



Subject:	International engagement – proposed approach
Date:	6 August 2025
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

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>