

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 20th March, 2026

HYBRID MEETING OF THE STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

- Members present: Councillor Brennan (Chairperson);
Councillors Beattie, Black, Bunting, Cobain,
Doran, de Faoite, R-M Donnelly, Ferguson,
Garrett, Long, Maghie, I. McLaughlin, R. McLaughlin
Murphy, Murray, Nelson, Ó Néill, Smyth and Whyte.
- In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, Chief Executive;
Ms. S. McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Director
of Corporate Services;
Ms. N. Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and
Civic Services;
Ms. S. Grimes, Director of Property and Projects;
Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mr. K. Forster, Director of Economic Development;
Mr. T. Wallace, Director of Finance;
Mr. E. McConville, Director of Communications, Marketing
and External Affairs;
Mr. D. Sales, Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood
Services;
Mr. J. Girvan, Director of City and Neighbourhood
Services;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and
Development;
Ms. K. Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control;
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;
Mr. J. Hanna, Democratic Services and Governance
Manager; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services and
Governance Coordinator.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 20th February, were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meetings on 2nd March subject to the amendments under the following headings:

- ***Physical Programme and Asset Management – (ii) Botanic Gardens (Lower Section) – Licence Agreement with Friends of Belfast Botanic Gardens***- be amended to also provide that a report be submitted to a future meeting, providing additional information on whether the UPSURGE project and a GAA pitch can co-exist on the site.

- **Physical Programme Update- Belfast Stories** - the Council agreed to move forward with the enhanced studio space and that a report be submitted to a future meeting with potential operating models, including how it would be financed.
- **Contracts Update – Competitive Tenders: Supply and Delivery of Uniforms, Footwear and PPE** - The Council agreed to refer the issue back to the Committee for further reconsideration.
- **City Centre Gritting Feasibility Study** - The Council agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure to seek clarification on her Department's Winter Preparedness arrangements for Belfast City Centre.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor R-M. Donnelly declared an interest under item 7. (a) Minutes of Shared City Partnership, in so far as it related to PEACEPLUS in that she worked for an organisation which was funded under the Programme. As the item did not become the subject of debate, she was not required to leave the meeting.

In relation to item 2. (b) Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, 6. (a) Contracts Update and 6.(c) Requests for use of the City Hall and the provision of Hospitality, Councillor Murray declared an interest, in that he was employed by S.O.S NI who were a delivery partner of the Fleadh and had applied for use of City Hall. As the related interests did not become the subject of debate, he was not required to leave the meeting.

Councillor de Faoite declared an interest under item 4. (d) Planning Information, in that he was on the Board of Governors of Forge Integrated Primary School. As the item did not become the subject of debate, he was not required to leave the meeting.

In relation to item 4. (h) Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, Councillors Long declared an interest, in that his wife was the Justice Minister, Councillor R. McLaughlin declared an interest under the same item, in that his partner was a Junior Minister, and they both left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Councillor Black declared an interest under items 2. (f) Independently Managed Community Centres, in that she was employed at Grosvenor Recreation Centre and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Regarding item 5. (c) Update on Area Working Groups, Councillor Doran declared an interest in that he was employed by Westland Community Group who were in receipt of funding and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Councillor Murphy declared an interest under item 6. (b) Requests for Funding, in that a family member was associated with a request and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Councillor I. McLaughlin declared an interest under item 2. (f) Independently Managed Community Centres, in that he was on the Committee of one of the centres and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following seven items is restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the press and public from the meeting during discussion of the following seven items as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

The Members were advised that content of ‘restricted’ reports and any discussion which takes place during closed session must be treated as ‘confidential information’ and no such information should be disclosed to the public as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Code of Conduct.

Area-based Community Planning and Community Wealth Building

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty and the Director of Property and Projects provided with an update on a proposed way forward to design, develop and resource area-based community planning alongside enabling communities to bring forward proposals to transform local places through demonstrator projects and community wealth building initiatives.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues: the split between South and East Belfast and suggested that flexibility in the areas which fell between both be considered; the North Belfast Action Plan and the importance of community buy-in; and the need to engage with facilities management regarding asset transfers.

After discussion, the Committee:

Local Community Ownership Fund

- i. agreed the guidance document and assessment pathway (Appendix 1).
- ii. agreed that the open call for the fund would commence in mid/end of April 2026.

Area-based community planning

- iii. agreed the guidance document and submission proforma (Appendix 2).
- iv. agreed the proposed community led approach outlined within the report which included an administrative and convening role of a wider community-based consortia.
- v. Noted the potential administrative fee (up to a maximum of 10%) which would currently need to come from the overall core budget.
- vi. agreed that an internal cross-departmental ‘area planning operational group’ be established as set out at para. 3.15.

The Committee also agreed that a meeting be convened with relevant stakeholders in North Belfast to engage and address the issues which had been raised.

Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann

(Ms. L-A O'Donnell, Senior Manager - Culture and Tourism attended in connection with this item.)

The Director of Economic Development and Senior Manager - Culture and Tourism provided an update on the planning to support the hosting of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Belfast in August 2026.

During discussion, one Member highlighted the importance of Day One and the management of parking and road closures and requested that the issues be raised at the Ministerial meeting. The officers advised that engagement continued with key stakeholders and highlighted that a public communication and signage plan would be put in place.

Regarding Falls Park now being a designated Camp Site for the Fleadh, one Member suggested that the information should be added to the website.

In relation to communication and advertising, Members suggested that previous Fleadh footage to show the scale of the event might improve the public's understanding of the event. One Member also suggested that the Members be given Q&A information sheet for dealing with queries.

In response to a Member's question in relation to Policing and the Event Management Plan, the Chief Executive undertook to provide further detail on this.

After discussion, the Committee noted the progress to date on the development of the Fleadh Cheoil and that the issues raised would be taken forward by the relevant officers.

Bad Debt Write Off

The Committee approved the write-off of ground rent arrears, in accordance with Section M12 of the Council's Financial Regulations.

Belfast Stories Update

The Programme Director presented an update on the Belfast Stories Programme and outlined the next steps, including the addendum to the Outline Business Case (OBC) to develop an Enhanced Studio space in Belfast Stories.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Murphy,
Seconded by Councillor R. McLaughlin

That the Committee agrees to rescind its decision of 20th February, under the heading Physical Programme Update, specifically as it related to Belfast Stories, which had been amended at the Council meeting of 2nd March, and agrees not to proceed with the development of the Enhanced Studio space for the Belfast Stories scheme.

On a vote, eight Members voted for the proposal and twelve against and it was declared lost.

The recommendations as outlined in the report were put to the Committee and twelve Members voted for the proposal and eight against and it was declared carried.

Accordingly, the Committee:

1. Noted the key programme milestones in RIBA stage 3, including the submission of the planning application at the end of April 2026;
2. Noted the further information provided on the Enhanced Studio and the next steps in relation to the approval of the addendum to the Outline Business Case, including implications of design changes and the call for expressions of interest;
3. Agreed to a Members site visit and design update in April 2026 in advance of the planning application submission; and
4. Agreed that party briefings be undertaken on RIBA stage 3, development of the operator model and inclusive growth in May 2026.

Asset Management (1)

The Committee:

- **Paisley Park Sports (PPS) Grounds – Transfer from Department for Communities (DfC) to the Council** - approved the proposed one off DfC contribution of £69K in order to progress with the proposed transfer of Paisley Park from DfC to the Council, with the proposed transfer subject to agreeing a new lease with PPS, under which PPS would be responsible for all repairs, maintenance, rates, and utilities costs associated with the use of the land and buildings at Paisley Park.

Independently Managed Community Centres

The Director of Neighbourhood Services provided an update on a range of areas with regards to the Council's seven Independently Managed Community Centres (IMCC's).

Proposal 1

Moved by Councillor R. McLaughlin,
Seconded by Councillor Murphy and

Resolved - That the Committee agrees that a condition survey would be undertaken across all Independently Managed Community Centres.

Proposal 2

Moved by Councillor R. McLaughlin,
Seconded by Councillor Murphy and

Resolved - That the Committee accedes to the request from 4 of the IMCCs to receive double their awards and receive an uplift of £74,000 each (totalling £296,000) for this financial year (2025/26), subject to in-year underspend/specified reserves, and that officers engage with the other centres to assess their requirements.

After discussion, the Committee:

1. Agreed to the annual revenue awards to 6 IMCCs including the annual Consumer Price of 3.8% based on September 2025 figures.
2. Agreed to defer the decision in relation to the Ballymacarret Community Centre so that a report could be submitted to the next Committee meeting in relation to the issues raised and delegated authority to the Chief Executive to manage the interim arrangements of the Centre, to ensure current users would be supported.
3. Agreed to the request from 4 of the IMCCs to receive double their awards and receive an uplift of £74,000 each (totalling £296,000) for this financial year (2025/26), subject to in-year underspend/specified reserves, and that officers engage with the other centres to assess their requirements.
4. Agreed to the request from the 4 larger IMCCs that they receive their first payment in April.
5. Agreed that a report would be brought back to the committee which would provide members with options on proceeding with standard Legal Agreements outlining Terms and Conditions for all IMCCs at a future meeting.
6. Agreed that a condition survey would be undertaken across all Independently Managed Community Centres.

City Innovation Programme Update

The Committee was provided with an update on the progress on a number of City Innovation programme initiatives including the Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayoral Challenge competition.

The Committee:

1. Approved Belfast City Council's acceptance of the letter of offer from Bloomberg Philanthropies to deliver the Belfast Mayors challenge;

2. Noted that the Bloomberg team would be visiting Belfast on 30th and 31st March, 2026 to meet with the Lord Mayor and Chief Executive on progress;
3. Noted that invitations had been issued to Party Leaders, or their representatives, to meet with Mr Andrew Haldane on 30th March to discuss inclusive growth; and
4. Approved the Council's £50,000 contribution to Innovation City Belfast for the financial year 2026 to 2027 (as part of a collective contribution of £300,000 by ICB partners).

Requests for Funding

(The Committee agreed to discuss the item under restricted session)

The Committee noted that 8 requests for funding had been received, and the following next steps:

- 1) **Glentoran Under 16-Girls travel to USA Cup - £x** – Agreed to defer consideration of the request so that further information could be provided;
- 2) **Clarawood Tenants Hall Renovation - £122,720** –As the request related to the Local Investment Fund, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of the request so that it could be considered at a special meeting of the East Area Working Group;
- 3) **Whiterock Children's Centre – additional £50k** – Agreed to the request under the Discretionary Fund;
- 4) **Glór na Móna - £200k for Croí na Carraige** – As the request related to the Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund, the Committee agreed that a report be submitted to the April meeting to outline the options for increasing this fund across the city. The Committee also agreed that Party Group Leaders also receive an update on the Fund at its next meeting;
- 5) **Mid Falls Alleyway Regeneration – £70k** - As the request related to the Bloomberg alleyway transformation fund, the Committee agreed that a report be submitted to the April meeting on how this request could be considered as part of the Bloomberg Scheme. The Committee also agreed that Party Group Leaders also receive an update on the Fund at its next meeting;
- 6) **Request from MLA re an individual in relation to representing Team Ireland in international Ice Hockey tournament** – Agreed that the request was not eligible as deemed a request from an individual;
- 7) **Ligoniel Rec Football Club cost of travel - £2k** – Agreed to the request as there was no current funding stream;
- 8) **An Droichead short-term stabilising support £100k - £150k** – Agreed that officers engage with the group to assess their requirements and report back to the Committee;
- 9) Noted that further funding requests had been submitted since the report had been submitted which would come back to the Committee for consideration;
- 10) **In relation to Cultural Multi Annual Grants** and the decision made by the City Growth and Regeneration Committee in March, agreed that an uplift to the transition fund for a maximum of £98,000 for year one support, and that a report be submitted to a future committee to

review the scheme and the impact on the organisations that had not received funding.

Governance

Official Announcements during Council Meetings

The Committee agreed that official announcements at Council meetings be limited to the following:

1. Births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships and retirements of Belfast citizens or Belfast City Council employees;
2. Achievements by local groups/organisations and/or individuals;
3. Requests for the Lord Mayor to write to and/or host a group/organisation;
4. Be no longer than 1 minute on duration;
5. Cannot commit the Council to any position or action which should be properly brought before the relevant Committee in the first instance by way of a notice of motion or is otherwise governed by a Council Policy or existing process;
6. The Lord Mayor may depart from this Standing Order where, due to the urgency of the matter, allow it to be discussed at the Council meeting rather than it being referred to a committee;
7. Acknowledgement of particular dates/days in the Calendar to recognise events; and
8. Should not be used for Political Statements for debate.

The Committee also noted that Standing Order 11 (b) would be amended to reflect the Committee's decision.

Belfast Agenda/Strategic Issues

Boxing Strategy

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 19th December, it had agreed to invite the IABA to a future meeting to discuss the implementation and recommendations made in a NI Equality Commission report; Approved the Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 payment to the IABA; and Requested that future funding be considered for the delivery and continuation of the Council's Boxing Strategy post March 2026.

The Operational Director, City and Neighbourhood Services advised that the IABA had been invited present to the Committee in April.

He reminded the Committee that the Council with Partners had developed a Belfast Boxing Strategy 2012 – 2022. At its meeting in January 2018, the Committee had agreed to provide £200,000 to the Irish Athletic Boxing Association Ulster Branch (IABA) for delivery of an agreed annual action plan supporting the Belfast Boxing Strategy. Council had continued to offer financial support through People and Communities committee on an annual basis.

He stated that the IABA provided a detailed breakdown of programmes to be delivered under six main areas; Salary – Development Officer and Coaches, Pathways, Events, Coach Education, Club Support and Governance.

The below table highlighted the current timeline for the development, consultation and implementation of the new Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy:

Action	Timeline
Presentation to elected members via Party Group Briefings	March - 2026
Presentation to SP&R Committee for approval	March/April - 2026
Conduct final 12 week public consultation	May 2026-July 2026
Review of findings from Public Consultation	August 2026- September 2026
Report requesting approval of the new Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy to P & C Committee	October 2026
Development of Strategy Delivery Plan	October- December 2026
Report requesting approval of final Action Plan to P & C Committee	January 2027
Launch of the New Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy and Action Plan	February 2027

The Operational Director, City and Neighbourhood Services stated that the above timelines highlighted that the Council would not have a new PASD strategy in place for the financial year for 2026/27.

He advised that the Committee was asked to consider extending the boxing strategy for one year whilst the new strategy and implementation plan was developed and a total of £200,000 was available within the next financial year to support a new Belfast Boxing Strategy Action Plan.

After discussion, the Committee agreed to extend the Belfast Boxing Strategy and funding for delivery of the related work programme from 1st April 2026 until 31st March 2027 and noted that the AIAB would present to the Committee, at its meeting in April.

European City of Sport

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 To provide Members with an update on the European City of Sport 2026 designation for the city including:

- I. our related monitoring and progress reporting obligations to the awarding body ACES**

- II. the request for non-recurrent additional resources to allow us to enhance programme delivery from April – December 2026, as well as ensuring adequate resource for communications activity.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the successful bid to ACES, note the planned programme of activity under the bid which is based on existing council and partner activity, note the programme monitoring and progress reporting obligations and consider the limitations for delivery in the absence of an approved budget to support additionality for collaborative impact.

3.0 Main report

3.1 ACES Europe have confirmed that Belfast was successful in securing the designation of European City of Sport for 2026 (Jan-Dec). ACES is a non-profit association based in Brussels and award this accolade each year, recognising the best cities, towns and regions across Europe to take part in sport. The successful bid will give the city an opportunity to showcase the excellent sports and leisure facilities/services provided by Belfast City Council along with the rich sporting heritage of the city.

3.2 Following a successful community launch weekend in late January 2026 (see appendix 1), our focus has now moved from application to delivery and officers are continuing to work with relevant internal services and strategic partners to expand the outline programme of activities and branding opportunities into a robust detailed programme.

City of Sport Planned Programme Delivery for 2026/7

3.3 Our programme reflects ACES' manifesto pledges – enjoyment in exercise, willingness to achieve, sense of community, learning to play and improvement in health – and focuses on five key themes:

- investment made into sport in Belfast over the last 10 years
- support provided to elite athletes
- contribution of our leisure centre staff, local clubs, coaches and volunteers
- ensuring everyone feels welcome and included, and

- **how sport is delivering better health outcomes for our residents.**
- 3.4 2026 will see lots of great sports events delivered across the city, as well as more work to:**
- **promote use of our leisure centres**
 - **showcase the variety of sports available in our city**
 - **celebrate the contribution of sports clubs and athletes, and**
 - **highlight how everyone can get involved.**
- 3.5 Activities will include:**
- **the Phoenix Energy Belfast City Marathon and other sports events**
 - **our annual Belfast Primary Schools' Cross Country Championships**
 - **our try-it events in our community and leisure centres, and**
 - **activities celebrating the contribution of athletes, coaches and volunteers.**
- 3.6 In December 2026 we will conclude the year with an end of year event and in Jan 2027 we will present the end of year report to ACES.**
- 3.7 The current programme is limited to activity already planned within existing council and GLL revenue budgets. It also includes the activities and events planned by the range of delivery partners who have committed to support the Belfast City of Sport 2026 programme.**
- 3.8 In order to maximise the impact of already planned activity, it is critical that the Project Co-ordinator proactively works with partner organisations to ensure that their programmes come under the banner of the City of Sport with the relevant branding and comms requirements.**
- 3.9 The project has to date been supported entirely as extra work by the Senior Manager of Campaigns, Press and Social. This was for the bid and launch, which was being carried out on top of management duties. However, given existing resource pressures within the CMEA department, this is unsustainable.**
- 3.10 For City of Sport to be successful, a full planned and resourced programme of events and a fully planned and resourced communications programme is required. City of Sport has the potential to present risk to the organisation if the programme and required communications cannot be adequately delivered.**

- 3.11 To maximise the impact of the existing activity programme, we are asking members to consider a non recurrent budget of £160,000 which will include:
- £40,000 for MarComms support in the form of an additional temporary officer to support the extensive marketing and communications requirements involved in the year long programme.
 - £15,000 to build a stock of CoS support materials, for example, infographics, mesh banners, branded sport products, for council facilities and events and to gift to partner delivery bodies.
 - £85,000 for additional programme support which would include:
 - £25,000 to deliver targeted events/activities where gaps are identified in the programme particularly in relation to gender, disability, ethnic background, etc. This is in line with our commitment to removing barriers to physical activity to ensure we get more people playing sport, keeping fit and having fun.
 - offer up to £5k for up to 12 Sporting Organisations to deliver key events in the city linked to the themes outlined in the City of Sport Bid Document – Total £60,000.
 - £20,000 for an end of year celebration and final report including evaluation.
- 3.12 Officers are continuing to engage a range of strategic partners to explore how they can collaborate on the City of Sport status in order to maximise benefit and legacy for the city. Identified partners currently include DfC, Sport NI, PHA, BHSC, UU, QUB, Tourism NI, etc. The intention is to further secure their strategic commitment, collaborative resourcing and legacy arrangements.
- 3.13 We have met with DfC and Sport NI to further interrogate their commitment to resource support the programme. DfC Sports Branch have agreed they will fully allocate their modest capital budget (circa £60k) in 2026 towards the City of Sport. While welcome, this is restricted support in that it is fully allocated to their hosting of Celebration of Sport events at locations throughout NI each year, bringing local school children together for taster sessions of a wide range of sports.
- 3.14 They have agreed to locate all events in 2026 in Belfast to celebrate the City of Sport. They propose to host 3 events March 2026:

- NewForge Primary Schools 13th March
- Brook LC Primary Schools 20th March
- Girdwood Community Hub General Public 28th March

- 3.15 They hope to allocate two further events in Sept/Oct subject to available funds. We will continue to work with DfC to ensure a citywide spread is achieved via the Autumn events. While DfC Sports Branch indicate they have no unrestricted budget to allocate, they have asked Sport NI about their potential input.
- 3.16 One of the core CoS themes is how sport is delivering better health outcomes for our residents, and we are working closely with colleagues in BHDU to brand any of their planned programme activity or campaigns in the 2026 calendar year. We are also exploring any additional resource support they, PHA or the Belfast Trust can commit in order to extend the programme.
- 3.7 Officers are continuing to work with council staff teams across Neighbourhood Services and Parks Outreach and Events to brand existing programme delivery including some of our external grant support where appropriate. We are keen to engage with other Departments to raise awareness of the European City of Sport 2026 programme and to identify collaborative opportunities to extend the programme and build the legacy.

Obligations to ACES as a designated European City of Sport for 2026.

- 3.18 Belfast as a European City of Sport must comply with the general regulations as set out by ACES for successful cities these in summary include:
- 3.19 Quarterly reporting submission of reports to ACES commencing from 1 Apr 2026 and focusing on the noted requirements. Each report should include:
- A summary of the activities carried out,
 - Photographic material,
 - Media coverage and press impact.
- 3.20 These reports allow ACES to monitor the correct use and promotion of the title, ensure compliance with the Regulations, and coordinate actions and events in the most effective manner.
- 3.21 At the end of the year, a final report must be submitted. This report must include a dedicated Legacy section, outlining the positive impact of the award on Belfast and its long-term outlook.

- 3.22 We have agreed a performance framework for the CoS programme and a simple monitoring return to capture information from council and GLL activities and from our delivery partners. Our ability to report to ACES on the related measures and targets will depend on the further development of the programme and available resourcing.

Financial Implications

- 3.23 The bid phase costs were estimated at £30,000 and this amount was agreed by People and Communities committee with funding provided on a 50/50 basis shared between BCC and GLL. The bid phase was delivered within budget.

To deliver an enhanced programme and ensure we have sufficient comms support to capture current planned activity, we have outlined a growth bid of £160k as follows:

- Corporate Comms (towards temp officer role) £40,000
- Branding and support materials £15,000
- Programme support £85,000
- End of Year celebration event and programme report £20,000

Members are asked to consider a non-recurrent budget be allocated to city of sport for the 2026/27 financial year. CNS will ringfence any underspends over the 2067/27 year to cover the costs.

Equality or Good Relations Implications and Rural Needs Assessment

- 3.24 This will be considered throughout and any appropriate issues highlighted to Members. Any amendments to existing scheme or new scheme will be considered in the context of any equality/Good Relations and rural needs considerations.”

During discussion, several Members raised concern in relation to the proposed use of additional funding for Communication activity and suggested the need to concentrate on participation, outcomes and engagement.

After discussion, the Committee:

1. Noted the successful bid to ACES;
2. Noted the planned programme of activity under the bid which was based on existing council and partner activity;
3. Noted the programme monitoring and progress reporting obligations and agreed to maximise the impact of the existing activity programme, with a non-recurrent budget of £160,000 to include: £140,000 for additional programme support and £20,000

for MarComms, support materials, end of year celebration and final report including evaluation.

Planning Information

The Committee noted the update on the Major planning applications and applications that had been determined by the Planning Committee.

Review of Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) Fees

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues

1.1 This report sets out proposals for a small operational change and inflationary uplift to Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) fees in the short term alongside a proposal for a longer term review of PAD fees in the coming financial year.

1.2 The report was noted by the Planning Committee at its meeting on 17th February 2026.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 The Committee is asked to agree the following:

- (i) the proposed increased PAD fees set out at Appendix 1.
- (ii) the small operational change set out at paragraph 3.13.
- (iii) a fundamental review of PAD fees over the next financial year.

3.0 Main Report

Background

3.1 The Council’s Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) service is a discretionary service, which provides opportunity for customers to discuss their planning proposals with the Planning Service before they make a planning application.

3.2 As the Committee is aware, the planning application process can be complex. PADs provide opportunity for issues to be identified early, thereby helping to improve the quality of application on submission, in turn leading to better outcomes on the ground as well as more efficient and timely decision-making. PADs also provide applicants with a degree of certainty as to whether their proposals are likely to be acceptable, with the caveat that the process does not bind the Council to a final outcome, with the planning application subject to consultation with the public and technical consultees, and the potential for the decision to be made by the Committee following the democratic process.

3.3 Customers can use PADs to establish:

- whether their proposal requires planning permission.
- the main issues and planning policies relevant to consideration of their proposal.
- the Planning Service's initial assessment of the proposal and how the proposal can be improved to increase the chances of planning permission being granted.
- the information that they will need to submit with their planning application (in accordance with the Council's published *Planning Application Valid Checklist*).
- the application process and likely timescales for a decision.

Best Practice

3.4 PADs are universally accepted as best practice in the industry, particularly for more complex proposals, and form an important part of the 'front-loading' of the planning application process to support timely decision making and secure better outcomes on the ground. PADs are advocated by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) through the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for NI (SPPS) and [Development Management Practice Note 10: Pre-Application Community Consultation \(and Pre-Application Discussions\)](#).

3.5 PADs also form an important part of the Council's published '10 Operating Principles' that support an efficient and effective Development Management service, and the Planning Service's aim of *helping customers get a timely planning decision that benefits the city*.

3.6 Operating Principle 7 states:

'We provide a Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) service so that issues can be identified at the beginning of the process, before the application is made. This leads to better quality planning applications which should be determined in a more timely manner...'

BCC charging for Pre-Application Discussions

3.7 Belfast City Council was the first council in Northern Ireland to charge for PADs in 2017. It is understood that some but not all NI councils have since introduced charging for PADs. Endorsed by the Committee, PAD fees were introduced in recognition of the significant level of resources that the Planning Service expends in providing its PAD service and significant demand for the service from customers.

- 3.8** PAD charging was informed at the time by engagement with applicants, agents, developers and other customers. It also formed part of the business case for employing two additional staff in the Development Management team.
- 3.9** PAD charging has since become culturally embedded in the planning application process in Belfast. The Planning Service remains acutely aware of the importance of providing high standards of service and advice in delivering a charged PAD service.
- 3.10** The Council's PAD fees were originally set in March 2017 and are provided at Appendix 1.
- 3.11** Projected income from current PAD and PPA fees is £100,000 pa. Actual PAD income for previous years is set out in Table 1, below.

Year	Actual PAD Income	Number of PADs
2021/22	£88,200	85
2022/23	£82,400	76
2023/24	£70,200	62
2024/25	£66,000	56
2025/26 (pro rata)	£92,900	58

Table 1: PAD income and the number of PADs per year since 2021/22

Review of PAD fees

- 3.12 it is recommended that the original 2017 fees are subject to an inflationary uplift from 2026/2027, applying the Consumer Price Index (CPI).
- 3.13 In addition, a small process change is proposed. The current charges including two PAD meetings at no additional cost for all PAD categories other than for Largescale Major proposals which include one meeting. It is proposed that the process for Largescale Major proposals is brought in line with other PAD categories so that they also include two meetings at no additional cost, to simplify the approach and recognising that it is unlikely that the largest category PADs would only ever involve one PAD meeting, due to their scale and complexity. The base fee for a Largescale Major proposal is proposed to be increased to cover the cost of the additional meeting.
- 3.14 PAD fee exemptions for householder proposals, commercial proposals of less than 200 sqm, community and proposals by non-profit organisations (i.e. fee exempt for planning applications) would remain. There would continue to be no charge for PADs for these proposals.
- 3.15 The general public can continue to avail of the free Duty Planner service which operates daily and provides opportunity to discuss householder and small-scale proposals with a planning officer.
- 3.16 The revised PAD fee proposals are set out at Appendix 1. It is considered that these small changes may make it more likely that the Council will achieve the £100k income target for PADs.
- 3.17 It should be recognised however that the Planning Service has evolved and improved its PAD service over the years. Since early 2024, following feedback from customers and informed by learning from the lean systems redesign experimentation project (2022 to 2024), the PAD process has been streamlined and targeted with the process more tailored to the specific requirements of the applicant and proposal. A new series of PAD principles relating to delivery of the service have been introduced, aimed at providing efficient, proportionate and more timely feedback to customers. These will be published on the Council's website alongside updated customer guidance on the PAD service.
- 3.18 A more fundamental review of PAD fees is therefore considered timely given the evolution in the delivery of the PAD service. It is recommended that a more comprehensive

review is undertaken during 2026/27, informed by planned feedback from the new Belfast Planning Partnership with planning agents; and further development of internal processes following further roll-out of the learning from the lean-systems redesign project.

- 3.19 A further report on the review and its conclusions will be brought to Committee in late 2026 / early 2027.
- 3.20 The implementation of the proposed new PAD fees at Appendix 1 will need to tie in with the annual update of regional planning fees for planning applications in the NI Planning Portal, expected towards the end of April or early May 2026.

Financial & Resource Implications

- 3.21 The realisation of PAD income remains an important income stream for the Council's Planning Service. Planning application fees are set regionally by DfI and overall income falls substantially short of the annual cost of delivery of the Planning Service. The proposed new PAD charges will help support the Planning Service's overall costs and service delivery and will help to achieve the income target of £100k per annum.

Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

- 3.22 There are no equality or good relations / rural needs implications associated with this report."

The Committee agreed the recommendations as outlined in the report.

Belfast Business Promise - Next Steps

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy presented the following report:

"1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the review process that the Belfast Business Promise has been undergoing and to set out a proposed way forward to transition the service to a more sustainable and scalable offer, ensuring that it adds value and supports corporate priorities.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to.

- i. consider the contents of the report and the appendices attached
- ii. consider the proposed reduction of the BBP pledges from 8 to 5 (refer Appendix 3)
- iii. consider the recommended approach to transitioning the Belfast Business Promise (Option 2: Good Practice Plus) (refer to Appendix 2)
- iv. consider and agree the proposed next steps as outlined at 3.17 and 3.18
- v. Note that further detail will be brought to the next Social Policy Working Group.

3.0 Main report

Background

- 3.1 The inclusive growth city charter is a key commitment in the Council's Inclusive Growth strategy. Co-created with businesses, it was designed to provide an assessment framework to enable employers to look at their current practices and identify where they could make changes which would have a beneficial impact on inclusive growth in the city. Driven by the Council's Social Policy Working Group (SPWG), the charter has been operationalised as the Belfast Business Promise (BBP) since April 2023 and delivered by a cross-council team, led by the Strategy, Programmes and Partnership and Economic Development teams, with support from Corporate HR, CPS and Climate teams. A snapshot of the progress made is attached as Appendix 1.
- 3.2 As Members will be aware the BBP had been brought forward on an initial pilot basis with a commitment to undertake an interim review of its progress and impact to ensure it remained fit-for-purpose and impactful. This review sought to consider the future model options for the BBP, building upon what works well, seeking to complement and enhance existing support programmes and position the programme to positively impact on the inclusive growth ambitions of the city while also taking account of the changing legislative and economic context within which organisations are operating.
- 3.3 In summary the key findings of the interim review included:
 - BBP members valued the support and energy of the team in spurring them on to meet the pledge areas.
 - Areas for further development included maximising the networking opportunities and ability to learn from and share good practice, along with the potential to build on existing programmes of support for businesses offered by the council and other partners.

- **BBP members felt that the support provided enabled them to move forward at a more rapid pace in terms of improving business and employment practices.**
- **Highlighted the possible challenges of scaling the offer if the current administratively heavy processes were maintained.**
- **Consideration to be given to adopting a more focused approach which would deliver greatest impact across the inclusive growth ambitions and key sectors.**

3.4 The review also acknowledged that there are a number of significant factors emerging which may influence the future approach and cope of the BBP. These include, for example:

- **Planned introduction of the Good Employment Bill by NI Executive**
- **PfG commitment to the development of the NI Good Employment Charter (PfG), which is being developed by the LRA (BBP team have been engaged in this process)**
- **Legislation is now in place for public bodies to report on their carbon emissions**
- **Internally, work is progressing on the development of a Sustainable Procurement Policy and a commitment in the Belfast Agenda to seek to establish an 'Anchors Network'**
- **Internally, exploratory work underway to examine the potential to create a Corporate Social Responsibility Framework which will seek to align future investment opportunities from medium-to-larger organisations to identified community and city initiatives**
- **Ongoing focus on efficiencies and need to ensure effective use of council resources.**

3.5 A series of planning workshops and internal discussions with key staff engaged in and associated with the BBP have taken place to consider the future model for the BBP; building upon what works well, seeking to complement and enhance existing support programmes and position the programme to positively impact on the inclusive growth ambitions of the city. The BBP team have carried out initial engagement with Belfast Business Promise Partners who have been instrumental in shaping the pledges and processes to date (such as the Labour Relations Agency, Queen's University, Ulster University and Translink) as well as key officers internally and informal engagement with Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter. It is accepted that it would be challenging to scale and sustain the existing model if the current processes and resources were maintained, given the administration burden associated with the various accreditations and that a more focused approach should be considered to deliver on the inclusive growth ambitions.

Guiding principles

3.6 A number of guiding principles have informed the transition planning for the Belfast Business Promise:

- Consistency and alignment - Embedding in BCC practices, delivering through existing provision and mechanisms where possible (BCC and BBP Partner resources) and building on what works.
- Creating value - Working with Partner organisations to deliver, share and promote good practice, demonstrating the benefits of doing the right thing and in a state of readiness for pending legislative changes which may impact on them.
- Evidence based - Working alongside other accreditations and standards to recognise employers and working with knowledge experts to support good practice.
- Continuous Improvement - Continuing to evolve and develop in line with external factors, changing legislation and the needs of the network.

Purpose of BBP

3.7 The purpose of the BBP has also been simplified to emphasise that its role is:

- 'To work with employers to change behaviours to support a more sustainable thriving local economy by:
- Providing a framework to improve and recognise good employment and inclusive business practices.
- Helping to deliver more good jobs with opportunities for people to progress and develop.
- Engaging with employers and partners to provide more wrap around support to help businesses to thrive, grow and scale.
- Building a strong business base and network, committed to supporting the city's inclusive growth ambitions – leaving no one behind'

3.8 In line with this a number of key outcomes have been delivered to date:

- Increased number of employees paid above the RLW and/or Increased number of organisations accredited RLW employers
- Increased procurement spend in the local economy/with Belfast based suppliers (via the collaborative network/anchors working group)

- Increased awareness of and readiness for impending legislative changes (e.g Good Employment Bill & LRA Charter/Guidance)
- Increased proportion of organisations monitoring (and reducing) their carbon emissions
- Increased proportion of organisations engaging in local community activity

3.9 While there has been an emphasis on refining the current operational processes and the assessment process in particular, the Belfast Business Promise delivers through a number of functions:

- Strategic and employer engagement
- Assessment and validation of the pledges and practice
- Learning and capacity building
- BBP Network and collaboration, shared learning opportunities
- Visibility and recognition

3.10 Across these functions opportunities are being identified to mainstream and integrate within existing programmes, for example Learning & Capacity building could largely be delivered through existing business support and growth programmes, Go Succeed, employability and skills programmes etc. Given that re-focusing, a key challenge has been to identify the unique added value and clear purpose of the refined Business Promise approach, working alongside business-as-usual both for council teams and for other external partners.

Strategic alignment

3.11 There is an opportunity to deliver positively on the city's ambition for inclusive growth. For example, the BBP has the potential to be the city's inclusive growth charter and governance vehicle to harmonise procurement practice across anchors and unlock shared, evidence-based outcomes in fair work, social value and climate action as well as economic outcomes.

3.12 Building on both the Belfast Promise and the Council's Sustainable Procurement Policy, there is an opportunity to create a shared structure through which anchor institutions can collectively raise expectations on fair work, prompt payment, modern slavery prevention, social value delivery and climate action.

3.13 An Anchor Procurement Working Group could share best practice, take advantage of collaborative opportunities and coordinate engagement with local SMEs and VCSEs, reducing duplication while increasing impact. This partnership approach also enhances transparency,

fosters innovation in supply chains and supports the Belfast Agenda's ambitions for inclusive growth, local competitiveness and a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

- 3.14 Many of the anchor organisations in the city are regional bodies, guided by CPD and NI Public Procurement Policy, therefore realistic expectations will need to be set; however, the output of the Anchor Procurement Working Group -the creation of the Belfast City Procurement Framework - could provide a coherent, city-wide approach that strengthens value for money by aligning economic, ethical, social and environmental standards across all major public institutions.
- 3.15 Drawing on examples in Leeds and Birmingham, there may be potential to establish Anchor working Groups to focus on each of BBP pledges/outcomes such as Inclusive Recruitment and Employment Practice; Climate and Working with our Communities.

Options assessment

- 3.16 In considering the way forward with the BBP, three options have been considered in detail (as outlined in Appendix 2) offering varying levels of assurance and robustness for those organisations involved in the Belfast Business Promise. In summary they include:

<p>Option 1 Good Practice Guidance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of advice/guidance • Raising awareness of and access to BCC programmes
<p>Option 2 Good Practice Plus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced approach to providing guidance as well as some level of assurance/validation for high impact/priority sectors. • Flexibility to adopt and target specific high impact/priority sectors • Scope to strengthen the Network and support the development of Anchor Procurement Working Group
<p>Option 3 Full Validation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality assurance in terms of commitments, however resource intensive – especially for SMEs

- 3.17 To date, a significant amount of effort has gone into building a robust level of accreditation and assurance, developing officer expertise, raising awareness and managing expectations of BBP Partners involved in the process and those organisations signed up. A key benefit of the initiative programme has been the ability of businesses to come together to network and share good practice and support. It has been noted that for organisations to fully realise the reputational benefits of being associated with the BBP, will require an enhanced focus on communications and marketing and monitoring and evaluation.
- 3.18 In considering these options, it is recommended for Members consideration, that option 2 be adopted as the preferred way forward. This would result in the following changes being brought forward which we believe offers greater potential to scale, provides flexibility to adopt approach and focus depending on size of business, enhances the added value to specific business sectors/cohorts and ultimately enhance the delivery of the desired and outcomes.
- Reducing from 8 to 5 pledge framework (attached at Appendix 3)
 - Scaling the pledge commitments to better fit organisational size (micro, small, medium and large) and clarify the assessment verification and validation requirements. This will increase transparency and manage expectations and officer time.
 - Simplifying the language to make it more business focused.
 - Introducing a signatory stage removing the barriers to entry and enabling scaling.
 - Increasing the onus on the organisations to self-assess against the 5-pledge framework and progress. Crucially this will reduce the administrative support required from BCC
 - Enhanced focus on the support using existing business support interventions and programmes; engagement, assessment and recognition.
 - Strengthening the BBP Network, developing the opportunities for peer-to-peer mentoring, networking, shared learning and increasing collaboration amongst employers on key issues/topics for example through working groups or communities of practice. This also takes account of the pilot evaluation feedback on what the 'early adopters' felt would be beneficial.
 - Providing the vehicle to leverage the potential for strategic collaboration amongst anchor and strategic employers in the city, with an initial focus on the creation of an Belfast Procurement Working Group.

Next Steps

- 3.19 The following next steps are proposed for the coming months to support the delivery of option 2 - 'Good Practice Plus', laying the foundations for an anchors working group:
- Further develop and engage on the 5 Pledge framework.
 - Develop a BBP information pack that outlines the assessment process, roles, expectations and ambition.
 - Defining the self-assessment process and outlining the associated requirements.
 - Map and integrate/align BBP learning and capacity building opportunities to enable roll-out of interventions via existing Council/Partner resources, where possible.
 - Revisit the role and membership of the BBP Internal Working Group to ensure the Council leads by example.
 - Develop key messages/lines to take and associated communications plan.
 - Develop the distinct BBP membership offer for businesses signing up.
 - Building on the BBP ethos, provide a platform to progress and align CSR efforts and to develop a city proposition to deliver greater social impact/value for communities.
 - As discussed at the Social Policy Working Group, Members will note that engagement is planned with a number of key anchor/larger organisations in relation to the potential approach to CSR. Work is also underway with the Community Foundation NI to explore hosting a roundtable discussion around the potential opportunities around Philanthropy funding.
 - Consideration given to the future delivery structure with consideration given to what can be mainstreamed and what needs bespoke / dedicated focus.
 - Development of an engagement strategy which sets out our core audiences and methods of engagement.
- 3.20 In addition, conversations will continue with key officers to explore the opportunity around a Belfast Anchors Procurement Working Group, and in relation to other Pledges, to support collaboration, innovative approaches and share good practice. Cognisance will also be given to existing forums to ensure it creates value for the city. This could also be used to enhance and strengthen the reach of relevant corporate initiatives such as EVAWG or accessible city.

4.0 Financial & Resource Implications

There is no financial or resource implications contained within this report.

5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

The Belfast Business Promise has been designed to be inherently inclusive and is not expected to have any adverse impacts on the Section 75 categories. It was therefore screened out with mitigating actions to monitor the roll-out of the programme, the team continues to tie in and promote specific issues/events such as Disability Awareness Day, Mental Health Awareness Week etc. and work with its Partner organisations such as Equality Commission and NOW Group. No equality issues have been reported.”

During discussion, in response to a Member’s question in relation to the reduction in pledges, the Director advised that there had been no dilution of the pledges, they had been mapped and some had been merged together.

After discussion, the Committee agreed the recommendations as outlined in the report.

Belfast Region City Deal Update

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 This report has been prepared to provide a progress update on activity within the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD).

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the latest progress in respect of the BRCD.
- Approve continued participation in the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund at a cost of £11,500 which is within current BRCD budgets.

3.0 Background

3.1 The Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) is a £1billion programme of investment that was signed in December 2021 and represents a new way of working between central and local government and regional partners to support the delivery of:

“Inclusive economic growth that delivers more and better jobs, a positive impact on the most deprived communities and a balanced spread of benefits across the region.”

- 3.2 This report sets out progress to date across all pillars of investment and an update on a possible extension to the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund.

Main report

Investment to Date

- 3.3 By the end of Q3, the BRCD PMO had paid out £75.4m for projects across all pillars of the programme with a year-to-date spend of £33.7m.

3.4 Innovation Pillar – 5 projects progressing.

- The £64m [iREACH Health](#) project - a world-class integrated clinical research innovation centre led by Queen's University - is progressing well. The completion of construction phase at 2 buildings on either side of the Lisburn Road close to the City Hospital is expected to complete in December 2026 and March 2027.
- Meanwhile, [AMIC's Factory of the Future](#) - a place for companies to discover the latest manufacturing advancements and technologies - is also nearing a significant milestone, with the facility at Global Point Newtownabbey now completing and with staff beginning to move to the facility.
- Progress continues at Ulster University's [CDHT](#)- a £42m quality Centre for Digital Healthcare Technology with associated 'living labs' in the areas of cardiology, diabetes, respiratory and stroke. Imminent sub-funding and collaboration agreements with BHSC, will now also enable the Living Labs element of this project to move ahead. Demolition works are ongoing; the Council has also now granted Planning permission and procurement for the main contractor is in progress.
- [Momentum One Zero](#) - a global innovation centre at Queen's University - is expanding its facilities to build on its existing Global Research Institutes (Deep Tech, Agri and Health) and house 550+ experts from across many organisations to solve business and societal problems through research and innovation in advanced digital technologies and data. Construction commenced in September and completion is expected by November 2027 - a Memorandum of Understanding with the AI Competency Centre has now also been agreed.
- Meanwhile [Studio Ulster](#) is well into its operational phase and, with the first productions filmed using the facilities already having been shown on BBC during the festive period, including Titanic Sinks Tonight.

3.5 Digital Pillar - three new OBCs approved, two projects progressing, one project concluded

- Outline Business Cases (OBCs) have been approved for 5G Research, additional investment into the successful 5G Innovation Regions programme, and the Regional Contracts for Innovation initiative; all projects have begun and are awaiting final funding contracts, and the AI Grants business case is close to submission.
- The [Digital Twin Centre](#) - which creates virtual representations of physical assets to bridge the gap between physical and digital worlds as testbeds to optimise performance, reduce costs, and predict outcomes - has now successfully completed its first Industry Accelerator with strong SME engagement and has launched its first Academic Accelerator call.
- Work on [i4C](#) - a new innovation and clean technology centre for SMEs at St Patrick's Barracks site in Ballymena - is now well advanced, and RIBA Stage 2 almost complete, positioning the project to draw down BRCD funding. An operator has also been appointed for the facility.
- Meanwhile, the c.£1m fund for innovation in immersive technology, [Augment the City](#) has concluded successfully with a final showcase in Belfast City Hall in January, where the final three entrepreneurs presented their prototypes, and provided their insights into the futureproofing of the tourism sector.

3.6 Tourism and Regeneration Pillar – 5 projects progressing

- The [Bangor Waterfront](#) programme has been designed to return Bangor to a destination of choice. Concept design and survey work for Ballyholme Yacht Club and Pickie Fun Park has been advancing with RIBA 2 complete for both projects and public consultation, in advance of submission of planning applications, underway. The procurements for the design teams for the Urban Waterfront and Public Realm and Marine projects are ongoing.
- Building on an already popular destination in Hillsborough Castle, [Destination Royal Hillsborough](#), will further enhance the existing offering to create a world class heritage village. An OBC Addendum has been submitted for approval and planning permission for the public realm element of the programme was granted in January 2026, allowing designs to be finalised. Key surveys works and concept designs are being progressed for the other elements of the programme in tandem with Addendum approval.

- In Newry, the Newry regeneration programme aims to increase footfall within Newry City Centre. The contractor for the [Newry Theatre and Conference Centre](#) has been appointed and construction is due to start in June 2026. NMDDC has received a pre-action protocol letter in relation to the Civic Hub element of the Newry regeneration programme and NMDDC are responding through the appropriate legal channels.
- Both of [Mid and East Antrim Council's](#) tourism projects - Carrickfergus and Gobbins - are progressing through the detailed design stages of project development and works to procure an Operator is ongoing.
- [Belfast Stories](#) achieved a major milestone with DoF approval of its OBC, and work is now focused on finalising the Contract for Funding and completing the subsidy control assessment.

3.7 Infrastructure Pillar – 1 project progressing, 2 projects on hold

- DoF approval for the [BRT Phase 2](#) has been granted to DfI who have now appointed Atkins to progress design development.
- Procurement of a Contractor for [Lagan Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge](#) is ongoing and DfI are considering the implications of the A5 judgement on all DfI projects.
- Following completion of a public consultation exercise for [Newry Southern Relief Road](#) earlier this year, DfI are awaiting a decision on whether a public inquiry will be required for the project.

3.8 Employability and Skills Pillar – 5 Skills Assessments completed

Five [cross-deal skills assessments](#) for the BRCD's key investment sectors have now been completed. Following this work we have engaged with project promoters and partners to consider how we might address the challenges with a view to agreeing an action plan. Individual projects across all pillars are also demonstrating good progress towards boosting inclusion, growth and digital futures through their own skills activities. Examples of these are included below:

Skills for Inclusion

To maximise inclusion, the IREACH Health and Studio Ulster projects are each providing exposure to future career opportunities to students. Meanwhile our own Belfast Stories has introduced pupils from three Belfast schools to the latest design proposals and the design process through Creative Youth workshops.

Skills for Growth

Skills in high value, high growth sectors are being promoted through both AMIC's IT apprenticeships and the Momentum 1.0 Internship Programme which offers intern opportunities in cutting edge, deep tech innovation projects.

Skills for Digital Futures

Led by BCC's City Innovation office, a BRCD funded AI Capability Building Workshop programme will aim to increase AI adoption within our six BRCD councils by helping them to identify and prioritise potential AI use cases.

Social Value

At the overall programme level the BRCD also brings additional opportunities such as contributions to social value. Projects across the Programme continue to apply SIB's Buy Social model and to date 16 contracts are committing 14,975 Social Value points, with 8,707 delivered so far. The points include 135 people accessing employment-related opportunities, mainly apprenticeships, work experience, student placements, and trainee roles, alongside careers events, mentoring, training, and site visits.

Environmental benefits are being achieved through training, awareness activities, volunteering, and reuse of surplus materials, while health and wellbeing outcomes are supported through awareness campaigns, training, assessments, and community donations.

The PMO will be considering future workshops in areas such as Benefits, Employability and Skills and other challenges and opportunities facing partners.

Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF)

The Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) concept was initially developed in response to the low levels of innovation and digital transformation taking place across the region - particularly among the small business community. Following the development of a business case In September 2022, on behalf of all 11 councils, £6m capital funding was awarded from the City Deal Complementary Fund with a further £1.1m from The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). At that point it was agreed that fund would be administered by Newry Mourne and Down District Council on behalf of Northern Ireland, and a revenue contribution from each council was agreed for the lifetime of the project up to March 2026.

The project is now nearing completion and has experienced a high level of demand and depending on the outcome of the current funding call there is an option to extend to a further call as long as any commitments do not exceed the overall agreed capital budget. This would mean that Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will require a further revenue contribution of £11,500 for the cost of continuing the administration of the fund. This can be accommodated within existing Belfast Region City Deal budgets so there is no additional financial ask. DTF has been very successful in helping to stimulate Digital Transformation and Innovation in small and micro businesses who generally do not have the capital reserves or resources to start to experiment, prototype and deliver new products or services using new and emerging technologies. Committee is therefore asked to approve continued participation in the programme.

3.9 Next Steps

Partners are currently preparing to report back formally on their respective Q4 and Year End positions which will inform the BRCD Annual Report – due to be brought back to the Aug/Sept meeting of this Committee. This will offer a more complete overview of progress and achievements to date.

Financial & Resource Implications

- 3.10 All costs associated with the BRCD are within existing budgets.

Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

- 3.11 The approach taken to develop the City Deal has been subject to independent equality screening and rural proofing and states that;

'BRCD is inherently inclusive, affording an opportunity for the region to grow in a way that will benefit the economy of Northern Ireland as a whole, thereby enhancing the lives and well-being of its citizens. If during further development of the programme it becomes apparent that there may be an adverse impact on certain groups or communities then the partnership commits to carrying out further Section 75 work and including screening and EQIAs as and when appropriate.'

The Committee:

- Noted the latest progress in respect of the BRCD;
- Approved continued participation in the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund at a cost of £11,500 which is within current BRCD budgets; and
- Under the Infrastructure Pillar, agreed to write to the Minister of Infrastructure to:
 - raise concern in the projects which had been outlined as ‘on hold’ in the report, clarify the Lagan Cycle and Pedestrian Bridge and urge the Minister to progress the project as a positive Active Travel Project and benefit to the Departments Climate Change responsibilities.
 - in relation to BRT Phase 2 project, request information when the design development would be completed, in particular regards to Ormeau Avenue.

Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

The Director City and Organisational Strategy presented the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform members about the public consultation on the [Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare \(ELC\) Strategy](#).

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 The Committee is requested to:

- I. Note that the Department of Education is seeking views on the draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (ELC).
- II. Approve the draft consultation response (Appendix 1) to be submitted by Belfast City Council to the public consultation. Given the deadline for submission of responses is 24 March 2026, SP&R Committee is asked to give delegated authority to officers to submit the agreed response noting that it is subject to full Council ratification on 01 April 2026.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Background

The draft ELC Strategy is the Executive’s draft plan for more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare. The strategy is a comprehensive and ambitious

framework designed to transform early years provision. It reflects a joined-up approach across departments and communities, recognising the critical role of early years in shaping lifelong outcomes. The draft strategy builds on work already undertaken to enhance early learning and childcare provision across the region and seeks to consolidate and expand on these achievements. The strategy is structured around three core themes which together seek to provide a holistic approach to improving early learning and childcare provision.

The PfG 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most' includes a commitment to *'provide more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare opportunities to support children's development and ease financial pressures for working families. This must complement existing support available through Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare (TFC). We also need to ensure that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable.'*

The draft strategy is the Executive's plan for delivering on this commitment. Achieving the objectives set out in the strategy will require input from a range of departments. It will also contribute to a range of policy priorities through increased labour force participation and economic growth, poverty reduction, gender equality and social mobility.

3.2 Notice of Motion

A Notice of Motion was raised by Cllr Mal O'Hara in 2018 stating 'This council agrees to explore options and take practical steps, including through the Belfast Agenda and City Deal, with a view to creating a childcare strategy for the city that will encourage greater maternal employment, redress gender inequalities in the workplace, increase GVA in the city and, most importantly, improve educational and social outcomes for our children.'

3.3 Belfast Agenda

The core objectives of the draft ELC Strategy are aligned to the 'call to action' outlined in the Belfast Agenda, seeking partners to provide collective leadership to the delivery of a Childcare Strategy which would aim to deliver extended, affordable and high-quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged three to four (Belfast Agenda, p.10).

3.4 Core Themes and Outcomes

The strategy is structured around three themes with associated outcomes and objectives which together seek to provide a holistic approach to improving early learning and childcare provision.

Theme 1: Supporting Children in Their Early Years

This theme focuses on what the strategy will deliver for children. It concentrates on improving ELC experiences through expansion and enhancement of provision, the promotion of high quality ELC environments and targeted support for those facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.

Outcome

All children get the developmental support needed in their early years to ensure the best start in life, including those facing disadvantage.

Objectives

1.1 Provide 22.5 hours pre-school education per week for children in their target preschool year.

1.2 Expand services for children facing disadvantage.

1.3 Expand developmental provision for children aged 2–3 (in their pre-school year).

1.4 Promote high-quality provision across all ELC providers.

Theme 2: Supporting Families with their Children's Learning and Childcare Costs

This theme focuses on what the strategy will do for families and carers. It seeks to make childcare more affordable and ensure better availability and accessibility of support and information, empowering parents to make the best choices for themselves and their family.

Outcomes

Families can access more affordable childcare that meets their needs.

Families are better equipped to understand and support their child's learning.

Objectives

2.1 Make childcare more affordable.

2.2 Improve the information and support available for families.

Theme 3: Supporting the Early Years Sector and Workforce

This theme sets out the vital role of the ELC sector and workforce in delivering change. It focuses on improving sustainability and building capacity, while promoting fair pay and professional recognition.

Outcomes

A more stable and sustainable ELC sector with a highly trained and valued workforce.

More inclusive and accessible early years provision for children with additional needs.

Objectives

3.1 Build the sustainability and capacity of the ELC sector.

3.2 Enhance accessible ELC for children with additional needs.

3.3 Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce.

3.5 Implementation Timeframe and Financial Investment

85 actions within the draft strategy have been categorised into three groups: those commenced in the past 2 years for which £80m funding has already been provided by the Executive (Category 1), those proposed to do next (over the 4-year period April 2026 to March 2030) (Category 2) and those which may take longer to implement (currently scheduled from April 2030 to March 2034) (Category 3). It will require significant additional investment to deliver the proposed actions with an estimated requirement of £500m to deliver those actions programmed for the next four years (April 2026 to March 2030). Costs would be recurring and increase in future years to sustain progress. Additional budget would be required to implement the longer-term proposals.

An Implementation Plan for category 2 actions, up to April 2030, will be produced once the consultation on the draft strategy is completed, and a budget has been agreed by the Executive. This will detail the actions which will be taken forward under each objective, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), delivery partners, timescale and estimated costs. A Progress Report will be published by DE and presented to the Executive on an annual basis from the commencement of implementation.

3.6 New initiatives and commitments

The strategy aspires to subsidise over 50% of childcare costs for working families by April 2032 as well as provide universal full-time pre-school education, strongly positioning Northern Ireland amongst the leading international models of support. It will also see the introduction of an Early Years Curriculum Framework to promote consistent content and pedagogy across early years and childcare providers and there is a longer-term objective to expand developmental provision to all 2–3-year-olds.

Alongside these new initiatives, there are commitments to invest in core services and provide a more stable funding environment for existing early years programmes. There are specific initiatives for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) and a plan to strengthen the childcare workforce, both centre-based provision and home-based childminders.

3.7 BCC Draft Consultation Response

The draft response, attached at Appendix 1, welcomes the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and endorses the objectives and actions outlined to deliver more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare.

Theme 1

- Supportive of extending funded pre-school places on basis of 22.5 hours per week to support child development outcomes and parental employment. However, the model fails to adequately support parents who work full-time hours, atypical hours, and lone parents and may risk reinforcing gender inequality in the labour market. Furthermore, access to places alone will not ensure uptake; targeted support will be required particularly in disadvantaged communities where families may lack confidence or trust in formal systems.
- The action to remove the legislative requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school

places is concerning and should be reconsidered. It risks diluting targeted access for those who would benefit from it the most.

- Restricting funded provision to one pre-school year misses an opportunity to support labour market participation earlier and maximise the opportunity to keep parents (predominantly women) in work.
- Supportive of actions to expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs. The inclusion of child poverty indicators could be considered as part of the assessment of where additional Sure Start provision should be concentrated.
- Supportive of actions to extend developmental provision for children aged 2-3 (in their pre-pre-school year) and the prioritisation of children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.
- Supportive of actions to promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers. However, there is a lack of detail on how these proposals will be implemented.
- Consideration should be given to capital funding to enable the physical expansion of Irish Medium and Pre-School infrastructure to meet growing demand of children and families who use Irish as their first language.
- BCC's Irish Medium Employment Academies are ideally placed to meet the rapid growth of the Irish Medium education sector.

Theme 2

- The actions to make childcare more affordable are welcomed however the proposed subsidy scheme could be further enhanced with planned increases introduced earlier.
- Reducing childcare costs is fundamental to inclusive economic growth, particularly for women and lone parents' labour market participation.
- While the proposed policy identifies average daily childcare fees and trends over time, it does not explore regional cost variations and demand levels. The Belfast average monthly childcare cost is 28% higher than the NI median of £225.
- Focus on enhancing information provision to families is to be welcomed. The needs of those who may face additional barriers should be considered when designing systems and digital platforms to ensure inclusion and accessibility.

Theme 3

- Actions to build the sustainability and capacity of the ELC sector are strongly supported and will be critical to delivering the wider ambitions of the strategy. Over the last eight years Belfast City Council have successfully delivered several employment academies and upskilling in relation to childcare including, classroom assistants, SEN, Irish Medium, Deaf people and people with hearing loss and welcome opportunities to further invest in this area.
- Actions to enhance accessible early learning and childcare for children with additional needs are to be welcomed. However, there is no specific reference to deaf children or sign language development. Evidence suggests that a deaf child will benefit from sign language learning from an early age.
- Approved Home Childcare should be promoted more widely particularly to families with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) and to those who work atypical hours who find it more challenging to find mainstream settings that meet their children's needs.
- The Draft Sign Language Bill for NI has a clause (Clause no 2.2 (b)) for free sign language classes for deaf children and young people. Public authorities who work with families with deaf children and young people will have a statutory duty to provide sign language support and classes. The ELC Strategy would benefit by including this as an additional action. The Bill is expected to become law later this year.
- The actions listed to ensure the workforce are skilled and valued are strongly supported. Offering better pay, free training and a full career pathway from entry level to level 5 would help incentivise childcare as a viable career path and address systemic recruitment and retention issues. Ensuring all staff employed by ELC providers funded by Government are paid the Real Living Wage strongly aligns with Belfast City Council's commitment as an employer and procurer and with our Belfast Business Promise Charter.

Financial and Resource Implications

- 3.8 There are no direct implications associated with this report.

Equality or Good Relations Implications

- 3.9 The implementation of the draft ELC strategy presents a significant opportunity to further promote equality of

opportunity and good relations across many Section 75 grounds, and to tackle some of the evident inequalities that continue to persist. While the EQIA appropriately presents the relevant data and highlights some potential impacts, there is opportunity to enhance its value by drawing out potential adverse impacts associated with some actions – specifically that identified in 1.1: proposal to remove the statutory requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school places. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate the means to disaggregate data (both quantitative and qualitative) by Section 75 considerations during implementation.

There are no direct implications associated with this report.

3.10 Rural Needs Assessment

The Rural Needs Assessment acknowledges that rural areas can face unique challenges in accessing ELC services, including limited availability of registered providers, longer travel distances to existing settings, and fewer subsidised places compared to urban centres. These barriers may result in reduced participation in early education, increased reliance on informal or unregistered care, and constrained employment opportunities for parents—particularly women. The strategy seeks to improve access to early learning and childcare (ELC) services in rural areas by addressing the core barriers of accessibility, affordability, and quality.

There are no direct implications associated with this report.

3.11 Child Rights Impact Assessment

The ELC Strategy is expected to have a broadly positive impact on children and young people’s rights, particularly in relation to:

- Article 6 (right to life, survival and development),
- Article 18 (support for working parents),
- Article 23 (children with a disability)
- Article 27 (adequate standard of living), and
- Article 28 (right to education).
- Article 31 (leisure, play and culture)

The strategy aims to reduce inequalities by improving access to affordable, high-quality ELC, with targeted support for disadvantaged groups including children from low-income families, those with SEN/D, and newcomer or minority ethnic communities.

There are no direct implications associated with this report.”

During discussion, several Councillors suggested additions to the consultation response, which included:

Theme one:

- Concern in the description of 22.5hrs/week term as full time.
- Emphasise that parents have to keep places for mornings or afternoon and non-term time - reducing parenting choice.
- Request further detail on how parents move to full time places in the pre-school year.
- Highlight the need for capital support for IM education provision and support for non-traditional pre-school provision.

Theme two:

- Highlight the high costs and fee increases and a commitment to working with UKG to reform it.
- Raise capped support and address earnings cap for both parents.
- Call for DE to engage further with UKG on the issue.
- Under question 5 – highlight the need for clear methodology used to capture the average costs.

Theme three:

- Highlight the need for proposals to improve workforce pay and conditions in the ELC sector.
- Reflect that the Childcare providers are also struggling.
- Highlight the difficulty in the cycle and retention of Level 5 qualified staff in the Irish Medium education sector.

After discussion, the Committee:

- Noted that the Department of Education was seeking views on the draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (ELC);
- Approved the draft consultation response (Appendix 1) and the additions highlighted by the Committee, to be submitted by Belfast City Council to the public consultation. Given the deadline for submission of responses is 24th March 2026, the Committee also delegated authority to officers to submit the agreed response, noting that it was subject to full Council ratification on 1st April, 2026.

Physical Programme and Asset Management

Physical Programme Update including Capital Programme 2026/27

The Committee considered the report which provided an update on the 2026/27 Capital Programme and associated capital financing, as well as requests for stage movement approvals under the Capital Programme.

During discussion, the Committee raised a number of additional improvements to be investigated.

After discussion, the Committee:

Capital Programme Movements -

- **Parks and Open Space Improvement Programme** – Agreed that the Programme for improvements to Parks and Open Spaces for 2025/2026 and 2026/2027 be moved to Stage 3 – Committed with a maximum allocation of up to £1.5million (£750k – Year 1 and £750k- Year 2) and noted that a rolling allocation of £750k had been agreed going forwards and agreed that the scope of the Ballyhackamore Parklet improvements covered the existing green areas and that the pathway in Gilnahirk Park be added, subject to budget availability.
- **Bridges Improvement Programme** - Agreed that the project be moved to *Stage 3 – Committed* with a maximum allocation of up to £240,000 for Year 1 and agreed the annual rolling programme of bridge improvements of £240,000 per year thereafter.
- **IT Programme — Digitising Audio-Visual (AV) Technology** - Noted that a satisfactory tender return had been received and that the Director of Finance had confirmed that this project was within the affordability limits of the Council and agreed that a maximum of up to £225,000 be allocated.
- **City Hall – Security Improvements** - Agreed that the project be moved to *Stage 2 – Uncommitted* to allow options to be fully worked up, with further detail to be brought back to Committee in due course.
- **Artificial Lighting in Parks Sites** - Agreed that the project be added to the Capital Programme at *Stage 1 – Emerging* to allow a business case to be developed.
- **Procurement process for Parks and Open Spaces Improvement Programme, Bridges Programme, Pitches Programme and Leisure Programme** - agreed that any necessary procurement processes (including the invitation of tenders and/or the use of appropriate ‘framework’ arrangements) be initiated for these Programmes as required with contracts to be awarded on the basis of most economically advantageous tenders received and full commitment to deliver.
- **Belfast Zoo/Old Zoo** – agreed that Member site visits be undertaken to a range of other Zoo locations to inform the ongoing work in respect of the Zoo.

Capital Programme and Capital Financing 2026/27

- noted the update on Capital Financing as outlined in 3.10 of the report and the update on the Capital Programme for 2026/27 at 3.11 and in Appendix 1.
- agreed to hold Party Group Briefings to update Members on the status of projects along with the emerging implications for future capital investment decisions and in particular the potential impact on the future district rate in line with the development of the Medium-Term Financial Plan and linked to the ongoing Transformation and Efficiency agenda.

The Committee also noted that, following requests by several Members, further updates would be provided on:

- Girdwood Indoor Sports Facility including financing and health and safety works at the Girdwood Community Hub;
- Strangford Avenue Playing Fields potential play park;
- Cavehill Park proposals and potential for mobile coffee unit; and
- Vesting process of rear gate at Cherryvale Park.

Asset Management (2)

The Committee:

i) Derrriaghy Glen Linear Park - Disposal

- Approved the submission of an application to the Department for Communities (DfC) to seek approval for a disposal at less than best value for the land currently owned by the Council at Derrriaghy Glen Linear Park.
- Agreed to the disposal of the lands subject to receiving DfC consent to a less than best value disposal at nil consideration.

ii) Westlands – Acquisition of Land

- Approved the purchase of land adjacent to Westlands from Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to facilitate the development of a new community facility and MUGA.

iii) Alexandra Park – Licence and Easement

- Approved a licence for works and easement with JAMDAC Developments Ltd for the installation of a storm drain and associated headwall within Alexandra Park.

iv) 35-39 Royal Avenue – New Short-Term Lease

- Approved the granting of a 9-month lease to ResStock3D for 35-39 Royal Avenue at an initial rent of £1,600 per month with the first month rent free.

Update on Area Working Groups

The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting of South Belfast Area Working Group of 23rd February, the North Belfast Area Working Group of 25th February and the West Area Working Group of 26th February.

The Committee agreed to refer the decision of the East Area Working Group of 5th March in relation to the reallocation of the Local Investment Fund proposals to a special meeting and approved the remainder of the minute.

Finance, Procurement and Performance

Contracts Update

The Committee considered a report which sought approval for tenders, contract modifications to contract term and Single Tender Actions (STA) over £30,000.

The Committee:

- Approved the public advertisement of tenders as per Standing Order 37a detailed in
- Appendix 1 (**Table 1**);
- Approved the award of STAs in line with Standing Order 55 exceptions as detailed in
- Appendix 1 (**Table 2**); and
- Approved the modification of the contract as per Standing Order 37a detailed in Appendix 1 (**Table 3**).

Table 1: Competitive Tenders

Title of Tender	Proposed Contract Duration	Est. Max Contract Value	SRO	Short description of goods / services	On published pipeline (Y/N)	Prior Committee approval (Y/N) If Y name Committee & Date	External Funding (Y/N)
Adobe licences	Up to 1 year	£55,000	P Gribben	Widely used software used by staff across the Council. This tender will consolidate all current Adobe licences into a single contract.	N	N	N
Provision of Travel Services	Up to 5 years	£495,000	S McNicholl	To support Officers and Members when booking travel and accommodation as part of their duties. Contract value includes all forecasted spend on travel related costs plus any supplier management fees.	N	N	N
The supply of Original Equipment Manufacturer 'OEM' parts for range of vehicles	Up to 5 years	£2,750,000	D Sales	Fleet are to amalgamate current separate contracts into one OEM spare parts tender (using Lots). Covers parts for DAF, Iveco, Scarab, Dennis Eagle, Holder/Schmidt, Fiat and John Deere and supports warranty cover for these OEMs. Some current contracts require short extensions to align expiry	Y	N	N

Title of Tender	Proposed Contract Duration	Est. Max Contract Value	SRO	Short description of goods / services	On published pipeline (Y/N)	Prior Committee approval (Y/N) If Y name Committee & Date	External Funding (Y/N)
				dates – see Table 2.			
Supply and Erection of Street Nameplates	Up to 4 years	£240,000	K Bentley	To supply and erect street nameplates within Belfast	Y	N	N
Digitisation of Building Control Records	Up to 4 years	£140,000	K Bentley	Digitisation of building control hard copy files to include application forms, plans, specifications and reports	Y	N	N
Commissioning of case work and advice programme for Communities from Minority Ethnic Background	Up to 3 years	£760,000	D Sales	Funding has been received from Executive Office who have asked all Councils to commission advice services for new communities. Initial funding £380,000 for 18 months secured. Extension option for a further £380,000/ 18 months to be included, subject to further funding being secured.	N	Funding/approach approved by Shared City Partnership & SP&R in Dec 25.	Y
North Foreshore Maintenance Contracts	Up to 5 years	£350,000	S Grimes	To provide a Term Service Contract for maintenance works (both scheduled and reactionary/emergency) at the North Foreshore – Giant's Park site. The contract reflects the unique nature and conditions of the site as a former landfill site. The emergency works (if required) will provide a contractor response within 1 hour and works within 4 hours of notification – this is particularly important for the services associated with the landfill capping, leachate	N	N	N

Title of Tender	Proposed Contract Duration	Est. Max Contract Value	SRO	Short description of goods / services	On published pipeline (Y/N)	Prior Committee approval (Y/N) If Y name Committee & Date	External Funding (Y/N)
				and gas ancillaries.			
Insurance Valuation Services	Up to 3 years	£90,000	T Wallace	This specialist service ensures all council assets are insured for the correct amount to avoid the risk of underinsurance in the event of a claim. All assets assessed over a 3-year programme.	Y	N	N
Strategic oversight & support for the development of the Belfast Vulnerability Model and transfer of learning to other community planning priorities	Up to 2 years	£100,000	J Tully	Building upon the success of the initial phases of the Complex Lives initiative, there is still a need for and benefit of independent advisory and strategic support. The additional capacity, experience and objectivity provided helped translate our ambitions into an actionable programme, roadmap and helped shape the emerging operating model and enabling partnership.	N	N	N

Table 2: Single Tender Actions

Title	Duration	Est. Max Contract Value	SRO	Description	Supplier	STA Reason
Hire of The Belfast SOS Bus for Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann	Up to 2 years	£98,000	K Forster	The Belfast SOS Bus provides a mobile, non-judgemental safe space on the streets, offering a range of support including first aid,	The Belfast SOS Bus	3

				<p>mental health intervention, and harm reduction. It offers practical assistance like refreshments, transport home, and referrals to other services. There is no other provider of this service for Belfast. STA approved at Dec 25 SP&R to cover Fleadh 26. Re-submitted for approval to cover up to 2 years (i.e. Fleadh 26 with option for Fleadh 27)</p>		
<p>Fleadh Cheoil Belfast 2026 Volunteer Services (Phase 2)</p>	<p>Up to 1 year</p>	<p>£177,472</p>	<p>D Martin</p>	<p>Volunteer Now is the only organisation in NI with experience and capacity of co-ordinating and managing a complex, high profile, volunteering programme of the scale of the Fleadh (approx. 1200-1500 volunteers).</p> <p>A STA with Volunteer Now was approved by SP&R in Aug 25 (Phase 1) to cover the initial planning stages for Fleadh 26. This STA is to cover the next delivery phase. A further STA will be required with Volunteer Now to cover cost of uniforms. Costs for this will be finalised shortly.</p>	<p>Volunteer Now</p>	<p>3</p>
<p>Hire of Road Train for Belfast Zoo (6-month trial)</p>	<p>Up to 6 months</p>	<p>£75,000</p>	<p>K Forster</p>	<p>With current Zoo Mobile approaching end of life, the Zoo would like to trial the use of a hop-on hop-off accessible road train which would improve accessibility and the customer experience at the Zoo. Electric Events are the only company that has a road train available for hire at a reasonable cost.</p>	<p>Electric Events</p>	<p>3</p>

Table 3: Modification to Contract

Title of Contract	Original Contract Duration & Value	Modification – Period & Value	SRO	Description	Supplier
Provision of asylum support and capacity building programme (T2605)	Up to 1 year & £100k	Additional 1 year and £70k	J Girvan	<p>In 2024 Council approved the approach to procure a training and capacity resource to support wider community and voluntary organisations to enhance their ability and skills to provide services to minority ethnic communities. Following an open tender exercise Law Centre NI were appointed (only bidder). Additional funding has been received from the Executive Office to support services for asylum seekers and other new Communities in Belfast. At the Shared City Partnership in December members agreed to recommend to SP&R to have a further phase of this work. This has also been endorsed by the Executive Office.</p> <p>An extension of 1 year is recommended with the supplier to deliver this next phase. The marketplace has not changed since the original tender and, given the requirement</p>	Law Centre Northern Ireland

Title of Contract	Original Contract Duration & Value	Modification – Period & Value	SRO	Description	Supplier
				for the contractor to be accredited at providing immigration advice, it would be expected that should a further tendering process be undertaken that other bidders would not respond.	
Provision of Building Management and Operations at 2 Royal Avenue - T2583	Up to 18 months & £326k	Additional 6 month and £113,108	D Martin	The extension of 2RA's operator contract will allow the venue to remain as a primary venue for both Fleadh and Culture Night 2026, whilst retaining the operational knowledge and expertise that MayWe have gained as operators. Extension until 31 December 2026 will also allow the annual Winter's Den (Council-funded Christmas programming) and Santa's Post Office (Belfast One funded) to remain in the venue in December 2026.	MayWe
Provision of Strategic Oversight and Support for Complex Lives and Community Planning – T2433	Up to 32 months & £200k	3 months & £30k	J Tully	The Council intends to commission a new tender for the independent advisory and strategic support for the widening of both focus and impact of the Complex Lives initiative through the creation of a Belfast Vulnerability Model; however, a short 3-month extension is	Marsh Public Service Solutions

Title of Contract	Original Contract Duration & Value	Modification – Period & Value	SRO	Description	Supplier
				requested whilst this tender exercise is progressed. The extension will maintain momentum and drive, retain the commitment and involvement of partners as well as facilitate the effective transfer of knowledge and experience.	
Supply of Scarab OEM vehicles parts (T2304)	Up to 3 years & £165k	Additional 3 months & £10k	S Leonard	Extend the contract expiry date by 3 months to align expiry dates with the new OEM spare parts tender – see table 1.	McCreath Taylor Ltd
Supply of DAF OEM vehicles parts (T2312)	Up to 3 years & £150k	Additional 3 months & £9.5k	S Leonard	Extend the contract expiry date by 3 months to align expiry dates with the new OEM spare parts tender – see table 1.	TBF Thompson (Garvagh) Ltd
Supply of Iveco OEM vehicles parts (T2294)	Up to 3 years & £165k	Additional 3 months & £10k	S Leonard	Extend the contract expiry date by 3 months to align expiry dates with the new OEM spare parts tender – see table 1.	NI Trucks
Facilities Management Service for Mary Peter's Track – T1856	Up to 6 years & £1.06m	Additional 2 months & £30k	S Leonard	The evaluation of the replacement tender for this service is being finalised; however, negotiations with the preferred supplier over the final management fee is ongoing. A 2-month extension will allow for these negotiations to be finalised, and the replacement tender awarded.	Athletics NI

CIPFA Prudential Code Capital Strategy
and Treasury Management Indicators 2026/27

The Director of Finance advised the Committee that the Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 required the Council to adopt the CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities. In doing so, the Council was required to agree a minimum revenue provision policy annually and to set and monitor a series of Prudential Indicators, the key objectives of which were to ensure that, within a clear framework, the capital investment plans of the council are affordable, prudent and sustainable.

He highlighted that a Treasury Management Strategy was presented to the Committee on an annual basis and that was supported by quarterly and year end treasury management reports.

He pointed out that, the Capital Strategy, incorporating the prudential indicators, was included as Appendix A of the report, while the Treasury Management Strategy and treasury management indicators had been included at Appendix B.

He explained that, the comparison of "Gross Debt" to "Capital Financing Requirement (CFR)" was the main indicator of prudence when considering the proposed capital investment plans of the Council. Estimated gross debt should not exceed the CFR for the current year plus two years.

He advised that the Council's estimated gross debt position, illustrated in Table 6, Appendix A of the report, was comfortably within the CFR in the medium term. The Director of Finance therefore considers the estimated levels of gross debt as being prudent.

It was reported that Table 10 (Appendix A) showed the estimated financing costs for capital expenditure as a percentage of the estimated net revenue stream for the Council, based on the medium term. These illustrated that, in the medium term, capital financing costs would represent an average of 5.19% of the Council's net running costs. On this basis the Director of Finance was satisfied that the level of capital expenditure is affordable.

The Director of Finance stated that the Finance Act required the Council to set an affordable borrowing limit, relating to gross debt. The Prudential Code defines the affordable limit as the "Authorised Borrowing Limit" and gross borrowing must not exceed this limit. Table 8 (Appendix A) sets out the recommended "Authorised Borrowing Limit" for the Council as being £128m for 2026/27.

The Committee:

- Noted the contents of the report and the prudential and treasury management indicators included within the appendices to the report;
- agreed the Authorised Borrowing Limit for the Council of £128m for 2026/27;
- Agreed the Treasury Management Strategy for 2026/27, which had been included as Appendix B to the report; and
- Requested that a report on the financing options for Girdwood, be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

Equality and Good Relations

Minutes of Shared City Partnership Meeting

The Committee approved the minutes and recommendations from the Shared City Partnership Meeting held on the 9th March, including:

Members Update

- Shared City Partnership recommends that members note the update provided in the minutes.

Girdwood 10 Year Review

- The Shared City Partnership recommends that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee also note the contents of the report and agree the approach outlined in the contents of the report.

PEACEPLUS – Local Community Action Plan Secretariat Update

- The Shared City Partnership recommends that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee note the contents of the report

Peace Plus Thriving and Peaceful Communities Thematic Update

- The Shared City Partnership recommends that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee note the contents of the report

Peace Plus Celebrating Culture and Diversity Thematic Update

- The Shared City Partnership recommends that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee note the contents of the report

Community Regeneration & Transformation Thematic Update

- The Shared City Partnership recommends that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee note the contents of the report

Any Other Business

- The partnership agreed to move SCP meetings to a Wednesday from May 26, and they would ask the Strategy Policy and Resources Committee to note this change.

Operational Issues

Minutes of the Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

The Committee noted the minutes of the Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum on the 12th March, 2026 and also agreed to an additional illuminate request for a date in April in recognition of Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) Awareness Month.

**Audit and Risk Panel Report and
Minutes of Meeting of 10th March, 2026**

The Committee noted the key issues arising at the meeting and approved the minutes of the Audit and Risk Panel of 10th March, 2026.

**Requests for use of the City Hall and
the provision of Hospitality**

The Committee approved the recommendations as set out below:

NAME OF ORGANISATION	FUNCTION DATE	FUNCTION DESCRIPTION	CRITERIA MET	CHARGES
The Chartered Institute of Management Accountants	9 October 2026	CIMA Awards & Gala Dinner 2026 – reception followed by dinner, awards and entertainment. Numbers attending: 150	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Room Hire of £1250 Any applicable additional charges
WAVE Trauma Centre	14 October 2026	Book Launch: Celebrating 35 Years of WAVE Trauma Centre – Reception followed by dinner and speeches to mark 35 years of cross-community work aiding those who have been directly impacted by ‘the Troubles’ Numbers attending: 65	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No Room Hire Any applicable additional charges <i>With 20% charity deduction applied to final total</i>
SOS Bus N. Ireland	29 October 2026	Volunteer Celebration to mark 20 years event with buffet, speeches and entertainment. SOS Bus provide welfare support, first aid, mental health intervention and community safety to anyone who becomes vulnerable. Numbers attending: 200	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No Room Hire Any applicable additional charges <i>With 20% charity deduction applied to final total</i>
Scouts Northern Ireland	8 January 2027	Chief Scout’s Award and King’s Scout Award Certificate Presentation – Annual awards ceremony Numbers attending - 500	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Room Hire of £1250 Any applicable additional charges <i>With 20% charity deduction applied to final total</i>
Multi-Ethnic Sports & Cultures Northern Ireland (MSCNI)	9 January 2027	NISCANS Awards & Community Reception 2027 – Reception followed by awards ceremony celebrating volunteering, community leadership and positive cross-community relations Numbers attending: 180	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Room Hire of £1250 Any applicable additional charges <i>With 20% charity deduction applied to final total</i>
Glaucoma UK	17 November 2027	UKEGS Dinner - annual conference for clinicians working in the field of glaucoma. Attendees will be ophthalmologists, optometrists, senior research academics, speakers. Numbers attending: 300	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Room Hire of £1250 Any applicable additional charges <i>With 20% charity deduction applied to final total</i>

NAME OF ORGANISATION	FUNCTION DATE	FUNCTION DESCRIPTION	CRITERIA MET	CHARGES
Belfast City Mission	3 December 2027	<p>Christmas Carol service to mark 200th Anniversary – As part of a series of events to mark this significant milestone in organisations history. City Mission is a Christian charity with halls in 14 districts running youth clubs, food banks, after school clubs, and senior citizen meetings.</p> <p>Numbers attending: 200</p>	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Room Hire • Any applicable additional charges <p><i>With 20% charity deduction applied to final total</i></p>

The Committee also noted that information on Linen and other Charges for events at the City Hall would be provided.

Minutes of Language Strategy Working Group of 30th January, 2026

The Committee approved the Minutes of Language Strategy Working Group of the 30th January, 2026

Request for the use of City Hall grounds for various events in July 2026

The Committee considered a report which sought permission for the use of City Hall ground for the following events:

- Use of East and West lawns – USA 250 Concert – 4th July, 2026 by Ulster-Scots Agency
- Use of Cenotaph and Garden of Remembrance – 13th July, 2026 by County Grand Orange Lodge of Belfast
- Use of East and West lawns – Orangefest – 13th July, 2026 by County Grand Orange Lodge of Belfast

The Committee:

1. Authorised the use of the specific areas of City Hall grounds on dates as set out in the report; and
2. Authorised the events to take place on the basis of submission of an event management plan and risk assessment to ensure delivery of a safe public events.

Issues Raised in Advance by Members

Procedures of the Irish Street Sign Consultation (Cllr Long to raise)

Councillor Long summarised his concerns regarding occupants, not on the electoral role, being unable to participate in street surveys in relation to Irish Street Sign Consultations,

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Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Friday, 20th March, 2026

The Committee agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting regarding a review of alternatives as to how surveys for Dual Language Street Signs could be as inclusive and robust as possible.

Chairperson