

Public Document Pack

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

16th March, 2026

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

In addition to those matters previously notified to you, the following item(s) will also be considered at the meeting to be held at 9.30 am on Friday, 20th March, 2026.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

AGENDA:

- 4 (f) Belfast Business Promise - Next Steps (Pages 1 - 12)

This page is intentionally left blank



Subject:	Belfast Business Promise next steps
Date:	20 March 2026
Reporting Officer:	John Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy Damien Martin, Strategic Director Place and Economy
Contact Officer:	Lisa Toland, Senior Manager, Economy Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty Claire Patterson, Inclusive Growth Policy & Programme Manager

Is this report restricted? Yes No

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	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes No

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

2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>Members are asked to.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. consider the contents of the report and the appendices attached ii. consider the proposed reduction of the BBP pledges from 8 to 5 (refer Appendix 3) iii. consider the recommended approach to transitioning the Belfast Business Promise (Option 2: Good Practice Plus) (refer to Appendix 2) iv. consider and agree the proposed next steps as outlined at 3.17 and 3.18 v. Note that further detail will be brought to the next Social Policy Working Group.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p><u>Background</u></p> <p>The inclusive growth city charter is a key commitment in the Council’s Inclusive Growth strategy. Co-created with businesses, it was designed to provide an assessment framework to enable employers to look at their current practices and identify where they could make changes which would have a beneficial impact on inclusive growth in the city. Driven by the Council’s Social Policy Working Group (SPWG), the charter has been operationalised as the Belfast Business Promise (BBP) since April 2023 and delivered by a cross-council team, led by the Strategy, Programmes and Partnership and Economic Development teams, with support from Corporate HR, CPS and Climate teams. A snapshot of the progress made is attached as Appendix 1.</p>
3.2	<p>As Members will be aware the BBP had been brought forward on an initial pilot basis with a commitment to undertake an interim review of its progress and impact to ensure it remained fit-for-purpose and impactful. This review sought to consider the future model options for the BBP, building upon what works well, seeking to complement and enhance existing support programmes and position the programme to positively impact on the inclusive growth ambitions of the city while also taking account of the changing legislative and economic context within which organisations are operating.</p>
3.3	<p>In summary the key findings of the interim review included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ BBP members valued the support and energy of the team in spurring them on to meet the pledge areas. ▪ Areas for further development included maximising the networking opportunities and ability to learn from and share good practice, along with the potential to build on existing programmes of support for businesses offered by the council and other partners. ▪ BBP members felt that the support provided enabled them to move forward at a more rapid pace in terms of improving business and employment practices. ▪ Highlighted the possible challenges of scaling the offer if the current administratively heavy processes were maintained. ▪ Consideration to be given to adopting a more focused approach which would deliver greatest impact across the inclusive growth ambitions and key sectors.

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

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

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

Guiding principles

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

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

Purpose of BBP

3.7

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

“To work with employers to change behaviours to support a more sustainable thriving local economy by:

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

3.8

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

- Increased number of **employees paid above the RLW** and/or Increased number of organisations accredited RLW employers
- Increased **procurement spend in the local economy**/with Belfast based suppliers (via the collaborative network/anchors working group)
- Increased awareness of and **readiness** for **impending legislative changes** (e.g Good Employment Bill & LRA Charter/Guidance)
- Increased proportion of organisations monitoring (and reducing) their **carbon emissions**
- Increased proportion of organisations **engaging in local community activity**

3.9

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

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

3.10

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

<p>3.11</p> <p>3.12</p> <p>3.13</p> <p>3.14</p> <p>3.15</p>	<p><u>Strategic alignment</u></p> <p>There is an opportunity to deliver positively on the city’s ambition for inclusive growth. For example, the BBP has the potential to be the city’s inclusive growth charter and governance vehicle to harmonise procurement practice across anchors and unlock shared, evidence-based outcomes in fair work, social value and climate action as well as economic outcomes.</p> <p>Building on both the Belfast Promise and the Council’s Sustainable Procurement Policy, there is an opportunity to create a shared structure through which anchor institutions can collectively raise expectations on fair work, prompt payment, modern slavery prevention, social value delivery and climate action.</p> <p>An Anchor Procurement Working Group could share best practice, take advantage of collaborative opportunities and coordinate engagement with local SMEs and VCSEs, reducing duplication while increasing impact. This partnership approach also enhances transparency, fosters innovation in supply chains and supports the Belfast Agenda’s ambitions for inclusive growth, local competitiveness and a just transition to a low-carbon economy.</p> <p>Many of the anchor organisations in the city are regional bodies, guided by CPD and NI Public Procurement Policy, therefore realistic expectations will need to be set; however, the output of the Anchor Procurement Working Group -the creation of the Belfast City Procurement Framework - could provide a coherent, city-wide approach that strengthens value for money by aligning economic, ethical, social and environmental standards across all major public institutions.</p> <p>Drawing on examples in Leeds and Birmingham, there may be potential to establish Anchor working Groups to focus on each of BBP pledges/outcomes such as Inclusive Recruitment and Employment Practice; Climate and Working with our Communities.</p>				
<p>3.16</p>	<p><u>Options assessment</u></p> <p>In considering the way forward with the BBP, three options have been considered in detail (as outlined in Appendix 2) offering varying levels of assurance and robustness for those organisations involved in the Belfast Business Promise. In summary they include:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="240 1588 1506 1984"> <tr> <td data-bbox="240 1588 635 1680"> <p>Option 1 Good Practice Guidance</p> </td> <td data-bbox="635 1588 1506 1680"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of advice/guidance • Raising awareness of and access to BCC programmes </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="240 1680 635 1984"> <p>Option 2 Good Practice Plus</p> </td> <td data-bbox="635 1680 1506 1984"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced approach to providing guidance as well as some level of assurance/validation for high impact/priority sectors. • Flexibility to adopt and target specific high impact/priority sectors • Scope to strengthen the Network and support the development of Anchor Procurement Working Group </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Option 1 Good Practice Guidance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of advice/guidance • Raising awareness of and access to BCC programmes 	<p>Option 2 Good Practice Plus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced approach to providing guidance as well as some level of assurance/validation for high impact/priority sectors. • Flexibility to adopt and target specific high impact/priority sectors • Scope to strengthen the Network and support the development of Anchor Procurement Working Group
<p>Option 1 Good Practice Guidance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of advice/guidance • Raising awareness of and access to BCC programmes 				
<p>Option 2 Good Practice Plus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced approach to providing guidance as well as some level of assurance/validation for high impact/priority sectors. • Flexibility to adopt and target specific high impact/priority sectors • Scope to strengthen the Network and support the development of Anchor Procurement Working Group 				

	Option 3 Full Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality assurance in terms of commitments, however resource intensive – especially for SMEs
3.17	<p>To date, a significant amount of effort has gone into building a robust level of accreditation and assurance, developing officer expertise, raising awareness and managing expectations of BBP Partners involved in the process and those organisations signed up. A key benefit of the initiative programme has been the ability of businesses to come together to network and share good practice and support. It has been noted that for organisations to fully realise the reputational benefits of being associated with the BBP, will require an enhanced focus on communications and marketing and monitoring and evaluation.</p>	
3.18	<p>In considering these options, it is recommended for Members consideration, that option 2 be adopted as the preferred way forward. This would result in the following changes being brought forward which we believe offers greater potential to scale, provides flexibility to adopt approach and focus depending on size of business, enhances the added value to specific business sectors/cohorts and ultimately enhance the delivery of the desired and outcomes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing from 8 to 5 pledge framework (attached at Appendix 3) Scaling the pledge commitments to better fit organisational size (micro, small, medium and large) and clarify the assessment verification and validation requirements. This will increase transparency and manage expectations and officer time. Simplifying the language to make it more business focused. Introducing a signatory stage removing the barriers to entry and enabling scaling. Increasing the onus on the organisations to self-assess against the 5-pledge framework and progress. Crucially this will reduce the administrative support required from BCC Enhanced focus on the support using existing business support interventions and programmes; engagement, assessment and recognition. Strengthening the BBP Network, developing the opportunities for peer-to-peer mentoring, networking, shared learning and increasing collaboration amongst employers on key issues/topics for example through working groups or communities of practice. This also takes account of the pilot evaluation feedback on what the ‘early adopters’ felt would be beneficial. Providing the vehicle to leverage the potential for strategic collaboration amongst anchor and strategic employers in the city, with an initial focus on the creation of an Belfast Procurement Working Group. <p><u>Next Steps</u></p>	
3.19	<p>The following next steps are proposed for the coming months to support the delivery of option 2 - ‘Good Practice Plus’ , laying the foundations for an anchors working group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Further develop and engage on the 5 Pledge framework. 	

3.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop a BBP information pack that outlines the assessment process, roles, expectations and ambition. ▪ Defining the self-assessment process and outlining the associated requirements. ▪ Map and integrate/align BBP learning and capacity building opportunities to enable roll-out of interventions via existing Council/Partner resources, where possible. ▪ Revisit the role and membership of the BBP Internal Working Group to ensure the Council leads by example. ▪ Develop key messages/lines to take and associated communications plan. ▪ Develop the distinct BBP membership offer for businesses signing up. ▪ Building on the BBP ethos, provide a platform to progress and align CSR efforts and to develop a city proposition to deliver greater social impact/value for communities. <p>As discussed at the Social Policy Working Group, Members will note that engagement is planned with a number of key anchor/larger organisations in relation to the potential approach to CSR. Work is also underway with the Community Foundation NI to explore hosting a roundtable discussion around the potential opportunities around Philanthropy funding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consideration given to the future delivery structure with consideration given to what can be mainstreamed and what needs bespoke / dedicated focus. ▪ Development of an engagement strategy which sets out our core audiences and methods of engagement. <p>In addition, conversations will continue with key officers to explore the opportunity around a Belfast Anchors Procurement Working Group, and in relation to other Pledges, to support collaboration, innovative approaches and share good practice. Cognisance will also be given to existing forums to ensure it creates value for the city. This could also be used to enhance and strengthen the reach of relevant corporate initiatives such as EVAWG or accessible city.</p>
4.0	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There is no financial or resource implications contained within this report.</p>
5.0	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The Belfast Business Promise has been designed to be inherently inclusive and is not expected to have any adverse impacts on the Section 75 categories. It was therefore screened out with mitigating actions to monitor the roll-out of the programme, the team continues to tie in and promote specific issues/events such as Disability Awareness Day, Mental Health Awareness Week etc. and work with its Partner organisations such as Equality Commission and NOW Group. No equality issues have been reported.</p>
6.0	<p>Appendices</p>
	<p>Appendix 1 – Summary of BBP progress</p> <p>Appendix 2 – Options assessment</p> <p>Appendix 3 – Pledge model refinement</p>

Snapshot of progress (Dec 2025)



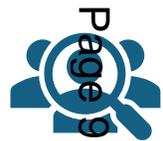
34 organisations employing **6,939 people** are ‘Supporters’ – their statement of commitment to progress through the pledge framework.



28 organisations employing **5,089 staff** have progressed to **BBP Member** status, meeting 5 pledges.



13 organisations employing **12,531 people** have reached **BBP Ambassador** status, meeting all 8 pledges.



9% of organisations are in the public sector, employing **12,319**. **47%** are from the private sector, employing **9,994 people**. **41%** are from the third sector.



Over 1/3 BBP organisations are **RLW accredited**, **employing 12,369 people**



Almost 1/4 BBP organisations have adopted Digital Badges. **19** unique Digital Badges created.



Just a minute

Over half BBP Network are **JAM Card Friendly**. **40 micro & small employers inc. VCSE employers** took up the offer of the **BBP JAM Card Bursary**.



Strong working relationships with key partners established. Active roles in shaping the pledges, providing assurance, offering expertise and advice & sharing resources.



17 organisations measured their carbon footprint for the first time using Climate Essentials platform, with **71 tonnes of CO₂ emissions avoided**.

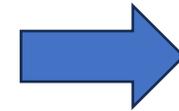


1 in 4 signed up to the BBP through a referral by another organisation. BCC’s CPS have included BBP in tender/quotation documentation.

BBP Model Options - Outline Pros / Cons for discussion

Model	Pros	Cons
Option 1: Good Practice Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to scale in terms of sign-ups • Can adapt guidance quickly in line with external environment. • Makes organisations aware of good practice and potential for engagement with BCC programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to track impact • High risk – no assurance of practice • Diminish ethos and purpose of model • No momentum or incentive to join, follow or progress with the guidance • Limited signposting or drive to sign up to relevant BCC programmes • Planning to manage & communicate change • No recognition for the business • Dilutes existing BBP brand and programme reputation built to date • Risk to BCC reputation if sign-ups aren't managed/controls
Option 2: Good Practice Plus Page 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to Scale • Appeals to wider business base – higher engagement / uptake • Capture good practice • Quality control in place • Increased transparency – lower risk • More regular updates / resources from Partners • Ability to adapt and prioritise sectors and suppliers for assessment based on strategic direction/need • Builds on existing model • More wrap around support provided - more sign ups to other BCC programmes at scale • Prepare businesses for legislative changes and emerging priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource – mainstream & integrate to existing programmes/support and delivery; comms support and messaging. • If sectors or suppliers prioritised for assessment, potential dissatisfied businesses outside of this who want to progress to Member, Ambassador. • Be prepared to remove sign-ups if not engaging..
Option 3: Full Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality control / robust, qualitative and thorough process • Transparency – low risk • Captures good practice • Good relationships built • Allows for thorough wrap around support and sign posting to other programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource intensive (officer / partner time) • Low uptake - risk of micro / SMEs and challenging sectors not signing up due to lack of capacity • Barrier for businesses accessing assessment levels due to robust evidence requirement • More difficult to scale – risk of over-promising & under-delivering. • More regular updates and resources from Partners • Intensive accreditation – lacks ability for continuous improvement • Difficult for businesses to adapt with external economic changes

A framework to improve and recognise good practice and support inclusive growth



Working Draft

GOOD FOR BUSINESS

This page is intentionally left blank