



Subject:	Events Update
Date:	14 January 2026
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture & Tourism Pièr Morrow, Tourism and Events Development Manager

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted?

Yes

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No

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If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision

After Council Decision

Some time in the future

Never

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Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?

Yes

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No

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1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	The purpose of this report is to provide • post event information on the 2025 Belfast Maritime Festival and planning update for 2027 • post event information on the Christmas Lights Switch and Animation programme • update on the St Patrick's Day Celebrations planning • update on Lord Mayors Day • update on the Events Action Plan • update on America 250
2.0	Recommendations

2.1	Members are asked to • Note the contents of the Maritime Festival post event evaluation and future dates. • Agree support for Sail Training in the lead up to 2027 Maritime festival • Agree Titanic Memorial arrangements and associated expenditure • Note the contents of the Christmas programming & post event evaluation • Note upcoming workshop on festive lighting planning • Note the planning update on St Patrick's Day & Lord Mayor's Day • Note the update on the Events Action Plan • Note the update on America 250 and approve funding allocation
3.0	Main report
3.1	Maritime Festival The Maritime Festival continues to be a Distinctly Belfast experience, the event location lends itself to the integration of the many heritage assets on the Maritime Mile.. The heritage sites were given the opportunity to share marketing opportunities, additional programming or discounts as part of the overall event programme. This year's programme increased the creative ambition yet again by continuing to align with our 10 year Cultural Strategy, engaging an array creative organisations with the vast majority of festival participants from the Belfast area. On Saturday 5 and Sunday 6 September, 57,000 people of all ages enjoyed a celebration of Belfast's rich maritime past and innovative future along the Maritime Mile – from Sailorstown/City Quays to HMS Caroline. Up to 40,000 attended on Saturday, with particularly wet and windy weather affecting Sunday attendance, resulting in less than half of the attendance on the same day of the 2023 event. The wider festival was organised by Belfast City Council's Events team, in partnership with Maritime Belfast Trust, which delivered specific festival activity on the Slipways. The festival was successful in securing £30,000 from Tourism NI (TNI) international events fund. The event was coordinated and implemented through a governance structure consisting of three working groups – marcomms, production/logistics and creative. Dashboard reports were presented to a programme board with senior representatives from Belfast City Council, Belfast Harbour, DfC and Maritime Belfast Trust. All groups met on a monthly basis creating the opportunity to further enhance partner collaboration and strengthen the creative festival profile.
3.2	Maritime Festival: Programming Queens Quay hosted Science Street, a space for hands-on learning and discovery – from marine biology and climate change to biodiversity. Close by was Kids Cove, where younger

visitors enjoyed arts and crafts, circus and dance and pirate play time. 'Maritime Presents Festival of Fools by the Sea' was held at the Arc, a mix of live street circus, theatre and walkabout animation. Close by the Nomadic, the Hamilton Dock Maritime Village celebrated past and future with immersive technology, interactive exhibits and boat building exhibitions.

A music programme & funfair was held at the historic Slipways with an extended Saturday evening programme including the headline Act 'Hothouse Flowers' delivered in partnership with Maritime Belfast Trust. The Slipways Street Food Market was also located here, with local and regional producers showcasing and selling their goods supported by DAERA, through the NI Regional Food Programme (NIRFP).

To complement the musical offering at the Slipways, there were three further performance spaces along the Maritime Mile, extending from Donegall Quay, to the Soundyard, and finally as far as HMS Caroline/Titanic Distillers.

New to the programme for 2025, was 'City Sensations', an Accessible & Inclusive programme of activities held on the Antrim side of the river in the recently developed City Quays Gardens. This engaging area offered a diverse range of entertainment and opportunities to get involved, including captivating on-stage performances, interactive games and activities, and music learning stations for all to enjoy. Between City Quays and the footbridge, DRIFT, a legacy project from 2024, was located at Donegall Quay. This unique floating installation provided a number of workshops and was in situ from the Bank Holiday weekend 23rd to 25th August with activities, from Friday 29th August to Friday 5th September and after the duration of the Festival for one or two days.

A Community Co-design project engaging Sailortown Regeneration, The Met and Passers-by provided programme enhancements in the form of public art, theatre or performance. There had also been ongoing engagement across the industry to showcase local offerings in conjunction with the overall festival programme.

Our media partner Bauer Media Group was on site across the weekend with prizes, games and giveaways.

Two naval vessels had to withdraw at short notice due to operational notice, and the Spanish Galleon 'Andalucia' withdrew the week prior due to strong winds and difficult weather in the Irish Sea. Despite this, the 'Granuaile' provided a spectacle on Queens Quay, and Sailability operated from the marina, offering accessible sailing, educational tours and animating the river. Ship recruitment remains a priority area of work for 2027 with a number of influencing factors under consideration.

	As part of our sustainability approach, Visitors attending the Belfast Maritime Festival were encouraged to walk, cycle, take the Glider from Belfast city centre directly to the Titanic Quarter, or travel by train to Titanic Quarter Halt. Cycle parking was available outside Titanic Belfast and at Belfast Bike docks at the SSE Arena.																								
3.3	Maritime Festival: Marketing and Communications The brand identity chosen for the 2025 event was determined in line with the TNI International Events Funding criteria and agreed TNI/BCC/VB brand playbook targeting Active Maximisers: Young families wanting inspirational and educational experiences for their children and Culture Connection Seekers: lovers of the arts, history and the outdoors. BCC Marketing and Communications and Visit Belfast developed a regional and out of state campaign with the initial press release issued to the public on 6 August 2025. Visit Belfast hosted the festival landing page for all collateral and content relating to the festival and promoting any shared marketing opportunities for partners and stakeholders. The campaign was rolled out on outdoor, radio, digital channels and social media platforms, promoting visitbelfast.com as the call to action with the following statistics recorded: <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Format</th><th>Impacts</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>ROI Outdoor</td><td>4,770,000</td></tr> <tr> <td>ROI Radio</td><td>5,262,100</td></tr> <tr> <td>ROI Digital Publisher</td><td>1,251,312</td></tr> <tr> <td>NI Radio</td><td>4,240,000</td></tr> <tr> <td>NI Outdoor</td><td>2,321,832</td></tr> <tr> <td>Social Media Organic</td><td>458,658</td></tr> <tr> <td>Social Media Paid</td><td>3,774,634</td></tr> <tr> <td>Influencer</td><td>987,687</td></tr> <tr> <td>E-zine</td><td>221,134</td></tr> <tr> <td>Web Impacts</td><td>2,700,000</td></tr> <tr> <td>Total</td><td>25,987,357</td></tr> </tbody> </table> Website: The Maritime Festival landing page hosted by Visit Belfast had 101K page views (+77.7%) event-on-event increase and 2.79m impressions (+120.9% event-on-event increase). There was a 13.3% organic conversion rate with 13% of all Hot House Flowers ticket purchases originating from the Visit Belfast landing page. Organic social media: Visit Belfast issued six posts spanning pre-event, weekend live, and post-event recap, core themes being Sunday Sessions and Hidden Gems of the Mile. Corporate Communications issued eight posts (four Instagram and four Facebook) spanning pre-event, weekend live, and post-event recap, with a focus on activities and free family fun Partners such as Maritime Belfast Trust and others added to the organic social reach for this year's event.	Format	Impacts	ROI Outdoor	4,770,000	ROI Radio	5,262,100	ROI Digital Publisher	1,251,312	NI Radio	4,240,000	NI Outdoor	2,321,832	Social Media Organic	458,658	Social Media Paid	3,774,634	Influencer	987,687	E-zine	221,134	Web Impacts	2,700,000	Total	25,987,357
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	Paid social media: Visit Belfast - Targeting Republic of Ireland (ROI) audiences (25–60) using user-generated content (UGC) across Meta and TikTok, positioning the event as a must-see Belfast experience (Adults aged 25–60 in Dublin, Drogheda, Dundalk, motivated by live music, nostalgia, and short cultural breaks). Council Corporate Communications targeted all adults in Belfast positioning the event as family-friendly and inclusive to the Belfast, Greater Belfast and local towns via Facebook and Instagram boosts. With respect to email marketing, Visit Belfast distributed an e-zine to NI and ROI database with an impact of 221,134 while Council issued an email to their events database (circa 2k) with 39.63% display rate and 4.33 click through rate Council's Marketing and Communications team ran a local campaign for T-sides in addition to adshels and adshel live digital screens across city centre. The festival was also advertised online with Belfast Telegraph and Daily Mirror/Belfast Live online with click-through rates recorded considerably higher than the UK average. The BCC festival brand identity reflected the overall programme and was coordinated to maintain a family-friendly audience as well as expanding the appeal to a broader audience demographic. Visit Belfast's creative for their outdoor campaign used photography and messaging to highlight live music, nostalgia, and short cultural breaks. Their outdoor campaign ran in ROI (with an impact of 4,770k) and NI (with an impact of 2,322k). They also ran radio ads impacting 5262k in ROI and 4,240k in NI.
3.4	Maritime Festival: Key Facts and Figures Key findings from the Economic Impact Report and Visitor Survey from the 2025 Maritime Festival shows a growth in out of state visitors evidence from the independent research survey illustrates that 21% were staying in accommodation away from home, up from 14% in 2023. However, the inclement weather on the Sunday affected numbers attending. While 40,000 were recorded on Saturday, this fell to 17,000 on Sunday. The report findings for the event include: • The estimated direct spend (based on 57,000 visitors) was £988,476.49 excluding accommodation (£1,326,839.26 in 2023) • 21% were staying in accommodation away from home (up from 14%) • 91% gave the Maritime Festival event an overall rating of 8-10, (up from 74% in 2023) including 24% who rated it as '10 - Extremely good'. • 94% of visitors said that the Maritime Festival improves the reputation of Belfast as a place to visit.

	• 94% agreed that there should be more events like this in Belfast. • 61% said they would definitely or very likely visit similar events in the future [2023: 60%] • 92% visited other tourist attractions at this time. • 50% said that they would be likely to revisit the Maritime Mile over the coming year. • 63% agreed that the Maritime Mile has its own unique cultural and historical identity. • 63% believe the role of the creative industry sector is important or very important in the conservation, enhancement and promotion of heritage of the Maritime Mile.
3.5	The Maritime Festival in 2027 Planning is underway for the 2027 event taking into account any lessons learned an options paper was discussed with delivery partners including Belfast Maritime Trust, DfC and Belfast Harbour to consider future dates for the 2027 festival, particularly bearing in mind the impact of the Fleadh event on planning and delivery. The Maritime Programme board has considered this and has proposed to host the next edition of the Festival in early June (6-8) 2027. This date takes into consideration coordination with the Fleadh, potential weather impacts and availability schedules for ship recruitment Previous iterations of the Maritime festival have been held in May with 2021 being the first year the event moved to September due to the pandemic This allows for an 18 month planning cycle from January 2026.
3.6	Sail Training Members are asked to note that Officers would like to revisit support for Sail Training as a means of both providing this unique opportunity to local youth – as has been the case until recently for almost two decades; and additionally incentivise vessels to attend the maritime festival as part of a sail training programme. Sail Training Ireland is a charity (CRN 20079406) that funds the development of young people from all backgrounds and abilities from the island of Ireland, by providing them with access to youth development training programmes on board Tall Ships and other sailing vessels. Sail Training Ireland are the National Sail Training Organisation (NSTO), as recognised by Sail Training International. They organise 30 voyages per year across numerous vessels. Engaging Sail Training Ireland via a Service Level Agreement assist with the objectives above.

	Members are asked to approve officers entering into an SLA, with the recognised NSTO on the island of Ireland. It is anticipated that the value of this agreement will be circa £15-20,000 from the Maritime budget.
3.7	Titanic Memorial Belfast City Council, via the City Events team, is responsible for the hosting of the Titanic Memorial event at City Hall each year. The event, hosted by the Lord Mayor, marks the anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, and involves a memorial in the garden, followed by a small reception for Belfast Titanic Society and their guests. The total cost is circa £2,500 to cover hospitality, PA and dressing Members are asked to note and approve this expenditure
3.8	Christmas: Post Event Information On Saturday 15 November 2025, the Council's Christmas Lights Switch On was presented by Cool FM. Opening the show were the Sandy Row Falcons, leading into festive performances from Donegall Road Primary School, The O'Hara Sisters and BA Collective. With a wicked twist to this year's programme Avenue Arts Academy give us a spellbinding performance, Jolene O'Hara joined local West End/TV actress/singer Rachel Tucker to perform. Belfast lit up in spectacular style as the Lord Mayor and champion boxer Lewis Crocker led the countdown to Christmas, unveiling City Hall's dazzling Christmas lights and streetlights for all to enjoy. Ticketing services and ticket scanning on the evening was managed by Visit Belfast. 2 Royal Avenue opened Winters Den on Saturday 15th November with a softer switch on experience for those with sensory requirements or additional needs. Winter's Den – 2 Royal Avenue In 2025, Winter's Den at 2 Royal Avenue delivered a programme of sustainable, community focused festive activities designed to enhance the city centre experience during the Christmas period. Winter's Den 2025 recorded the highest visitor numbers since the opening of 2 Royal Avenue in 2021. A total of 51,489 visitors attended the venue during the festive period, with approximately 28,000 visits taking place during the opening hours of Santa's Post Office. Christmas Animation Programme MayWe successfully delivered a free Christmas Animation Programme across Belfast city centre, bringing festive cheer and entertainment to locals and visitors alike. Nineteen events were delivered in Grand Central Station, Belfast City Hall, Cornmarket, Donegal Place, Writer's Square and 2 Royal Avenue. Christmas Music Programme

	43 live music events took place, involving 156 artists, at the front of Belfast City Hall, Belfast Grand Central Station, St George's Market and various sites/stores in the City Centre. Circa 10,000 attended this event. Council received no complaints and there were no recorded accidents. Derig and debriefing is currently underway for the festive lighting scheme and a planning workshop will be facilitated with members in due course with regards to 2026 provision.
3.9	Christmas: Key Marcomms / Survey Stats Council delivered a digital media campaign in partnership with Visit Belfast and Bauer Media with online advertising to promote the Switch On. Council directed people to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas URL, where the event information was displayed prominently on the page, BCC social platforms communicated messaging and promoted the switch on both pre and post event. Promotion took place across digital platforms and via key partners including Visit Belfast, BID One and Bauer Media. City Matters reached nearly 160,000 homes in early November, supported by a press release promoting ticket sales and the event. Media Partner Baur campaign featured interviews on Downtown and Cool FM with the Lord Mayor and Rachel Tucker. Both stations amplified the promotion with trails, competitions, live reads, and outdoor broadcasts, while Cool FM's Breakfast team, Pete, Paolo, and Rebecca, compered the Switch On Event. Media coverage was secured on Belfast Live, Belfast Telegraph, News Letter, Belfast Media Group, Yahoo UK, 4NI, Belfast Times, UTV, Cool FM and Downtown. Visit Belfast offered box office and visitor servicing, as well as related marketing activity such as digital screen display, social and digital campaign. Socio-Economic Survey Results In excess of 10,000 citizens and visitors gathered to enjoy the event. The event was free and ticketed via Visit Belfast. The geographical breakdown of tickets booked through Visit Belfast revealed • 51% of visitors were from the Belfast City Council area, • 45% were from elsewhere in Northern Ireland. • 2% were visitors from ROI • 2% outside the UK and Ireland The overall estimated direct spend for the Belfast Christmas Lights Switch On event excluding accommodation was £178,141.

	75% surveyed said they were supportive of Belfast City Council's preference to source local talent for stage acts. 66% gave the Belfast Christmas Lights Switch On event an overall rating of between 8 and 10, including 27% who rated it as '10 - Extremely good'.
3.10	Additional Christmas Animation and Music Programme. The Winter's Den at 2 Royal Ave, which commenced on the evening of the Switch On, continued throughout December with a varied programme of entertainment aimed at primarily a family audience. A music programme curated by Snow Water and additional animation facilitated by Maywe brought festive cheer across the city centre from 20th November to 21st December. Activities took place at key locations including City Hall, Grand Central Station, Writers Square, St George's Market, Donegall Place, Royal Avenue, and Cornmarket. The city came alive with vintage-style swing dancing and Christmas-themed circus performers, creating unforgettable performances for visitors. A dazzling fire show in Writer's Square added excitement and dramatic flair to the Cathedral Quarter, while Trim the Velvet energised St George's Market with high-energy Irish dancing. Belfast's status as a UNESCO City of Music was celebrated through a beautifully curated programme featuring brass bands, soloists, choirs, harpists, carol singers, Ní Music Prize winners, and special showcases. During the festive season, musicians and bands serenaded shoppers and revellers with free gigs and pop-up performances across the city.
3.11	St Patrick's Day 2026 A number of multi-year agreements are now in place with regards to the delivery of St Patrick's Celebrations allowing for earlier planning and programme development for the 2026 event. The budget is currently the same as 2025 - £300,000 and it will be supplemented by Good Relations funding for the parade element - £20,000. In 2025, a number of parade specific procurement exercises took place and began the 1st year of three-year contracts with Luxe, Circusful and Beam Creative to deliver on parade floats, professional performers and community engagement respectively. In 2026 Council Officers will continue to work with 'creative' contractors on the 2nd year of their contracts. 2026 will also be the second year of the Council's contract with Belfast TradFest to deliver a spectrum of city centre musical performances.

	St Patrick's Day 2026 will be the final year of Féile an Phobail's three year contract to deliver their successful city-wide Trad-trail programme.
3.12	St Patrick's Day: 2026 Programming In the lead-up to St. Patrick's Day and the day itself, a series of activities will be delivered across the city in collaboration with Council and curated partners, enhancing the festive atmosphere including: TradTrail, delivered by Féile an Phobail will feature performances from the best local and national trad musicians, offering free music performances in bars, restaurants, hotels and visitor attractions across the city from early March. St. Patrick's Music Festival will take place March 13 – 17 as part of Belfast UNESCO City of Music's St. Patrick's Day celebrations. At the heart of this programme is a diverse, cross-cultural and cross-traditions celebration in honour of St. Patrick. From headline concerts and relaxed workshops, the fun and grace of set and céilí dancing, reflective pilgrimages, and free St. Patrick's Day Festival Village at Cathedral Quarter, everyone is invited to the city to enjoy a variety of indoor and outdoor traditional arts events. Sunday 15 March will see the Pipe Band Extravaganza take place in grounds of City Hall from 12pm - 2pm. A stellar line-up of musicians are confirmed on the bill including the legendary voice behind the timeless anthem "Caledonia", Dougie MacLean, Belfast harper Ursula Burns, RTÉ Radio 1 Folk Singer of the Year 2022 Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh Band, Planxty's Andy Irvine, experimental smallpiper Brìghde Chaimbeul, celebrated harper Michael Rooney, sean nós dancer Becky Ní Éallaithe, uilleann piper Mick O'Brien, and many more. Writers Square will host Tradfest's Main Stage Area, Belfast Cathedral Car Park will house the Food Village while Saint Anne's Square provide the Acoustic Stage and The MAC - Indoor Céilí & sessions Seachtain na Gaeilge, presented by Conradh na Gaeilge – will take place from the 1-17 March. Their aim is to amplify and to broaden participation through accessible family-friendly and community-centred events, all of which aim to raise awareness of the Irish language, which will feature a headline event - Irish Cultural and Family Celebration Day 'Spraoi Cois Lao' – Custom House Square Saturday 7 March 2026 from 1pm-4pm. The St. Patrick's Day Parade will be held on Tuesday the 17 March 2026. Starting at Belfast City Hall it will provide an accessible family-friendly experience of cultural celebration. The large-scale parade will be curated and delivered by the Council Events team with animation and participation from professional, voluntary and community organisations. Participants from a range of backgrounds and from the North, South, East and West of the city will come

	together to join the procession of floats (with additions from 2025) to champion inclusion and diversity within the city. Event Officers will continue to work with Good Relations and wider units across Council to identify opportunities to enhance the cultural offering and connect communities into how they can be associated and engaged with the St Patricks Day Celebrations. Officers have engaged with the Belfast Bands Forum and further programming will be developed in partnership with them in the coming months. There will be engagement on opportunities to profile the hosting of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in August 2026.
3.13	St Patrick's Day: Alignment to Belfast's Cultural Strategy / Events Action Plan The 'City Imagining Strategy' approved by Council has a focus on supporting developing local arts and cultural organisations, through funding, commissioning and capacity building. In this regard, there has been engagement with local arts, voluntary and community organisations to create props and to coordinate performances of varying nature for example Circusful and Streetwise to enhance the overall production of the parade and highlight the local arts and culture within Belfast. Members are advised that ongoing future developmental approaches will be explored and recommendations made through the development of the 5 Year Events Action Plan which will be brought back to Committee for consideration in due course. This will include addressing holistically the challenges and opportunities in relation to city events in their current form. For example, we know that the St Patrick's Day Celebrations in particular requires consideration of a multi-year planning approach.
3.14	St Patrick's Day: Marketing and Communications Under the theme of 'Celebrating Together' an integrated marketing and PR campaign began in October 2025 with headline announcements, building to a full programme launch in February 2026. The goal of the marketing and communications campaign will be to generate widespread positive media coverage across broadcast, print and online media, plus strong interest and engagement on social media. Coverage will engage major print and digital outlets including BBC, UTV, Cool FM, Q Radio, the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, and Belfast Live. Council will develop a digital and outdoor advertising campaign from February 2026 to promote the events taking place under the St Patrick's Celebrations umbrella. The advertising

	campaign will target online advertising, radio and outdoor promotion in the form of adshells, impact wraps, digital hubs, adshel lives and bus T-sides. The campaign will direct people to belfastcity.gov.uk/stpatricks where the event information was displayed prominently on the page.
3.15	Lord Mayor's Day The Events team are liaising with the Lord Mayor's office to identify and agree a date in early May 2026 for this and will develop a programme for delivery in the coming months.
3.16	Events Action Plan Update Belfast City Council is developing a new Events Action Plan to shape how the city supports, delivers and promotes events over the next five years. The Plan will provide a shared framework to strengthen Belfast's reputation as a leading city for distinctive, inclusive and high-impact events that contribute to cultural life, tourism, community pride and the wider economy. The Council is working with Festivals and Events International (FEI) to develop the Plan, drawing on local expertise and insight from across Belfast's culture, tourism and festivals and events ecosystem. As part of this process, FEI have undertaken a series of workshops and conversations with key partners and stakeholders, Elected Members and the creative sector, to better understand current strengths, challenges and future opportunities. An online Public Survey was developed and available on Yoursay up to 19 December. This engagement will ensure the action plan reflects a shared vision for the city's future as both a festival city and a world class events destination. It is anticipated that recommendations and next steps on the action plan will be brought to March committee.
3.17	America 250 On 4th July 2026, the USA will celebrate 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Many Ulster-Scots people helped create this document that shaped the future of the United States of America. To mark this significant anniversary, DfC are leading on development work to highlight this unique contribution. The Ulster Scots Agency have shared proposals for activity aligned to; • Flagship concert to mark the 250th anniversary to take place in July • Sister cities conference to take place in Assembly Buildings in May Ulster Scots Agency are seeking funding of up to £50,000 from BCC to support their plans, this would be match funding against provision from DfC. This proposal would align with the

	Council's Language Strategy Action Plan, which provides for supporting events which promote Ulster Scots. Officers are also exploring other opportunities to support America 250 celebrations, including through the Fleadh Cheoil.
4.0	Financial and Resource Implications Financial resources for City events will be met from within existing departmental budgets, with the exception of request for funding from the Ulster Scots Agency to support America 250 celebrations which will be funded through existing budgets in support of the Language Strategy Action Plan commitments.
5.0	Equality & Good Relations Implications /Rural Needs Assessment The cultural strategy, A City Imagining has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and a Rural Needs Assessment (RNA). Specific initiatives as required will be subject to a further equality screening.
6.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	None.