

**Democratic Services Section  
Legal and Civic Services Department  
Belfast City Council  
City Hall  
Belfast  
BT1 5GS**



**Belfast  
City Council**

14th January, 2026

## **MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE**

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

The above-named Committee will meet in the Lavery Room, City Hall on Wednesday, 14th January, 2026 at 5.15 pm, for the transaction of the business noted below.

You are requested to attend.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

### **AGENDA:**

#### **1. Routine Matters**

- (a) Apologies
- (b) Minutes
- (c) Declarations of Interest

#### **2. Restricted Items**

- (a) Future City Centre Vacancy Programme (Pages 1 - 18)
- (b) Local Growth Fund Update (Pages 19 - 22)

#### **3. Request to Present**

- (a) Belfast One BID (Pages 23 - 26)

#### **4. Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure**

- (a) Department for Infrastructure Correspondence - Belfast Cycle Network Ravenhill Road Scheme (Pages 27 - 30)

5. **Positioning Belfast to Compete**

- (a) Events Update (Pages 31 - 44)

6. **Strategic and Operational Issues**

- (a) Department for Communities Consultation on Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland - Council Response (Pages 45 - 58)
- (b) Minutes of the Zoo Long-Term Financial Sustainability Group - 10th December 2025 (Pages 59 - 60)

By virtue of paragraph(s) 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 6  
of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

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<b>Subject:</b>	Belfast One BID – request for presentation
<b>Date:</b>	14 January 2026
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Lisa Toland, Senior Manager, Economy

<b>Restricted Reports</b>	
<b>Is this report restricted?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b>	
Insert number <input style="width: 40px;" type="text"/>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Information relating to any individual</li> <li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li> <li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li> <li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li> <li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li> <li>6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction</li> <li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li> </ol>	
<b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b>	
After Committee Decision After Council Decision Sometime in the future Never	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Call-in</b>	
<b>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</b>	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues</b>
1.1	<p>The purpose of the report is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Update members on the pending ballot for the third term of the Belfast One BID (Business Improvement District)</li> <li>• Request that members agree to receive a presentation from the BID at the February meeting of this Committee in order to enable officers to submit the Council votes in the ballot ahead of the 5 March 2026 deadline.</li> </ul>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the update on the pending ballot for the third term of the Belfast One BID (Business Improvement District)</li> <li>• Agree to receive a presentation from the BID at the February meeting of this Committee in order to enable officers to submit the Council votes in the ballot ahead of the 5 March 2026 deadline.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<p>Members will be aware that there are three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Belfast city centre: BID One which covers the main retail core and runs from the City Hall down to the junction of Royal Avenue and North Street; Linen Quarter which covers the office district to the north the City Hall including the new Transport Hub and Destination CQ which covers the Cathedral Quarter including the Ulster University campus.</p>
3.2	<p>A BID is a defined district where organisations collectively invest in projects, services and events that will benefit that area. BID One is an independent, not-for-profit company that works on behalf of its levy payers to support, develop and promote Belfast city centre. It focuses on delivering programmes that enhance safety, cleanliness, business support and the overall vibrancy of the area.</p>
3.3	<p>Under government legislation, all BIDs operate on a five-year term. At the end of each term, a ballot must take place in order for the BID to continue its work. BID One is the longest standing of the three BIDs and began operations in April 2016. The ballot for the third term of BID One will open on 22 January 2026 and all votes must be submitted by 5 March 2026.</p>

3.4	Belfast City Council has a number of properties within the BID One boundary including City Hall and 2 Royal Avenue. The BID One area contains around 700 units that are eligible for votes. Each property must pay an annual mandatory BID levy – depending on the NAV (Net Annual Value) of the property. Belfast City Council is responsible (by legislation) for issuing the levy bills (the cost of this service is covered by the BID).
3.5	<p>In order for the proposal to be successful at ballot, the result will need to meet, as a minimum, three independent criteria, namely:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There must be more yes votes than no votes (volume)</li> <li>2. Total rateable value of yes votes must exceed total rateable value of no votes (value)</li> <li>3. The turnout of ballot papers returned must be no less than 25% of the eligible rate payers entitled to vote in the ballot <i>and</i> total no less than 25% of the eligible rateable value.</li> </ol>
3.6	<p>BID One works closely with the council on a range of issues related to safety, cleanliness and vibrancy in the city centre. The team and the Board are also represented on a number of city centre forums and working groups and, given their mandate, represent a strong conduit for engagement with city centre businesses operating in this geographical area. They have produced a business plan for the five year term and this proposes focusing resources on four main areas of work, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promoting Belfast city centre</li> <li>• Enhancing the visitor experience</li> <li>• Supporting local businesses</li> <li>• Shaping a better city centre.</li> </ul>
3.7	The draft business plan notes that the BID is likely to generate just slightly over £1million annually through its levy collection and it will use these resources to deliver projects on behalf of levy payers within these agreed priority areas for action. Details of planned activities will be shared by the team at the upcoming meeting.
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Financial Implications</b>
	Belfast City Council will be liable for levy payments relating to its properties and assets located within the BID One boundary.
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</b>

	No specific equality or good relations implications. The Belfast One designated boundary has been approved by DfC. Visitor insights demonstrate that the city centre is accessed by visitors from all parts of Northern Ireland and beyond.
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Appendices</b>
	None.



<b>Subject:</b>	Belfast Cycle Network's Ravenhill Road Scheme – Department for Infrastructure Response
<b>Date:</b>	9th January, 2026
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Cathy Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and Development
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Craig Mealey, Committee Services Officer

## Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted?

Yes

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No

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Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?

After Committee Decision

After Council Decision

Sometime in the future

Never

☐  
☐  
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☐

## Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in?

Yes

☒

No

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<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues</b>
1.1	To update Members on a response received from the Department for Infrastructure to correspondence from the Committee in relation to the Belfast Cycle Network's Ravenhill Road Scheme.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
2.1	The Committee is asked to note the response received from the Department for Infrastructure.
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main Report</b>
3.1	At the City Growth and Regeneration Committee meeting in October 2025, Councillor de Faoite raised an issue in advance in relation to the delivery of the Belfast Cycle Network's Ravenhill Road Scheme. He stated that, in response to a letter he had written to the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the scheme, the Minister had advised that the formal consultation stage on the scheme had been moved from autumn 2025 to early 2026. He expressed his disappointment at the delay in progressing the scheme, given that it had been highlighted as deliverable in the short term within the Department for Infrastructure's Belfast Cycle Network Delivery Plan.
3.2	At the request of Councillor de Faoite, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure to express its frustration at the lack of progress in delivering the Belfast Cycle Network's Ravenhill Road Scheme, and to seek an update on the reasons for the delay
3.3	A response has now been received from the Department for Infrastructure (Appendix 1) which advises that the extent of the scheme has been amended to include a section of the Ormeau Embankment, and that further consideration has been given to certain elements of design along the route that emerged following the initial public engagement on the proposals. The response states that these considerations have resulted in a longer than originally anticipated design period, and that the statutory consultation process is expected to commence early this year, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of discussions on a small number of remaining issues.
3.4	<b><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></b> None associated with this report.
3.5	<b><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></b> None associated with this report.
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Appendices - Document Attached</b>
	Appendix 1 – Department for Infrastructure Response – Belfast Cycle Network Ravenhill Road Scheme

From the office of the Minister for Infrastructure  
**LIZ KIMMINS MLA**

Craig Mealey  
Committee Services Officer  
Belfast City Council  
[mealeyc@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:mealeyc@belfastcity.gov.uk)

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Belfast  
BT7 2JA  
Telephone: (028) 9054 0540  
Email: [Private.office@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk](mailto:Private.office@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk)

Your reference: CGR241125DFI  
Our reference: COR-1047-2025  
11 December 2025

Dear Craig

## **BELFAST CYCLE NETWORK – RAVENHILL ROAD SCHEME**

Thank you for your correspondence of 24 November 2025, in relation to the above. As part of the detailed design process, the extent of the scheme has been amended, to include a section of Ormeau Embankment and further consideration has been given to certain elements of design along the route that emerged following initial public engagement on the proposals. These considerations have resulted in a longer than originally anticipated design period.

It is expected that the statutory consultation process will commence in early 2026, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of discussions on a small number of remaining issues.

Yours sincerely



**JAMES GRAHAM**  
Private Secretary to the Minister

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

<b>Restricted Reports</b>	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Call-in</b>	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report</b>
1.1	<p>The purpose of this report is to provide</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• post event information on the 2025 Belfast Maritime Festival and planning update for 2027</li><li>• post event information on the Christmas Lights Switch and Animation programme</li><li>• update on the St Patrick's Day Celebrations planning</li><li>• update on Lord Mayors Day</li><li>• update on the Events Action Plan</li><li>• update on America 250</li></ul>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>

2.1	<p>Members are asked to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the contents of the Maritime Festival post event evaluation and future dates.</li> <li>• Agree support for Sail Training in the lead up to 2027 Maritime festival</li> <li>• Agree Titanic Memorial arrangements and associated expenditure</li> <li>• Note the contents of the Christmas programming &amp; post event evaluation</li> <li>• Note upcoming workshop on festive lighting planning</li> <li>• Note the planning update on St Patrick's Day &amp; Lord Mayor's Day</li> <li>• Note the update on the Events Action Plan</li> <li>• Note the update on America 250 and approve funding allocation</li> </ul>
3.0	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<p><b>Maritime Festival</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
3.2	<p><b>Maritime Festival: Programming</b></p> <p>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</p>

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:

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
<a href="#">Social Media</a> Organic	458,658
<a href="#">Social Media</a> Paid	3,774,634
Influencer	987,687
E-zine	221,134
Web Impacts	2,700,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>25,987,357</b>

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.

	<p>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.</p> <p>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</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
3.4	<p><b>Maritime Festival: Key Facts and Figures</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>However, the inclement weather on the Sunday affected numbers attending. While 40,000 were recorded on Saturday, this fell to 17,000 on Sunday.</p> <p>The report findings for the event include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The estimated direct spend (based on 57,000 visitors) was £988,476.49 excluding accommodation (£1,326,839.26 in 2023)</li> <li>• 21% were staying in accommodation away from home (up from 14%)</li> <li>• 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'.</li> <li>• 94% of visitors said that the Maritime Festival improves the reputation of Belfast as a place to visit.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 94% agreed that there should be more events like this in Belfast.</li> <li>• 61% said they would definitely or very likely visit similar events in the future [2023: 60%]</li> <li>• 92% visited other tourist attractions at this time.</li> <li>• 50% said that they would be likely to revisit the Maritime Mile over the coming year.</li> <li>• 63% agreed that the Maritime Mile has its own unique cultural and historical identity.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
3.5	<p><b>The Maritime Festival in 2027</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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</p> <p>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</p> <p>This allows for an 18 month planning cycle from January 2026.</p>
3.6	<p><b>Sail Training</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>

	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	<p><b>Titanic Memorial</b></p> <p>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</p> <p>Members are asked to note and approve this expenditure</p>
3.8	<p><b>Christmas: Post Event Information</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p><b>Winter's Den – 2 Royal Avenue</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p><b>Christmas Animation Programme</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p><b>Christmas Music Programme</b></p>

	<p>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.</p> <p>Circa 10,000 attended this event. Council received no complaints and there were no recorded accidents.</p> <p>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.</p>
3.9	<p><b>Christmas: Key Marcomms / Survey Stats</b></p> <p>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 <a href="http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas">www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas</a> 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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Visit Belfast offered box office and visitor servicing, as well as related marketing activity such as digital screen display, social and digital campaign.</p> <p>Socio-Economic Survey Results</p> <p>In excess of 10,000 citizens and visitors gathered to enjoy the event. The event was free and ticketed via Visit Belfast.</p> <p>The geographical breakdown of tickets booked through Visit Belfast revealed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 51% of visitors were from the Belfast City Council area,</li> <li>• 45% were from elsewhere in Northern Ireland.</li> <li>• 2% were visitors from ROI</li> <li>• 2% outside the UK and Ireland</li> </ul> <p>The overall estimated direct spend for the Belfast Christmas Lights Switch On event excluding accommodation was £178,141.</p>



	<p>75% surveyed said they were supportive of Belfast City Council's preference to source local talent for stage acts.</p> <p>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'.</p>
3.10	<p><b>Additional Christmas Animation and Music Programme.</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
3.11	<p><b>St Patrick's Day 2026</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>2026 will also be the second year of the Council's contract with Belfast TradFest to deliver a spectrum of city centre musical performances.</p>

	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	<p><b>St Patrick's Day: 2026 Programming</b></p> <p>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:</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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 Brighde 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 &amp; sessions</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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</p>

	<p>together to join the procession of floats (with additions from 2025) to champion inclusion and diversity within the city.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>There will be engagement on opportunities to profile the hosting of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in August 2026.</p>
3.13	<p><b>St Patrick's Day: Alignment to Belfast's Cultural Strategy / Events Action Plan</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
3.14	<p><b>St Patrick's Day: Marketing and Communications</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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</p>

	<p>campaign will target online advertising, radio and outdoor promotion in the form of adshels, impact wraps, digital hubs, adshel lives and bus T-sides. The campaign will direct people to <a href="http://belfastcity.gov.uk/stpatricks">belfastcity.gov.uk/stpatricks</a> where the event information was displayed prominently on the page.</p>
3.15	<p><b>Lord Mayor's Day</b></p> <p>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.</p>
3.16	<p><b>Events Action Plan Update</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>It is anticipated that recommendations and next steps on the action plan will be brought to March committee.</p>
3.17	<p><b>America 250</b></p> <p>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;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flagship concert to mark the 250th anniversary to take place in July</li> <li>• Sister cities conference to take place in Assembly Buildings in May</li> </ul> <p>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</p>

	<p>Council's Language Strategy Action Plan, which provides for supporting events which promote Ulster Scots.</p> <p>Officers are also exploring other opportunities to support America 250 celebrations, including through the Fleadh Cheoil.</p>
4.0	<p><b>Financial and Resource Implications</b></p> <p>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.</p>
5.0	<p><b>Equality &amp; Good Relations Implications /Rural Needs Assessment</b></p> <p>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.</p>
6.0	<p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>
	<p>None.</p>

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Subject:	DfC Disability and Work Strategy – Consultation Response
Date:	14 January 2026
Reporting Officer:	Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy
Contact Officer:	Jamie Uprichard, Business Research and Development Manager, Jelena Buick, Business Research and Development Officer

<b>Restricted Reports</b>							
<b>Is this report restricted?</b>	<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>				
		<b>X</b>					
<p><b>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b></p> <p><b>Insert number</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Information relating to any individual</li> <li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li> <li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li> <li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li> <li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li> <li>6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction</li> <li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li> </ol>							
<p><b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b></p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="width: 60%;"> <p><b>After Committee Decision</b></p> <p><b>After Council Decision</b></p> <p><b>Sometime in the future</b></p> <p><b>Never</b></p> </div> <div style="width: 35%;"> <table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%;"> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 25px;"></td></tr> </table> </div> </div>							

<b>Call-in</b>			
<b>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>No</b>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
1.1	The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Department for Communities' (DfC) draft Disability and Work Strategy for Northern Ireland and seek agreement on a Council response to the public consultation.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>It is recommended that the Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notes the main highlights of the DfC Disability and Work Strategy; and</li> <li>• Approve the consultation response, attached at appendix 1 (subject to council ratification).</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<p><a href="#">Disability and Work: A Strategy for Northern Ireland</a> sets out the Department for Communities' (DfC) commitment to achieve better employment outcomes for disabled people, people with health conditions, and people who are neurodivergent.</p> <p>The 2023/24 employment rate for disabled people (43.4%) was approximately half the employment rate for people without disabilities (83.7%). The difference between these two rates is known as the "disability employment gap", and in 2023/24, the NI disability employment gap was 40.3 percentage points. This is the largest gap of any of the UK nations, and despite the number of disabled people in employment here increasing, the gap has changed little over the last decade. (Note: the 2024 Labour Force Survey Local Government District tables were released in July 2025 and report a disability employment gap of 48.8pp in Belfast).</p> <p>The key outcome of the Strategy is to get an additional 50,000 disabled people into work by March 2036, and to achieve a disability employment rate of 50% and growing. The Strategy also aims to get more disabled people into better jobs, helping to reduce the disability pay gap; reduce underemployment; and support more disabled people into self-employment.</p> <p>The Strategy is aimed at supporting people in Northern Ireland to prepare for work, obtain work, remain in work, and progress in work. It aims to support people who are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• deaf or disabled, and/or</li> <li>• have health conditions, and/or</li> <li>• are neurodivergent.</li> </ul> <p>The Strategy's scope includes people from the above groups who are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• of working age and not currently working, or</li> <li>• already in work, or</li> <li>• young people who are about to transition out of school, further education, or higher education.</li> </ul> <p>The sub-outcomes for the Strategy are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase the disability employment rate for all age groups</li> <li>• To increase the disability employment rate for males and females</li> <li>• To increase the disability employment rate for people with different types of disability</li> <li>• To reduce the disability pay gap</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To reduce levels of underemployment of disabled people</li> <li>• To increase levels of self-employment for disabled people</li> </ul> <p>The key themes of the strategy are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalised support</li> <li>• Inclusive Skills, Careers, and Educational Transitions</li> <li>• Supporting and Enabling Employers</li> <li>• Strategic and Structural Enablers</li> </ul>
3.2	<p><b>Key highlights from the draft BCC response</b></p> <p>While the full response is attached at appendix 1, overall, the council welcomes the Strategy. It is a useful starting point in joining-up support to address key challenges in helping disabled people into meaningful employment (those who can and want to work). We welcome the provisions made for disabled people where they can voluntarily opt in for employment support as this approach is proven to be more effective than mandating participation.</p> <p>While the Council welcomes the Strategy's themes, guiding principles and outcomes, the response states that budget availability against each element of delivery would be beneficial to plan ahead for service delivery and workforce planning. We note this consultation is taking place while there are severe funding cuts to disability specialist organisations supported through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Cuts will have a major impact on delivery of the Strategy; on disabled people, organisations and staff that deliver much needed employment services.</p> <p>We welcome a flexible and responsive approach, particularly where delivery gaps emerge and additional support is required to increase the employment rate for disabled people. However, Belfast may have different needs as a predominately urban area. For example, there are areas within Belfast such as Oldpark (18%) and Court (17%) that have male long-term sickness or disability rates that are closer to one-fifth of the male population compared against 8% for NI.</p> <p>Furthermore, the response highlights the imbalance that exists across Northern Ireland council areas (evidenced by the 2024 Labour Force Survey Local Government District tables) and identifies that the greatest need is within Belfast. The employment rate for disabled people ranges from a high of 59.7% in Ards and North Down to a low of 33.4% in Belfast. We therefore recommend that the Department consider implementing a sub-regional balance approach, tailoring and prioritising actions where the greatest inequalities exist.</p>
3.3	<p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no financial implications attached to this report.</p>
3.4	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>There are no equality, good relations or rural needs implications contained in this report.</p>
4.0	<p><b>Appendices – Documents attached</b></p>
	<p>Appendix 1: DfC Disability and Work Strategy - Belfast City Council Response</p>

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# **Belfast City Council's Draft Consultation Response to the Department for Communities' Disability and Work Strategy for Northern Ireland**

## **Strategy Scope**

The Strategy is aimed at supporting people in Northern Ireland to prepare for work, obtain work, remain in work, and progress in work. It aims to support people who are:

- deaf or disabled, and/or
- have health conditions, and/or
- are neurodivergent.

The Strategy's scope includes people from the above groups who are:

- of working age and not currently working, or
- already in work, or
- young people who are about to transition out of school, further education, or higher education.

### **3a. To what extent do you agree with the scope of the Strategy?**

Strongly agree ☒ **Agree** Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

### **3b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the scope of the Strategy.**

The council welcomes the scope of the Strategy and the groupings that require assistance. We recognise there are many disability organisations already supporting disabled people to prepare, obtain and stay in work. The council's approach is to only intervene where there are gaps in provision and provide support by working along with delivery partners across the city. Examples of our work include the following:

- Delivering a Customer Service Employment Academy for people who are deaf (in association with AdaptNI) in January 2026. The academy is a short, intensive week-long training programme to help ten participants obtain skills, confidence, and support needed for work.
- Scoping out and developing a bespoke Employment Academy for blind people in association with a specialist disability charity. This predicated on job demand being confirmed with a major employer and is in early stages of development.
- Delivering a Classroom Assistants' Employment Academy for ten people who are deaf or people with hearing loss and are fluent in their primary language – either British Sign Language (BSL) or Irish Sign Language (ISL). Training is expected to be completed by June 2026. It is the first time an Academy in this format has been done in the education sector. The people who work using BSL/ISL as their first language. Participants will complete a Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (QCF 5329-31) over 12 months approximately. This support will improve participants employability and job prospects, provides an introduction to the education sector and as well as insights into various job roles. Participants will receive one-to-one mentoring.

## **Guiding Principles**

The Strategy is built upon six guiding principles which are:

- Ambitious and inclusive
- Person-centric
- Collaborative and joined-up
- Evidence driven
- Open, honest and transparent
- Flexible and responsive

### **4a. To what extent do you agree with the guiding principles of the Strategy?**

Strongly agree ☒ **Agree** Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

### **4b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the guiding principles of the Strategy**

While we broadly welcome the six guiding principles, a narrative on budget availability against each element of delivery would be beneficial to plan ahead for service delivery and workforce planning, if the employment rate for disabled people is to be increased by 50% by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2036. We welcome a flexible and responsive approach, particularly where delivery gaps emerge and additional support is required to increase the employment rate for disabled people. This will be important at a local delivery level. For example, Belfast may have different needs as a predominately urban area. Research undertaken by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre for Belfast City Council in January 2024 (Economic inactivity draft: Who, what, where, why? A briefing paper on economic inactivity & inclusive labour markets in Belfast and Northern Ireland) reported:

- For males across Northern Ireland, the top reason for economic inactivity is long-term sick or disability. One in ten Belfast males report long-term sickness or disability, in turn accounting for half of the economically inactive male population. The concentration of long-term sickness among males in the Belfast area is concerning, specifically given that more recent economic inactivity increases at the national level have been associated with ill health;
- There are areas within Belfast such as Oldpark (18%) and Court (17%) that have male long-term sickness or disability rates that are closer to one-fifth of the male population compared to an average of 8% for Northern Ireland;
- In Belfast, the most predominant reason for economic inactivity among the 50-64 age cohort is long-term sickness or disability, reported by half (50%), compared to two in five (41%) across Northern Ireland. Current Labour Force Survey data shows this increasing to 58%;
- When working towards more inclusive labour markets, it will be important for employers to have a better understanding of the challenges associated with long-term health conditions and the need for flexibility within the workplace;
- Any progression towards a more inclusive labour market will need to tackle flexibility and additional supports that are often cited as being necessary to successfully (re) enter and remain in employment.
- Data from NISRA's Labour Market Status reports (2023), taken from the Labour Force Survey, report the disability employment gap (for people aged 16-64) in Belfast, as 39.6pp. This gap has stayed at approximately 40% for the last few years and is significantly above the rest of the UK (Maximising potential: A review of labour market outcomes for people with disabilities in Northern Ireland, UUEPC, 2022) and requires interventions to redress over the long term.

## **Overarching Outcome**

The Strategy's overarching outcome is: To increase the employment rate for disabled people to 50% by 31 March 2036. We estimate that this would mean an additional 50,000 disabled people or people with health conditions in employment in Northern Ireland by March 2036.

### **5a. To what extent do you agree with the overarching outcome of the Strategy?**

Strongly agree ☒ **Agree** Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

### **5b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the overarching outcome of the Strategy.**

We welcome the ambition to increase the employment rate for disabled people to 50% by 31 March 2036. Within the refreshed Belfast Agenda (2024), community planning partners set a stretch goal to increase the employment rate for people living with a disability from 37% to 42% by 2028 (note the baseline uses figures from 2022). This equates to approximately an additional 3,000 disabled people living in the city in employment.

By 2024, the disability employment gap (for people aged 16-64) in Belfast was 48.8pp. (there is a 82.2% employment rate for people without a disability compared with 33.4% for people with a disability). There had been a significant reduction in the gap from 49.2pp in 2016, before increasing again more recently, however the gap has stayed at approximately 40% for the last few years. This is significantly above the rest of the UK and requires interventions to redress over the long term.

The Labour Force Survey Local Government District (LGD) tables for 2024 identify imbalance across the region. The employment rate for disabled people ranges from a high of 59.7% in Ards and North Down to a low of 33.4% in Belfast. This suggests a sub-regional approach should be considered, prioritising interventions in Belfast.

People with a disability are significantly disadvantaged compared to the rest of the population in terms of economic inactivity. It was estimated that over half of the people in Belfast in 2022, who were economically inactive, had a disability. In 2023, the economic inactivity rate for people with a disability is estimated to be 57.1% compared to 19.2% for those who are economically inactive but do not have a disability.

It is important to understand that the economically inactive cohort does not include people "actively seeking work". Previous research by UUEPC using data from ONS and NISRA reported that 16% of all people in Northern Ireland who are economically inactive due to long-term sickness or disability who definitely or probably work again. The 2023 Census reported that there were 26,781 adults aged 16-64 living in Belfast who were economically inactive due to long-term sickness or disability. Extrapolating this data for Belfast, suggests that there may be an estimated 4,300 people who are currently workless but may choose to become a jobseeker in the future. This is an important group to consider if this target is to be achieved.

We would welcome further details on the modelling criteria and rationale used to arrive at this figure and request if regular breakdowns at local government level can be published routinely to aid with resource planning for the city.

Early conversations with all stakeholders regarding data capture including the potential for statutory monitoring and reporting would be beneficial.

### **Sub-outcomes**

The sub-outcomes for the Strategy are:

- To increase the disability employment rate for all age groups
- To increase the disability employment rate for males and females
- To increase the disability employment rate for people with different types of disability
- To reduce the disability pay gap
- To reduce levels of underemployment of disabled people
- To increase levels of self-employment for disabled people

#### **6a. To what extent do you agree with the sub-outcomes of the Strategy?**

☒ **Strongly agree** Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

#### **6b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the sub-outcomes of the Strategy.**

The Council strongly agrees with sub outcomes as they align with research carried out with disability specialist groups via the Belfast Labour Market Partnership and in our day-to-day practice in rolling out employment academies.

However, we would request that statisticians undertake secondary analysis of the available data to report baselines of the above indicators at a local government level. Furthermore, updates should be routinely published to aid with resource planning for the city. We are aware that issues exist due to small sample sizes and disaggregation at a more granular level often risks disclosure. Nevertheless, we would propose that this could be overcome by combining multiple years' of data in order to provide councils with vital information for them to plan and track performance.

The Belfast Labour Market Partnership produced People Based research in March 2024 to determine gaps and interventions needed to support disabled people in the city into work. The council engaged with 16 organisations, mainly from Disability Specialist groups but including the Department for Communities. Research findings broadly concurred with the proposed strategy and its proposed actions. Those attending the engagement sessions (mainly disability representative organisations) told us that:

- Employers lacked knowledge and understanding about disability and needed support in this area;
- Disabled people feared benefit loss where employment is taken up and associated risks (including cases where household income is affected). The need to protect benefits for disabled employees was frequently referenced;
- Many disabled people require significant pre-entry support to obtain and sustain employment;
- Mental health challenges were exacerbated because of the pandemic;
- Many individuals need significant pre-entry employment support before engaging with a service, let alone employment. The significant disconnect between the proportion of non-disabled people with no qualifications but who are still in employment, compared to the

equivalent for disabled people is stark and is considered a key barrier. Support to achieve entry level qualifications was identified as a potential area of focus;

- Practical issues such as securing reliable transport to work was raised consistently by contributors. Many people with physical disabilities may need support in arriving and leaving work or interviews for jobs, through means such as a friend or family member, public transport, or taxi services. This can be quite difficult to repeatedly obtain;
- There is a need to raise awareness of the availability of employment services – both for employers and disabled people;
- There are not enough highlighted examples of success and good practice to stimulate and motivate disabled people to follow a rewarding career path;
- There is a need for more accessible communication, outreach and partnership with schools, health and social care teams;
- A need to raise the aspirations of disabled people and importantly, their family members and to promote the prospect of work as a valid and achievable outcome;
- There is a lack of promotion of good workplace practice, highlighting positive examples locally, regionally, and internationally and sharing those across the sector could stimulate greater engagement from disabled people and employers;
- Their top three recommendations were: an awareness raising initiative for employers to include employment laws and to boost their confidence in supporting disabled employees into work, helping disability specialist groups better realise their Social Value offer and the development of a Disability Employment Initiative. DfC will be aware of the council's work in each of these areas.

This suggests that further qualitative research may be necessary in order to develop understanding if the sub-outcomes are to be delivered.

## **Key Themes**

The key themes of the Strategy are:

- Personalised Support
- Inclusive Skills, Careers and Educational Transitions
- Supporting and Enabling Employers
- Strategic and Structural Enablers

### **7a. To what extent do you agree with the key themes of the Strategy (summarized on pages 19 to 27)?**

☒ **Strongly agree** Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

### **7b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the key themes of the Strategy.**

The Council strongly agrees with the key themes as they align with research undertaken by the Belfast Labour Market Partnership (in conjunction with specialist disability groups) and in our day-to-day practice in rolling out employment academies. In March 2024, the Belfast Labour Market Partnership produced People Based research to determine gaps and interventions needed to support disabled people in the city into work. The council engaged with 16 organisations, mainly from Disability Specialist groups and including the Department for Communities. The research findings broadly concurred with the strategy and its proposed actions. Those who attended engagement sessions (mainly disability representative organisations) told us that:

- Employers lacked knowledge and understanding about disability and needed support in this area;
- Disabled people feared benefit loss where employment is taken up and associated risks (including cases where household income is affected). The need to protect benefits for disabled employees was frequently referenced;
- Many disabled people require significant pre-entry support to obtain and sustain employment;
- Mental health challenges were exacerbated because of the pandemic;
- Many individuals need significant pre-entry employment support before engaging with a service, let alone employment. The significant disconnect between the proportion of non-disabled people with no qualifications but who are still in employment, compared to the equivalent for disabled people is stark and is considered a key barrier. Support to achieve entry level qualifications was identified as a potential area of focus;
- Practical issues such as securing reliable transport to work was raised consistently by contributors. Many people with physical disabilities may need support in arriving and leaving work or interviews for jobs, through means such as a friend or family member, public transport, or taxi services. This can be quite difficult to repeatedly obtain;
- There is a need to raise awareness of the availability of employment services – both for employers and disabled people;
- There are not enough highlighted examples of success and good practice to stimulate and motivate disabled people to follow a rewarding career path;
- There is a need for more accessible communication, outreach and partnership with schools, health and social care teams;
- A need to raise the aspirations of disabled people and importantly, their family members and to promote the prospect of work as a valid and achievable outcome;
- There is a lack of promotion of good workplace practice, highlighting positive examples locally, regionally, and internationally and sharing those across the sector could stimulate greater engagement from disabled people and employers;
- Their top three recommendations were: an awareness raising initiative for employers to include employment laws and to boost their confidence in supporting disabled employees into work, helping disability specialist groups better realise their Social Value offer and the development of a Disability Employment Initiative. DfC will be aware of the council's work in each of these areas.

### **The Strategy's Actions**

The proposed actions in the Strategy are summarized on pages 19 to 27 of the document under the themes of:

- Personalised Support
- Inclusive Skills, Careers, and Educational Transitions
- Supporting and Enabling Employers
- Strategic and Structural Enablers

### **8. Please provide any comments on these actions in the box below.**

Evidence from the 2024 Labour Force Survey Local Government District (LGD) tables identify imbalance across the region. The employment rate for disabled people ranges from a high of 59.7% in Ards and North Down to a low of 33.4% in Belfast. This suggests a sub-regional approach should be considered, tailoring and prioritising actions within Belfast.



Nevertheless, the council broadly welcomes all of the actions included in the draft. In particular,

- The council welcomes the action to develop a new Employer Engagement Strategy their exploration (with the Department for the Economy) of developing a scheme for employers, that grows their awareness of disability employment and supports and enables implementation of best practice in disability employment. The Department will be aware of the council's work around Inclusive Growth and the Belfast Business Promise (See <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/businesspromise> and <https://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/Documents/Our-commitment-to-Inclusive-Growth-2020-2022#2.%20Our%20inclusive%20growth%20statement> for further information).
- Belfast City Council's commitment to Inclusive Growth includes reference to disability employment practice for residents, our inclusive recruitment and opportunity, mainstreaming of equality, diversity and inclusion, engaging and building capacity within our neighbourhoods via the council's Community Outreach Programme, extensive employability support to educational establishments, disability organisations, criminal justice organisations and other community-based organisations; and prioritising employability and skills.
- The Belfast Business Promise includes a pledge to recruit inclusively, whilst larger organisations of more than 250 staff are tasked with routinely monitoring the diversity of their workforce and acting if there are issues. This includes monitoring their workforce's age, disability status, race, gender, and sexual orientation. In December 2025, Belfast City Council, the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Union for Supported Employment (NIUSE) delivered a conference focusing on practical ways to support disabled people at work and support employers. Employers, disability organisations and equality specialists attended to learn about workplace adjustments, disability support organisations, and practical examples of what works.
- The Belfast Health & Work Steering Group's work was established by Belfast City Council through the Labour Market Partnership to develop a strategic response to the pressing and persistent issue of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. Considering transition from the European Social Fund (ESF) to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) a process marked by uncertainty, fragmentation, and disruption, the Steering Group sought to inform the design of successor funding models and advocate for more integrated, co-designed, and place-based delivery systems. In the Bridging Health and Work Report produced on behalf of Belfast Health and Work Steering Group (August 2025), a twin-track approach was adopted to address the immediate challenge of designing a successor to UKSPF post-2026 and propose a long-term system reform to integrate health, employment, and community services in a person-centred model. The report concurs that siloed systems, narrow eligibility criteria, and short-term commissioning cycles have undermined impact across Northern Ireland. The report called for structural reform that: brings together health, skills, employment, and community services; fosters employer engagement and inclusive recruitment; and leverages community trust and local delivery infrastructure.
- The report emphasises greater engagement with employers, recommending that employers should be supported with training, guidance, and incentives to adopt inclusive practices such as flexible working, reasonable adjustments, and mental health-friendly policies. The report recommends that all services must embed trauma-informed, person-centred practice—particularly for those affected by conflict-related trauma, addiction, or adverse childhood experiences—ensuring interventions are strengths-based and client-led.

### **The Disability and Work Council - Functions**

A new Disability and Work Council will be established to support delivery of actions under the Strategy and will report annually on progress against the Strategy's outcomes.

This Council will provide structures to bring partners together to co-ordinate, drive, support and monitor delivery. It will also provide a Forum for stakeholders to discuss disability and work issues, and better inform our approach, as well as enhancing engagement with stakeholders and disabled people.

**9a. To what extent do you agree with the creation of a new Disability and Work Council, and its proposed functions?**

Strongly agree ☒ **Agree** Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

**9b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the new Disability and Work Council, and its proposed functions.**

The Council welcomes the development of the Disability and Work Council to provide oversight of the strategy and in particular the inclusion of local councils and reference to Labour Market Partnerships.

**Disability and Work Council – Partnership Working**

The proposed Disability and Work Council will be jointly led by a senior civil servant from the Department for Communities and a disabled person. It is proposed that across the structures of the Council, the following organisations will work in partnership to support the work of the Council:

- The Department for Communities
- The Department for the Economy
- The Department of Education
- The Department of Health
- Relevant public bodies (such as the Equality Commission)
- Local Councils
- Disabled people
- Organisations from the disability sector and wider voluntary and community sector
- Employers and their representative bodies
- Experts from academia and the research community

**10a. To what extent do you agree with the proposed representation across the Disability and Work Council structures?**

Strongly agree ☒ **Agree** Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

**10b. Please provide us with any comments you have on the new Disability and Work Council, and its proposed membership.**

The council welcomes the development of the Disability and Work Council to provide oversight of the strategy (Figure 22: The Disability and Work Council P.89). We welcome the inclusion of local councils. We note there are three separate groups (Delivery Group, Operational Issues Forum and an Engagement Forum) feeding into oversight. We note there are nine groupings

including five Government Departments, Enterprise Agencies, Labour Market Partnerships and Employers and Employer Bodies and Disability Sector. We recommend that structures are streamlined to aid management and ensure actions are delivered and momentum is built and maintained.

**11. If you have any other comments on the Strategy, please enter them in the box below:**

To maximise employer engagement, we recommend that a target is set to reach employers in various sectors to increase support to help disabled people into work. The strategy would benefit from having reference links to the various employment programmes to aid understanding of the overall offer, both to employers and people with disabilities. Examples include JobStart Specialist Pathways, Additional Support Fund, Regional Day Opportunities Model, Workable NI, Access to Work NI, and the Condition Management Programme. We recommend that other supports are integrated to the offer, including the Work Experience Programme and Make the Call.

We note this consultation is taking place while there are severe funding cuts to disability specialist organisations supported through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Cuts will have a major impact on delivery of the Strategy; on disabled people, organisations and staff that deliver much needed employment services.

The council would conclude by reiterating that evidence from the 2024 Labour Force Survey Local Government District (LGD) tables highlights imbalance across the region and identifies that the greatest need is within Belfast. The employment rate for disabled people ranges from a high of 59.7% in Ards and North Down to a low of 33.4% in Belfast. We therefore recommend that the Department consider implementing a sub-regional balance approach, tailoring and prioritising actions where the greatest inequalities exist.

*Please note that this response is still subject to council ratification. It will be presented to members of the City Growth & Regeneration on Wednesday 14 January before being presented to full council on 02 February. Officers will contact [disabilityemploymentstrategy@communities-ni.gov.uk](mailto:disabilityemploymentstrategy@communities-ni.gov.uk) at this time should there be any changes.*

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## Zoo Long-Term Financial Sustainability Group

Wednesday, 10th December, 2025

### MEETING OF THE ZOO LONG-TERM FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY GROUP

- Members present: Councillor Murphy (Chairperson); and  
Councillors Anglin, Brennan, Flynn, R. McLaughlin,  
Nelson and Whyte.
- Also attended: Alderman McCullough.
- In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;  
Mr. K. Forster, Director of Economic Development;  
Ms. S. Grimes, Director of Property and Projects;  
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration  
and Development;  
Mr. F. Grant, Operations Development Manager;  
Mr. D. Orr, Departmental Business Manager; and  
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

### **Apologies**

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor Doran.

### **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest reported.

### **Election of Chairperson**

Moved by Councillor Anglin,  
Seconded by Councillor Nelson, and

Resolved – That Councillor Murphy be elected to serve as Chairperson for the Zoo Long-Term Financial Sustainability Group until the date of the Annual Council Meeting in 2026.

### **Draft Terms of Reference**

The Strategic Director for Place and Economy submitted a copy of the draft Terms of Reference which outlined that the purpose of the Group was to examine options in relation to the long-term financial sustainability of the zoo and complementary assets. The Terms of Reference also outlined the Group's membership and proposed governance arrangements.

During discussion, Members highlighted the need for the purpose of the Group to incorporate a focus on not only the Zoo and the old Zoo site, but also Belfast Castle.

The Strategic Director advised the Group that a final Terms of Reference would be submitted to its next meeting for consideration.

Noted.

### **Overview of Current Position / Scope of Work**

The Group was presented with an overview of the Zoo's current position which included information on visitor numbers, education programmes, commercial packages, on-site services, animal collection, animal welfare, financial position and the operational and strategic challenges.

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy outlined the proposed scope of work. The Group was advised that the scope of work would involve a phased approach which would initially look at a detailed analysis of the current position; a review of previous visioning work; consideration of related plans and strategies; short-term measures and options; research and benchmarking; and planning and resourcing going forward.

During discussion, the officers answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to the Zoo's financial position and modelling, benchmarking, resourcing, visitor numbers, animal care and welfare, conservation, and the scope of work.

After discussion, the Group noted the information that had been provided, and that further information would be provided at the next meeting of the Group in respect of the issues highlighted by Members and the initial phase of work.

Chairperson