

Appendix 1: Draft International Relations Framework 2025-2028

Background

For many years, Belfast City Council has been actively engaged in international relations activity – working with and in support of our local partners. The nature of that work has changed over time and in response to changes in the internal and external operating context.

The most recent framework document (2017-2021) set out a strategic approach for engagement, focused on three key pillars, namely:

- Business – investment (including capital), export/trade activity and supporting the development of business-to-business collaboration
- Tourism development and promotion – for both business and leisure markets
- Education – professional development partnerships, research and innovation exchanges, student mobility and global education initiatives.

Global changes in the last number of years have been unprecedented in recent history. This makes long-term planning more challenging – and requires flexibility and responsiveness to adapt to the new ways of working. In response, our proposal is for a three-year framework approach, supported by a series of one-year action plans. We are mindful of the need to remain responsive to opportunities that can help deliver on strategic objectives, in the context of limited resources. We note the need to develop a more rigorous approach to the assessment of emerging opportunities, ensuring that these support the city's inclusive growth ambitions as set out in the Belfast Agenda. In that context, we also note the need to ensure that the proposed actions are cognisant of both ethical and environmental considerations, in keeping with council policy.

In addition to external changes, there have been significant internal changes since the previous framework was established. New teams are focused on international engagement activity as part of their day to day working. The EU and International Relations Unit (EUIRU) is likely to remain the focal point for the council's international civic engagement work, coordinating the critical civic engagement activities (alongside the office of the Lord Mayor), managing key sister city relationships and facilitating relevant inward visits. Individual teams will be responsible for leading out on their own areas of work and will be accountable for associated outcomes.

This current framework provides a strategic approach that seeks to focus our financial and staff resources to position Belfast as a globally-connected, forward looking city that is open, inclusive and ambitious, attracting trade, investment, talent and visitors while sharing the city's unique story and values with the world.

Our international partners

As with all International Relations activity, the success of transnational partnership working is dependent on a mutual willingness of partners to reciprocate and support project initiation and development.

Given the resources available (both human and financial), Belfast City Council has strategically focussed a significant element of its international relations activity on its established Sister City relations. However, it remains open to partner with other cities and locations on strategic initiatives where this collaboration fulfils council's objectives as outlined in the Belfast Agenda, Corporate Plan and associated plans and frameworks.

Belfast City Council has three established Sister City partnerships:

- Nashville (Tennessee) – council's oldest Sister City relationship signed in 1995
- Boston (Massachusetts) – signed in 2014
- Shenyang (China) – agreed in 2016

The Council has also engaged in other networks such as Eurocities (incorporating more than 200 cities and municipalities across Europe) as well as other sector-specific and issue-based networks that are critical for learning, information-sharing and city promotion. The June 2025 UK/EU Reset along the unique NI trading relationship offered through the Windsor Framework presents new opportunities for European engagement overall – working alongside partners such as the Northern Ireland Executive team in Brussels. The Irish Presidency of the Council European Union from July-December 2026 will bring the new relationship with the EU into focus and will also present opportunities for engagement through our north-south partnerships.

As previously noted, international connectivity is not restricted to the work of the EUIR team and this framework and supporting action plan encompass and profile the international engagement work across other departments and units such as Innovation City Belfast, the City Innovation team, Climate and Resilience team, and the City Regeneration and Development team.

Strategic Context

Belfast City Council's International Relations Framework is not a stand-alone document. It is, rather, a supporting document, creating opportunities for the delivery of city priorities as set out in critical strategies such as the Belfast Agenda and the new Corporate Plan in particular.

Our approach in developing the framework

In developing this new framework, the EU and International Relations team undertook extensive engagement with a range of internal teams involved in this work. They also engaged directly with key city partners such as the universities, Invest NI, Visit Belfast, British Council, TEO and Catalyst. The findings from these engagements have formed the basis of this revised framework, shaping not only the content but also considerations on ways of working and opportunities for data-sharing and resource maximisation, as well as focusing on what specific areas of added value the framework can support.

The vision, purpose and strategic objectives are set out below and delivery against these is to be focused on three key work pillars, namely:

- Trade and investment
- Innovation and knowledge exchange
- City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development.

Vision

To position Belfast as a globally-connected, forward looking city that is open and ambitious, attracting trade, investment, talent and visitors to support environmentally sustainable and inclusive economic growth while sharing the city's unique story, culture and values with the world.

Purpose

The purpose of this framework is to identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that can maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities.

Council's Role

Belfast City Council will work alongside its strategic partners to :

- Develop and utilise international relationships and connections to generate investment, trade and tourism
- Enhance Belfast's positive global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and attractions
- Coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment
- Support delivery of priority activities aligned with the Belfast Agenda's vision for environmentally sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

Our priority work pillars

Building on our work on international relations to date as well as our analysis of emerging market issues and taking account of the discussions through our engagement with internal and external partners, we have identified three core pillars of activity to focus our work under this framework.

Pillar 1: Trade and investment

While FDI investment may have dominated the narrative in more recent years, there is an increasing focus on trade development. An emerging regional entrepreneurship strategy is likely to include a specific focus on high-growth businesses – Innovation Driven Enterprises (or potentially AI Driven Enterprises). These businesses are global by nature and need new sources of capital and international research and business partnerships. There is an opportunity to explore how Belfast's existing civic relationships can support greater business to business collaborations – with a focus on creating jobs; driving productivity and building new joint ventures and partnerships – all while ensuring a focus on sustainable and inclusive growth. This is consistent with the Economy Minister's focus on "good jobs".

Successive economic strategies have noted that export-led growth is a key economic driver. In 2023, external sales by NI companies were estimated to be £33.3 billion, a 15.7% increase from the previous year. The EU remains the largest export market for Northern Ireland (63.6% of Northern Ireland exports) and the largest import market for Northern Ireland (69.0% of Northern Ireland imports) for goods in 2024. It is followed by the US (15.1% of NI exports). At a city level, new relationships – still in their infancy – with partners in our sister city of Nashville have the potential to generate positive business-to-business connections, particularly in key growth sectors such as life and health sciences. Likewise – an area of focus for the current framework is to explore additional opportunities for export to the EU market, facilitated in partnership with organisations such as the NI Executive Office in Brussels.

The need for external capital is not confined to trading businesses. It is also critical for bringing forward key infrastructure and investment projects.. As the council and its city partners double down on the delivery of its high-level ambitions set out in the Belfast Agenda – particularly focusing on job and population growth – developers and project promoters are increasingly exploring opportunities for international mobile, patient capital to support delivery. In the short term, the need to drive investment in sustainable housing is a strategic priority and will be a focus of our efforts in the coming year, following previous progress in relation to Grade A office, Purpose Build Student Accommodation and Hotels.

As a result of the positive reset in relationships with the EU there is also the potential, working with government partners and key city institutions, such as our universities, to explore enhanced opportunities for European funding.

Pillar 2: Innovation and knowledge exchange

Belfast Region City Deal is a £1billion programme of investment that aims to create more than 20,000 new jobs over the next decade. Digital transformation and sectoral growth are at the heart of many of the Belfast-based projects. These emerging centres of excellence present an opportunity not only to compete globally on collaborative research activities but also to attract additional talent and investment to the Belfast Region. As these centres are established, they will become critical components of the city's investment narrative, enabling a focus towards higher-value jobs and helping drive productivity in line with city ambitions.

There has been a recent resurgence of work through Innovation City Belfast – a partnership focused on bringing together public and private sector partners along with academia to generate investment; maximise the societal and economic impact of the innovation ecosystem; improve the reach and quality of the city's digital infrastructure and grow the entrepreneurial ecosystem to support the development of more innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs). Active engagement in global networks to support this work is critical to ensuring that our investments are world-class and that the Belfast offer is heard and understood among key decision-makers. ICB is currently mapping out an engagement plan to take account of critical events and activities. We will work with them to consider shared and consistent messaging and to explore opportunities for participation by relevant of partners. One specific angle that we want to learn from and share learning on is "inclusive innovation" – in keeping with our commitments to support inclusive economic growth. Likewise, there is an opportunity to support our local businesses to engage in mission-driven R&D and innovation activities – using investment to address a range of environmental and social challenges faced across the city.

Belfast has a number of FDI and indigenous companies across a range of growth sectors that are world leading in their field and competing in a global marketplace – as illustrated through the Invest NI trade statistics. Sectors include net zero; life and health sciences and digital technology. The challenge is to drive more businesses to think and operate globally. We will work closely with Invest NI and sector support organisations to identify opportunities for market access and market engagement activities as well as opportunities to secure capital to support growing businesses in these sectors – including through our sister cities, wider civic connections in the USA, and rebuilding European relations to exploit the unique trading position secured through the Windsor Framework.

Belfast is home to two leading universities – both of whom are extremely active in international markets for the purpose of developing research collaborations, attracting talent and increasing international student numbers. Through this framework, we will explore opportunities to support this work, principally through the civic office and by identifying new opportunities with our partner cities.

Belfast is an active member of a number of international networks and engages on a regular basis in networking, knowledge exchange and showcasing activities. Through this framework, we will explore opportunities for additional engagement including the annual European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels and collaborative participation in events such as New York New Belfast, working alongside our private sector and academic partners to promote key city messages.

Pillar 3: City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

Belfast is a culturally vibrant destination that attracts growing numbers of visitors each year. It is a UNESCO city of music – one of only 59 across the world and the only one on the island of Ireland. The rich cultural traditions – and the music in particular – are at the core of our unique and authentic tourism product.

Attracting international visitors (either for conferences, other business or leisure) is an important element of any international relations framework. Belfast is the gateway for most visitors to Northern Ireland and the council has already demonstrated its commitment to growing tourism numbers by investing in ICC Belfast – to drive new and high-value business tourism to the city. As a new business tourism strategy emerges, it is critical that the role of Belfast is reinforced. For leisure tourism, the value of large-scale events in attracting visitors – particularly Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann – is likely to present significant opportunities in the coming two years in particular. Early engagement and promotion in key markets – working closely with partners in Visit Belfast, Tourism NI and Tourism

Ireland – will be essential if we are to deliver on the economic regeneration benefits from this large-scale event.

A recurring insight from international partners is the strength of the networks in Belfast and the value of the “Team Belfast” approach in helping them to access key decision-makers and expediting decision-making. A priority for the period of this framework will be to develop a suite of assets that can be shared by all partners involved in international activity, including Belfast Region partners, focusing on the key investment messaging – both the ask and the offer.

The important role of the Lord Mayor and the civic office

In addition to playing a convening and complementary role with our partners, Belfast City Council’s civic role in international relations is a critical one. It enables and facilitates access to key influencers and networks. The role of the Lord Mayor, in particular, is a critical asset that can elevate the messaging and create a positive experience of engagement in outward visits and in hosting delegations that visit the city. This factor was widely recognised and acknowledged by our city partners as providing significant added value. Likewise, the ability to involve our elected members in conversations with investors and visitors to the city is seen by our partners as a key part of the “Team Belfast” ethos. We will ensure that our elected members play a key civic leadership role where their involvement supports our strategic objectives and will continue to work with the Lord Mayor and the team to identify opportunities for involvement in critical inward visits and international engagement activities.

How we work

In addition to considering **what** we do, it is equally important to consider **how** we do it. Through our engagement with partners, we have identified a number of key principles that sit behind our activity plan and that, if properly considered, can help make our individual and collaborative efforts more effective. These include:

Objective assessment of opportunity

A recurring discussion during our engagement with internal and external partners was the need to create a consistent approach to due diligence around requests to host inward visits; attend international events and enter into new formal partnerships.

The scale of interest in Belfast from external partners is welcome. In the last year alone, the EU and International Relations Team supported more than 45 inward visits. In the context of constrained resources across all partners, it is clear that a more robust process of evaluating and assessing opportunities presented in order to make recommendations as to how (and whether) these are supported is essential. This due diligence approach is also likely to lead to more collaborative/partnership-based outward missions – thereby reducing the environmental impact and increasing the overall impact of investment. Work has already been undertaken on a new approach and this will be further refined before being introduced across all teams in the coming year.

Measuring and communicating success

Another recurring theme in engagement meetings was the challenge associated with assessing and measuring impact directly related to specific international engagement activities.

Our research into experiences from other locations highlighted that this was not unique to Belfast and it is something that most locations are challenged by. This is because the relationships required to attract capital investment or develop new research or business-to-business partnerships can often take a long time to develop and are reliant on relationship-building – rather than being simple transactions. Likewise, engagement at a single event will rarely deliver an immediate outcome; it may take a number of follow up engagements or it could be that fortuitous connections are made which ultimately lead to outcomes that had not been previously foreseen.

Given that the framework is a supporting document rather than a stand-alone strategy, the outputs and benefits delivered by this framework will support and are aligned to outcomes from the Belfast Agenda and other key strategies highlighted elsewhere in this framework. These are likely to include securing additional investment for local businesses; increasing investment in innovation; supporting delivery of housing targets (through investment attraction) and increasing visitor numbers. The supporting action plan that sits with this framework will identify relevant outputs and performance measures and progress against these will be reported back to Committee on a quarterly basis.

In order to help track outputs and benefits from inward and outward visits, a new CRM system will be introduced. This will enable officers to record support offered and identify outputs and outcomes as a result of that support (where information is available). It will enable us to take a more informed approach to how we deal with requests that have not, to date, generated a return and will support better information-sharing across the various teams involved in this work.

Accountability

While the CRM system will help coordinate and manage data better, it can only be effective if officers can get access to the information they require from other partners. This document and the associated action plan provide an overarching perspective of the council's international engagement activity across a number of teams. Each team is accountable for securing delivery against their stated objectives and associated reporting through committee. The EU and International Relations team may generate connections for businesses and organisations, but the responsibility and accountability for follow-up sits with the individual organisation. Likewise, the EUIR team will endeavour to track progress and collate information on outputs and outcomes associated with this work, but it is reliant on other parties to secure that information.

Maintaining strong partnerships

Belfast's international focus aligns well with the emerging approach from the NI Executive and that of key city and Belfast Region partners. Recent years have seen a new impetus behind our Sister City agreements in North America in particular as well as China. We plan to build stronger connections with the NI Executive teams and the Invest NI International Offices, including developing a plan of action alongside the NI Executive Office in Brussels to explore EU-based trade development and information exchange in line with the priorities set out in this framework.

There has been a revitalisation of support for the work of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and there are numerous opportunities for collaboration with partners along the corridor to support inclusive economic growth, positioning this seamless cross-border corridor in a global context. Likewise, new opportunities to secure external funding to support collaborative activity on areas of shared interest (skills; circular economy; key economic growth sectors) are a focus of the DBEC work for the coming year. Maximising the outcomes from these agreements, rather than developing new partnerships, will be a focus throughout the period of this framework. Complementing their activity and amplifying its impact is both a core role of the Council and a key principle of this framework.

We will work with these partners to ensure our role contributes to theirs for the benefit of the city; our measures of success will be developed in conjunction with these partners to further cement this 'additionality' role and ensure our resources are deployed towards shared outcomes. In practical terms, this will mean continuing to work closely with our partners through formal and informal relationships – including the stakeholder engagement groups and wider engagement mechanisms that provide opportunities for information-sharing and forward planning for collaborative activities.

Appendix 1: Case studies from recent international relations engagement work

Case Study: Nashville Economic and Civic Mission Feb 2025

Objectives:

- 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

Highlights:

- 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 and innovation-focused Belfast start-ups, researchers and civic leaders connected 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.

Case study: Aflac

"Belfast, the 'city of talent and innovation' became the standout choice for company investment due to its talent pool, digital capability, and alignment with the company's overall strategy. Not to mention the personality of the city felt by the key decision makers on a fact-finding trip."

The start up and ongoing success of Aflac NI has been strongly supported and elevated with the continued backing of Belfast City Hall, which has been greatly appreciated by the company. The council ensures that VIP global visitors from Aflac are given a special City Hall welcome to show how the city values the investment, job creation, and further growth".

Case study: TalentSensus

"The International Relations function is an invaluable asset to Belfast City Council and the businesses it supports. It has been instrumental in driving significant growth for my business, Upskill Enterprise, in the USA."

It has provided invaluable support in hosting numerous high-profile delegations from the United States and played a crucial role in facilitating an important trade mission to Northern Ireland for a delegation from Pennsylvania.

The impact of these visits has been truly remarkable. Thanks to the connections fostered, our company, Upskill Enterprise, and our TalentSensus Technology have gained direct access to key individuals in the US public workforce system. This has resulted in an impressive \$4.2 million in revenue for 2025.”

Case study: Friendship Four

The Friendship Four tournament is the first and only NCAA Division One Hockey tournament to be held outside of the United States. The tournament brings up to 1,000 Bostonians to Belfast for a week over the Thanksgiving period.

The tournament is important to Belfast as it aligns to a number of corporate objectives:

- Economic development: on a number of occasions, a business delegation has accompanied the sports teams, through the office of The Boston Irish Business Association (BIBA)
- Education and skills: in addition to participating student athletes’ mobility, the players also undertake education outreach. Visits to Belfast schools profile how sport can support educational pathways and community cohesion. University partnerships have also spun out of tournament participation e.g. Northeastern University has developed a partnership with Queen’s University Belfast, bringing almost 200 students to study in Belfast for a semester over the last two years
- Tourism development: taking place during the tourism “off-season”, spend by international guests in Belfast during the week of Friendship Four amounts to £500,000 and generates 3,000 bed nights for local hotels. During game intermissions, Belfast is profiled directly into millions of Canadian and American households through a series of promotional messages aired on TV channel NESN.

From 2026, the tournament will encompass four women’s teams – building on the prior success and reach of the female Friendship Series which engaged two colleges - proof that the appetite for these quality experiences for international visitors, and Belfast’s reputation for delivering them continues to grow.

Case study: St Mary's University College

"As a small institution with limited international resources, St Mary's struggled to engage with the US market or make significant connections. Introductions made through Belfast City Council to Nashville Sister Cities changed that.

Positive PR created through undertaking outward and inward visits with Nashville has been priceless - positioning St Mary's University College as an international, outward looking institution with talented students – both domestically across Northern Ireland and in the States. The development of our students' skillset has been phenomenal. The relationship also gave St Mary's the confidence to launch our International Summer school.

St Mary's would like to acknowledge the incredible work of Belfast City Council's International Unit who have been invaluable to the development of a footprint for St Mary's in the US".