfast Stories so that people are excited and want to continue to be engaged in its development - Making sure that Belfast Stories can be a positive experience for everyone, including consultation on the EQIA, RNIA and Story Collection Framework - Asking people how they would like to continue to be involved in the ongoing engagement.
3.5	The reach of this consultation included 2,755 visits to the online consultation hub, 149 responses to online survey and polls, 65 consultation workshops and 1,148 direct participants.
3.6	Whilst the feedback received during this consultation was overwhelmingly supportive of Belfast Stories, there were several areas that were noted as requiring careful ongoing consideration throughout the development of the project. In particular, responses indicated that the main barriers that would stop people enjoying Belfast Stories included concerns over the experience not being considered inclusive, potential to be politically partisan or lack of trust in how the stories would be represented.
3.7	<p><u>Second Public Consultation, Nov 2024 – Mar 2025</u></p> <p>From an early stage and in line with Council's consultation and engagement framework, the project has made a commitment to consult with the public, communities and key stakeholders at key points in the design process to allow feedback to be meaningfully taken on board.</p>

	<p>RIBA stage 2 represents an important milestone and as such a second public consultation was undertaken. This second public consultation took place over a 16-week period from November 2024 – March 2025. Documents and information are available here.</p>
3.8	<p>Feedback from this second consultation has already informed the next steps of the emerging concept designs from the design teams. Throughout the public consultation period updates were provided on a fortnightly basis to the design teams to ensure feedback was taken on board as the designs developed through RIBA stage 2. Key members of the design team also attended and co-facilitated several consultation events in Belfast.</p>
3.9	<p><u>What we consulted on</u></p> <p>The information presented during this consultation was commensurate with the current design phase. As such it did not present detailed designs, however, it offered a genuine and inclusive opportunity to engage on two primary areas of interest, the design of the building and the envisioned visitor experience. Through the public consultation, Belfast Stories and the design teams received both quantitative and qualitative responses to inform the next stage of project development up to the end of RIBA stage 2 and beyond. By undertaking consultation events, workshops and targeted activity, Belfast Stories continues to ensure the potential of the project to deliver on inclusive growth through focusing on positive economic, social and environmental impacts. The full report including findings and recommendations is available at Appendix 1 and summarised in Appendix 2.</p>
3.10	<p><u>Design Concept</u></p> <p>Emerging proposals seek to bring the former Bank of Ireland back into the life of the city respecting the importance of Royal Avenue whilst developing the full site, ensuring that the design orientates towards and embraces local communities. In designing a home for stories, the design teams have aimed to place significant emphasis on inclusivity and generosity, making spaces for stories and for a multiplicity of uses. Proposals focus on making spaces for both visitors and local people. The purpose of the consultation was to test whether the proposed approach to date, was successful in delivering on the ambition.</p>
3.11	<p><u>Facilities Mix</u></p> <p>The proposed facilities mix at Belfast Stories is based on the site bringing together three threads as one:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A creative hub where writers, musicians, artists and film makers can meet to create, collaborate and develop art and stories to sustain us. Proposals include education and learning facilities together with development and showcasing spaces for industry and a new home for archive. 2. A visitor attraction that visitors can engage with which clearly communicates the spirit of the city – its past, its present and its future. Proposals include a ticketed experience that can support a 90-minute core visitor journey aimed at local and international visitors as well as free to access areas including orientation and a springboard to neighbourhood tourism. 3. A public space – a place for everyone to gather, helping us to express our unique identities and share them with others. Proposals include generous outdoor space comprising of a programmable central courtyard for activities and events and an extensive roofscape offering panoramic views of the city.
3.12	<p>Defining the proposed facilities mix further will continue to be an iterative process as we progress through the business case and design development processes. However, the consultation provided an important opportunity to test the balance of proposed facilities and uses.</p>
3.13	<p><u>Story Gathering</u></p> <p>The emerging masterplan for the visitor experience challenges a conventional thematic approach to storytelling and replaces it with a narrative framework comprising of the two main proposed routes of time and space, supported by a series of crossroads that will support large scale interventions and creative installations. This approach also emphasises the importance of the city's authentic voice focusing on engagement with the people of Belfast</p>

	<p>through an extensive programme of ongoing story gathering as well as establishing a creative commissioning model for local artists. Given the level of feedback on the proposed themes during the first public consultation in 2022, this second consultation provided an important opportunity to test how the emerging concept had responded to previous concerns.</p>
3.14	<p><u>Purpose of the consultation</u></p> <p>The specific objectives of this consultation were to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote the project, raise awareness and gain buy-in - Ensure that Belfast Stories is for everyone including undertaking an equality impact assessment and rural needs impact assessment - Gain feedback on current plans and thinking - Inform next phase of project development and design.
3.15	<p>Activities and opportunities for feedback during the public consultation focused on the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emerging design concept to reflect the current stage of the project, RIBA Design stage 2 of an industry standard eight-stage RIBA process - Proposed facilities mix including public space, visitor attraction and creative hub - Visitor experience as informed by the <i>draft</i> Interpretive Masterplan, and specifically focusing on primary audiences (visitor journeys) for all elements of the Belfast Stories site.
3.16	<p>Consultation activities were structured around five key themes, aligned to the overarching aspirations of Belfast Stories and mapped against the physical form that the building could potentially take. These themes are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regenerating the city centre - Providing outdoor space for all - Providing indoor space for all - Trusted storytelling - Engendering pride.
3.17	<p>A summary of consultation activities and reach is included below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consultation hub welcomed over 4,900 - 514 responses to the online survey - 97 responses to questions on the draft equality impact assessment - Information was available in a range of formats: Easy Read, British sign language BSL, Irish sign language ISL, HTML online, easy read, Irish language - The online consultation documents were downloaded by 272 users - Over 2,500 hard copy consultation documents were distributed across the city - 102 in person consultation sessions - 1014 in person participants across a range of stakeholder groups - Reaching an audience of over 4000 people during all activities in person - Media coverage across 38 media outlets - Social posts reaching audience of over 5000 people throughout public consultation.
3.18	<p><u>Conclusions and Recommendations</u></p> <p>As well as a detailed report (Appendix 1), a consultation summary report including next steps is included at Appendix 2 and will be circulated publicly to all who took part during the consultation and available on the Belfast Stories YourSay hub page. Key areas of feedback and analysis arising from the consultation responses and EQIA is summarised below. This is not an exhaustive representation of consultation feedback. The Belfast Stories Programme Management Office and design teams have reviewed and are continuing to consider the detailed information presented in the full report.</p>
3.19	<p><u>Support for the Belfast Stories concept</u></p> <p>During the public consultation, feedback was gathered across a range of groups, and there was broad support for its concept and potential impact. Responding to the overarching concept of Belfast Stories, when asked if they were likely to visit it, 84% of survey respondents agreed that they would visit, including 57% who would “definitely” visit and 27%</p>

	<p>who would “probably” visit. 82% of survey respondents were likely to recommend Belfast Stories to a friend visiting Belfast. Support was even stronger at face-to-face engagements such as workshops and focus groups. Survey results indicate people from some Section 75 categories may have concerns that should continue to be monitored going forward.</p>
3.20	<p><u>Architectural concept</u></p> <p>Across both RIBA stage 1 and 2 public consultations, consultees generously shared their lived experience and advice to help make Belfast Stories inclusive and welcoming. Some of this feedback has already been used to inform the initial architectural concept, including multiple, broad entrances; a wide, open courtyard; and accessible public space.</p>
3.21	<p>The design team will now further consider new evidence and review architectural plans to maximise the sense of welcome and inclusion, particularly in relation to access and thresholds, signage, public space and accessibility.</p>
3.22	<p><u>Curatorial/Ethical framework</u></p> <p>Compared to the first public consultation, when stories were to be curated by theme, the time and space curatorial framework has been well received, and there appears to be fewer concerns that it will present a partisan, binary or narrow perspective of Belfast.</p>
3.23	<p>Nevertheless, residual concerns are likely to be a barrier to equitable story gathering and curation. It is proposed that these concerns should be addressed through long-term, ongoing, and targeted engagement and mitigation, such as targeted outreach, embedded in story gathering processes.</p>
3.24	<p>A <i>draft</i> Ethical Framework has been developed in response to this feedback and is included in Appendix 4. It is proposed that further engagement on this takes place with an updated version alongside details of the story gathering programme presented to Committee in September 2025.</p>
3.25	<p><u>Story Gathering</u></p> <p>It is recommended that Council should prioritise testing story gathering processes and tools with groups that are less likely to share stories, in particular older people and the very elderly whose stories are otherwise at risk of being lost. The potential for this activity to be delivered via partnerships should be considered.</p>
3.26	<p><u>Language strategy</u></p> <p>Belfast Stories is an opportunity to promote access to and awareness and inclusion of Irish, Ulster Scots, BSL and ISL. This may in turn enhance good relations by affording respect and recognition to native minority language in keeping with local and international policy and best practice.</p>
3.27	<p>Belfast Stories will continue to consult closely the city’s language communities, including in relation to the development of the building, story gathering, exhibition and overall experience. Resulting language policy or practice should support the council’s Language Strategy and draft Irish Language Strategy and be subject to an equality screening. Language should be a key area included in initial story gathering activities. Further recommendations will be presented as part of the report to Committee in September 2025.</p>
3.28	<p><u>Travel and transport</u></p> <p>Consultees have identified that travel and transport may be a major barrier for some Section 75 groups including disabled people, older people, younger people, carers and parents. Ongoing engagement is required with city stakeholders in relation to accessible parking, sustainable transport, drop-off and streetscaping.</p>
3.29	<p><u>Safety</u></p> <p>Another major barrier identified across consultees and that may affect some Section 75 groups in particular is perceptions of safety in the immediate vicinity of Belfast Stories and the city centre in general. Ongoing engagement is required with public and private sectors</p>

	including Belfast City Council departments, government, other developers and stakeholders to maximise regeneration and reduce concerns around blight, safety and anti-social behaviour.
3.30	<p><u>Ongoing engagement</u></p> <p>Survey responses may point to underlying systemic issues of trust and representation which reinforce Belfast Stories' intent to continue to target engagement at people and groups most likely to feel excluded. The next stage of engagement is an opportunity to continue to build on messages of welcome and inclusion while gathering evidence as to how this can be achieved, practically and ideologically, from those key equality groups. This is particularly important as concepts and ideas become plans for structures and layouts during RIBA stage 3.</p>
3.31	<p>Consequently, Belfast Stories engagement plan and stakeholder mapping will be reviewed and revised in light of lessons learned and additional evidence uncovered during this public consultation. Ongoing engagement will prioritise those stakeholders and groups that may be most at risk of missing out but also have most to offer in terms of how inclusion can be designed in. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - young people - older people - people from minoritized ethnic communities - disabled people - parents - carers - people from the LGBTQ+ community - people from neither a Protestant nor Catholic community background - different language communities including Irish, Ulster Scots and sign language.
3.32	An updated engagement plan with proposed actions will be presented to Committee in September 2025.
3.33	<p><u>Operational model</u></p> <p>There were high levels of interest among stakeholders as to how Belfast Stories will be run after its opens in 2030. This included the need for further detail on the operating model, staffing, pricing policy, opening hours and marketing and communications.</p>
3.34	At a meeting of SP&R Committee in April a report was presented on the Outline Business Case for Belfast Stories including initial consideration of operator models. It was agreed that further work be undertaken to develop options and that this would include ongoing engagement with Members in advance of any decision point, which is currently anticipated as end of 2026. Details of this proposed programme of work will be included in September update to Committee.
3.35	<p><u>Equality consultative forum</u></p> <p>The equality consultative forum proved a valuable tool for engagement throughout second the consultation. Many of its participants had been involved in the first public consultation and now couple lived experience with expertise in the development of Belfast Stories. Actions and next steps include a recommendation that a standing equality consultative forum be established to provide continuity and advice between and throughout public consultation.</p>
3.36	<p><u>Consumer Testing</u></p> <p>Between December 2024 and April 2025, market testing was conducted via focus groups, engagement with tour operators and online surveys covering international and domestic consumers in Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Ireland, USA, France and Germany.</p>
3.37	Overall, the Belfast Stories experience was received very positively by the travel trade representatives interviewed, with each suggesting that they would include it in travel itineraries.

3.38	Almost three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents overall would consider visiting the Belfast Stories experience with around four in five (83%) survey respondents overall felt that the Belfast Stories experience was exciting, whilst 63% felt that it was unique. Of the three key elements of the Belfast Stories experience, the public spaces were most likely to have been ranked first in terms of appeal, followed by the main, paid exhibition, then the creative hub.
3.39	The potential sustainability of Belfast Stories is supported by these initial results. In particular there is a strong level of interest in the breadth of the offer and from across several markets both domestic and international including daytrippers (e.g., ROI 64% would consider daytrip) and overnight stays. Similarly, almost 80% of respondents to the survey indicated that Belfast Stories could be either the main reason for visiting Northern Ireland or a factor in decision-making, supporting the ambition to increase dwell time as well as overall visitor numbers.
3.40	<p><u>Next steps</u></p> <p>A summary of recommendations is included in Appendix 2 Public Consultation Summary with an initial workplan including engagement, communications and stories gathering set out in Appendix 3.</p>
3.41	<p>It is proposed that detailed programmes are developed and presented to SP&R in September 2025 to cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Final RIBA stage 2 Concept Designs highlighting how feedback has been incorporated - Final Ethical Framework - Story Gathering Programme including criteria for partnerships - Operator Model programme, actions and engagement.
3.42	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no new financial implications to this report.</p>
3.43	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>An Equality Impact Assessment and a Rural Needs Impact Assessment were undertaken during the second public consultation and the equality decision report is available here. These will be reassessed and updated in line with emerging designs and as part of the next public consultation.</p>
4.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
	<p>Appendix 1: Belfast Stories Public Consultation Full Report</p> <p>Appendix 2: Belfast Stories Public Consultation Summary</p> <p>Appendix 3: Belfast Stories workplan including engagement, communications and stories gathering</p> <p>Appendix 4: <i>Draft</i> Ethical Framework (RAA)</p>