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

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE
-ADDITIONAL ITEMS AND REPORTS TO FOLLOW (3)

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, 18th September, 2026.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

AGENDA:

2. **Restricted Items**

   (d) Belfast Alleyways Transformation Programme (Pages 1 - 6)

   (h) Bye Laws Update - City Hall (Verbal Update)

   (i) Irish Language Policy - Implementation Plan (Pages 7 - 10)

4. **Belfast Agenda/Strategic Issues**

   (d) Regional Balance Bill - Call for Evidence Response (Pages 11 - 20)

8. **Operational Issues**

   (c) Minutes of the Audit and Risk Panel Minutes of 11th September, 2026 (Pages 21 - 36)

   (e) Request for the use of Tommy Patton Bowling Pavilion (Pages 37 - 40)

9. **Issues Raised in Advance by Members**

   (b) Ethical Procurement Policy Update Request (Cllr Brennan to raise)

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

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

Agenda Item 2i

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STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Belfast City Council

Subject:	**Regional Balance Bill – Call for Evidence Response**
Date:	18 September 2026
Reporting Officer:	Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy
Contact Officer:	Jamie Uprichard, Business Research and Development Manager

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? **Yes** [ ] **No** [x]

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 [ ]

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? **Yes** [x] **No** [ ]

1.0	**Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues**
1.1	The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Members for the attached response to the Economy Committee's Call for Evidence in relation the Regional Balance Bill.
2.0	**Recommendation**
2.1	The Committee is asked to: • Consider and approve the submission attached at Appendix 1, as the Council's response to the NI Assembly's Committee for the Economy.
3.0	**Main Report**
3.1	The Regional Balance Bill is a Private Member's Bill introduced by Foyle MLA Sinéad McLaughlin to the Northern Ireland Assembly on Monday 8 June 2026. The Bill seeks to improve regional economic balance across Northern Ireland. It seeks to do so by imposing a duty on the NI Executive to develop and implement a framework setting out how disparities in regional economic performance and living standards are to be addressed and to review the effectiveness of the framework. The Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for the Economy launched a call for evidence and is inviting individuals and organisations to share their views on the Regional Balance Bill. The evidence received will play a role in informing the Committee's scrutiny work, which will include evidence sessions with stakeholders; clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill, and recommendations to the sponsor of the Bill and the Department for the Economy.
3.2	The Bill gives statutory recognition to regional balance (i.e. the difference in economic performance and living standards between geographic regions) as an Executive-wide priority, requires the Executive to adopt and maintain a Regional Balance Strategic Framework, imposes a duty on departments to pay due regard to the Framework when developing policies, strategies and plans, and requires annual reporting to, and scrutiny by, the Assembly. The Department for the Economy (DfE) is given a lead role in monitoring, reporting, issuing guidance and conducting research to support delivery. This latter point is important, as the Bill is seeking to balance recognition that departments need to work together in the context of an overall, strategic framework with the expertise and lead responsibility resting with the DfE. This means that the Framework will have a clear owner in terms of reporting and recommending improvements, whilst ensuring the Executive drives it across the board.
3.3	During the initial 12-week online public consultation conducted between November 2024 and February 2025 (which received 115 responses) there was strong support for many of the provisions in the Bill. However, concerns were raised about the potential impact on Belfast as an economic driver and the possible neglect of the region's capital city, should government become more focused on 'left-behind' places. This is a point the Bill Sponsor is alive to, but notes that the legislation is seeking to drive greater regional balance and lift opportunity and standards of living overall, giving the Executive appropriate discretion to make policy choices on that and justify them accordingly. It is the Bill Sponsor's firm belief that regional balance will result in an improved settlement for left-behind areas, whether within the capital city which contains an extensive share of more deprived wards, especially in North and West Belfast, or more peripheral areas such as the North-West.

	It was highlighted that regional economic statistics are limited, and any reliance will need to take account of the fact that small regions mean statistics are distorted by the fact many people live in one region and work in another, while a business may be based in one region but employ people from throughout NI or further afield. The Bill Sponsor considers that these are important contributions which should be addressed by the Department through more effective data collation and improved monitoring. In fulfilling their responsibilities under the Bill, Departments can set out their operating assumptions and approach to any targets they have been assigned.
3.4	The proposed response (attached at Appendix 1) supports the principle of addressing regional disparities but raises concerns that the Regional Balance Bill, as currently framed, could unintentionally negatively impact Belfast's role as Northern Ireland's primary economic driver as set out in the Regional Development Strategy. We set out five key points for the Committee's consideration: 1. The Belfast economy has performed well over recent years; 2. The city's strong economic performance drives growth across the whole region; 3. The city's economic performance does not automatically translate into improved living standards or economic benefit for all its residents; 4. Research consistently shows that cities drive productivity; and 5. Belfast has spent years playing catch-up – we must maintain that focus rather than take our eye off the ball. The Council argues that Belfast's economic competitors are comparable UK, Irish and European cities rather than other parts of Northern Ireland and warns that diverting policy attention or investment away from the city could weaken overall regional prosperity. It highlights Belfast's significant contribution to the economy, accounting for around one-third of Northern Ireland's GVA, 30% of all jobs and more than a quarter of net job growth since 2013, while also serving as the region's main hub for inward investment, innovation and high-value sectors. The draft response emphasises that strong economic performance does not automatically translate into improved outcomes for all residents. Despite economic growth, Belfast contains some of Northern Ireland's most deprived communities, with six of the ten most deprived wards located in the city, significant skills deficits, high levels of economic inactivity and marked inequalities in employment, educational attainment and life expectancy. It therefore contends that any regional balance framework should consider both intra-city deprivation and objective need, alongside disparities between geographic regions. Drawing on national and international evidence, the Council argues that cities are key drivers of productivity, investment and economic growth, and that policies should focus on enabling places to realise their own economic potential as well as redistributing growth. The Council advocates an inclusive approach that strengthens Belfast's competitiveness while ensuring that economic benefits are more widely shared. The draft responses recommends that the Bill recognises Belfast's strategic economic role, avoid creating barriers to investment and infrastructure delivery, and ensure that efforts to reduce regional disparities are balanced with measures to raise overall economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland.

3.5 3.6	<u>Financial and Resource Implications</u> There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report. <u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> The Bill's Explanatory and Financial Memorandum states: "An Equality Impact Assessment has not been undertaken. Engagement between the Bill Sponsor and the Equality Commission on the outline proposal did not raise any potential adverse effects on initial reading and the Bill Sponsor is happy to engage on this further. Indeed, if the Bill contributes to achieving its policy objectives it may positively affect some groups subject to disadvantage. By promoting action to reduce geographic disparities, the Bill is expected to have positive equality impacts. Transparent reporting and a duty to pay due regard to the Framework support compliance with existing equality obligations. The Bill Sponsor is therefore satisfied that the Bill will not have an adverse effect on any of the groups identified in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The duties imposed by the Bill will be subject to obligations under Section 75."
4.0	**Appendices - Documents Attached**
	Appendix 1 – Belfast City Council's draft response to the Economy Committee's Call for Evidence in relation to the Regional Balance Bill.

Draft Response from Belfast City Council to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Economy's Call for Evidence on the Regional Balance Bill

Submitted by: Belfast City Council
via email to: committee.economy@niassembly.gov.uk
Date: Monday 22 September

Dear Committee Chair and Members,

Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for the Economy's Call for Evidence on the Regional Balance Bill. We recognise the legitimate ambition to reduce geographic disparities in economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland. However, the Council has concerns that the proposed legislation, as currently framed, risks detracting from Belfast's essential role as the largest population centre and the region's primary economic driver, as set out in the Regional Development Strategy. The Council would also welcome clarification how in tackling geographic disparities, which is reasonable and appropriate in some policy areas, sits alongside the need for government plans to prioritise tackling objective need, as defined by deprivation indicators.

Belfast and the Belfast Region's economic competitors are not other parts of Northern Ireland; but rather other UK, Irish and European Cities and City Regions of a similar size. Any statutory framework that potentially reduces the focus on Belfast's continued growth risks undermining the very engine that generates opportunity, revenue and prosperity for the wider region. When Belfast succeeds, surrounding areas benefit through supply chains, commuting patterns, higher-value employment, and increased public resources available for redistribution.

The council notes that the Bill Sponsor is aware of concerns about the impact on Belfast as an economic driver and the possible neglect of the region's capital city, should government become more focused on 'left behind' places. While it is suggested that the legislation is seeking to drive greater regional balance and lift opportunity and standards of living overall, Belfast City Council would emphasise that there is strong evidence of objective need to tackle lower living standards within the city, with people living in many parts of the city not adequately benefitting from economic growth. Belfast suffers from significant disadvantage: 6 of the top 10 most deprived wards in NI are in Belfast while the top 15 most deprived wards for the Education, Skills and Training domain are all in Belfast.

The Council's agenda and approach to economic growth focuses not only on stimulating economic growth and creating jobs but also in ensuring inclusive growth and as many people as possible having access to those jobs. Creating a strong, competitive economy requires growing the business base and sustainable jobs, increasing skill levels and improving infrastructure and connectivity in its widest sense, from connecting communities to opportunities as well as the region's external and internal connectivity. While there has to be a focus on improving high value skills and job creation to boost productivity, it is also essential to increase lower-level skills and jobs to address economic inactivity levels, ensuring that those furthest from the labour market are supported through inclusive pathways to employment. Sectors such as healthcare and retail are the largest urban employers. Together with leisure and tourism, these are important growth sectors for the region and Belfast and provide such pathways to address high levels of inactivity and unemployment.

We would welcome clarity regarding how the proposed Regional Balance Strategic Framework would interact with the existing Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS) which has a statutory basis prepared under the Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and the wider body of planning legislation.

We note that Part 3 of the legislation as introduced defines “regional disparities” to include “regional distributions of public capital expenditure”. It is important that regionally significant investments by the NI Executive within Belfast which aim to support strong, sustainable growth for the benefit of all parts of Northern Ireland and strengthen Belfast as the regional economic driver are not constrained by such provisions.

We set out five key points for the Committee’s consideration:

1. **The Belfast economy has performed well over recent years**

   Belfast has delivered strong growth in recent years in jobs, productivity, foreign direct investment and high-value sectors such as financial and professional services, technology, advanced manufacturing and the creative industries.

   - 32,638 net additional jobs since 2013 – more than 1 in 4 jobs created in Northern Ireland over that period;
   - £18.5bn of GVA in 2025, ⅓ of the Northern Ireland economy (£36.8 bn for the Belfast city region, ⅔ of the NI economy);
   - 243,062 jobs in the city, representing 30% of all NI jobs respectively; and
   - 12,100 active enterprises in the city and 41,890 enterprises in the Belfast region. 1 in every 7 NI businesses are based in Belfast and 1 in 2 in the Belfast region;
   - Belfast is a globally competitive location with well-established strengths in key growth sectors:
     - Number 1 inward investment globally location for US FDI cyber security projects (FDI Markets 2020)
     - Number 1 location globally for FinTech inward investment (FDI Markets 2023)
     - Number 1 location in Europe for new software development projects (FDI Markets 2023)

   This performance is the product of investment in growing sectors, infrastructure, skills and place-making but it should be noted that this positive economic performance reflects progress from a lower-base than many other similar sized Uk and European cities and continuing infrastructure and competitiveness challenges.

2. **The city’s strong economic performance drives growth across the whole region**

Belfast functions as Northern Ireland's economic capital. Growth in the city generates demand for goods and services from the wider region, supports employment for residents of neighbouring councils who commute into the city, and contributes disproportionately to the regional rates base and tax revenues that fund public services across Northern Ireland. A successful Belfast expands the overall economic pie.

- Belfast is the region's key population centre: it has a population of 348,005, and the Belfast region (based on the TTW area) is home to a population of over 1.13 million people (around 60% of the total Northern Irelands population);
- The Council has a strong track record of working in partnership with the NI Executive to implement national and regional policies and programmes at a local level and delivering positive outcomes for local communities, including, for example, the Urban Villages programme, Labour Market Partnership, NIESS, supporting vulnerable individuals in need through Complex Lives initiative as well as securing the transformational Belfast City Region Deal (BRCD). The BRCD involves an integrated programme of investment that cuts across the responsibilities of local councils, the Northen Ireland Executive and UK Government and is expected to deliver 20,000 new jobs over the next decade.
- Belfast is a new job creator for all adjacent areas – particular those around the city. Almost half of those that work in Belfast do not live in the city and Belfast City Council residents account for only 53% of total workplace employment in the city. This is indicative of the City's role as an employment hub for NI, attracting a high proportion of in-commuters. Any approaches that simply focus on redistribution risk having a negative impact not only in Belfast but in all other parts of the region;
- Incomes in neighbouring council areas (Lisburn & Castlereagh, Ards & North Down, Antrim & Newtownabbey) are on average higher than for Belfast residents. Average earnings for residents in Lisburn & Castlereagh are 6% higher than Belfast citizens; Antrim & Newtownabbey residents have earnings 3.4% greater than Belfast.

3. **The city's economic performance does not automatically translate into improved living standards or economic benefit for all its residents**

Despite strong headline economic indicators, significant intra-city inequalities persist. Many residents, particularly in North and West Belfast and other disadvantaged neighbourhoods, do not yet fully share in the benefits of growth. Levels of economic inactivity, skills gaps and health inequalities remain stubbornly high in parts of the city. Any regional balance framework must therefore recognise that "Belfast" is not a homogeneous entity and that targeted action within the city is as important as action between regions.

- Average earnings of Belfast residents lag behind that of its workforce: those living outside of Belfast but working in the city earn on average £3,419 a year more than Belfast residents;
- While Belfast supports proportionately more higher-level jobs than other areas, it also has a disproportionate level of deprivation in many neighbourhoods: 6 of

the top 10 most deprived wards in NI are in Belfast while the top 15 most deprived wards for the Education, Skills and Training domain are all in Belfast;

- The employment rate in Belfast varies greatly by local area – and is significantly lower in areas of deprivation. The employment rate of those living in the most deprived areas of Belfast is 22 percentage points less than those living in the least deprived areas (55% v 77%);
- There is a significant gap in life expectancy between most and least deprived areas – this equates to 11 years for males and 8 years for females;
- A significant proportion (41.5%) of all Belfast residents have skills levels not higher than level 2 (5 GCSEs equivalent) – with 13.8% (approx. 1 in 7) of all working age residents having no formal qualifications. By contrast, the skills demand for the coming period shows that fewer than 1 in 10 jobs will require skills levels below level 2. This suggests that future growth in Belfast will continue to be serviced by those living outside the city; and
- Educational attainment shows that Belfast school leavers have the lowest educational attainment of any council area in NI – 66.4% achieve 5+ GCSEs including English and Maths, well below the NI average of 71.9%. Performance varies greatly based on socio-economic circumstances. School leavers entitled to free school meals living in the Castle DEA are the lowest attainers in the city (42.7%), whereas school leavers not entitled to free school meals living in the Ormiston DEA are more than twice as likely to (88.5%) to attain this level.

4. **Research consistently shows that cities drive productivity**

Extensive evidence from the UK and internationally demonstrates that large cities and city-regions are the primary engines of productivity growth. Agglomeration effects, dense labour markets, knowledge spillovers and specialised services concentrate in urban centres. Policies that artificially constrain the growth of the leading city in a region tend to reduce overall productivity and competitiveness rather than raise the performance of lagging areas. Northern Ireland's long-term prosperity depends on Belfast remaining competitive with peer Core Cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham and Leeds.

- In OECD countries, cities (which are home to 50% of total population) have contributed 60% of total employment creation and GDP growth in the past 15 years;
- OCO Global suggests that cities are magnets for FDI as they are home to 3 in 4 of all highly skilled jobs;
- Belfast and the wider region possess many of the assets that direct FDI decisions (The Productivity Institute) including its skilled workforce, universities and researchers, vibrant cultural scene, industry clusters and transport infrastructure;
- These assets are also critical in positioning the city as a base for fast-growing, globally focused businesses. We need to grow more innovation-focused businesses to drive our competitiveness. This also helps address a reliance on FDI – with local businesses more likely to "stick" to their home location – even when they go global;

- Regional productivity performance has been linked to investment in research and development (R&D) and other innovation activities. The Belfast Region City Deal presents a unique opportunity to develop clusters of high-growth industries and innovative businesses, providing agglomeration benefits and 'knowledge spillover' effects. Concentrating economic activity in a small city such as Belfast increases the productivity of that activity;
- The battle for investment is a global not a regional one: comparing ourselves only against adjacent districts is a zero-sum game. Whilst there has been much progress there continues to be significant areas for improvement in our productivity performance.

5. **Belfast has spent years playing catch-up – we must maintain that focus rather than take our eye off the ball**

For much of the post-conflict period Belfast lagged behind other UK cities. Only through sustained focus on regeneration, jobs, education and skills, connectivity and investment attraction has the city begun to close the gap. Maintaining that momentum is essential if more of our citizens are to access good jobs and if the benefits of growth are to reach a wider range of communities within the city. Diverting policy attention or resources away from Belfast at this stage risks reversing hard-won gains and leaving both the city and the wider region less competitive.

- Belfast hasn't yet reached our potential – and the competition is strong. More than 41% of the working age population on the NI side of Dublin-Belfast economic corridor are skilled at level 2 and below: in ROI, this is 28%.
- Belfast needs more new businesses – there were 29.7 business start-ups per 10,000 population in 2022 – at this time, the worst performance of all 63 urban areas in the UK (Core Cities).
- We accept the argument around the need for targeted investment; we have that at a micro level within our city. We need to maintain a focus on a growth agenda – while putting in place targeted activities to support inclusive and more sustainable growth;
- We believe that to raise productivity, future policy should aim to help places achieve their productivity potential, which will differ from area to area, rather than trying to get every council area to achieve the same level of productivity.
- Investment decisions are taken on a global level: Belfast is not competing with its neighbouring towns and cities for investment – we are competing against other global cities. Belfast has a proven track record of working with partner Councils across NI. and government departments and agencies, in our collective and shared interests and are committed to improving economic performance and living standards across NI;
- In terms of scale, Northern Ireland makes up a small share of the UK economy IS-7 (Industrial Strategy 7 key sectors) economy. However, Belfast makes up a large share relative to other local UK authorities. It is an underutilised national economic asset and makes a disproportionately large contribution to the regional economy. That contribution should be nurtured.
- While Belfast and the wider Belfast City Region area performs better than other parts of Northern Ireland, it isn't best in class when considered against other

UK city regions. There is room for significant improvement, with implications for the overall Northern Irish economy. Context is critical – and the competitive challenges are not from neighbouring towns and boroughs. They are from other UK, RoI and global cities.

<u>Recommendations</u>

While the Council supports the principle of reducing regional disparities, we urge the Committee to ensure that any approach to tacking such disparities:

- Explicitly recognises Belfast's role as Northern Ireland's economic driver and the importance of its continued competitiveness with other major cities;
- Avoids any presumption that growth in Belfast is inherently at the expense of other areas;
- Requires consideration of objective need and intra-city inequalities alongside inter-regional ones;
- Ensures that the definition of "regional disparities" or "due regard" duties do not constrain or create unnecessary barriers to investment, infrastructure or economic development decisions in Belfast that strengthen the city-region and NI as a whole; and
- Focuses on raising overall economic performance so that more resources are available to improve outcomes everywhere.
- Recognises that the beneficiaries of recent economic growth in Belfast are not necessarily Belfast residents. Furthermore, much of that growth supports other parts of the region: almost half of all the high skilled and well-paid jobs in Belfast are taken up by people who don't live in the city, ensuring that prosperity is shared across the region.

We recognise that some of the outcomes and areas of concern hinge on definitions of "economic performance and living standards between geographic regions" and how the Framework is designed and applied if the Bill becomes law. However, at this stage, we continue to be concerned about the potential for negatively impacting the long overdue improvement in the number and quality of jobs available in our city and our collective efforts to ensure that growth reaches people living within the city itself who have not as yet seen its benefits.

Belfast City Council remains committed to working with the NI Executive, other councils and partners agencies to help deliver a more prosperous and inclusive Northern Ireland. We would be happy to provide further evidence or meet with the Committee to discuss these points in more detail.

STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Belfast City Council

Subject:	Audit & Risk Panel Report and Minutes of Meeting of 11 September 2026
Date:	18 September 2026
Reporting Officer:	Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive / Strategic Director of Corporate Services
Contact Officer:	Claire O'Prey, Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services (AGRS)

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? **Yes** [ ] **No** [X]

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)
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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 [ ]

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? **Yes** [X] **No** [ ]

1.0	**Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues**
1.1	The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with a summary of the key issues that were considered and discussed by the Audit & Risk Panel at its September 2026 meeting and present the minutes of the last meeting of the Panel for approval.

2.0	**Recommendation**
2.1	That the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee notes the key issues arising at the meeting and approves the minutes of the Audit & Risk Panel of 11 September 2026 at appendix A.
3.0	**Main Report**
	Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO)
3.1	The Panel considered the **Statement of Accounts** for the Council for the year-end 31 March 2026. These accounts are a fundamental part of the councils overall corporate governance framework and provide assurance to Members and ratepayers on the stewardship of the council's finances and its financial position.
3.2	The NIAO Director Manager provided the Panel with an update on their audit of the accounts which is nearing completion, including the proposal that **they will report positively on the 2025-26 financial statements with an unqualified audit opinion, without modification.**
3.3	The Panel considered the draft Report To Those Charged With Governance which summarises the key matters from the NIAO audit and contains one priority one recommendation regarding notice of public rights; one priority two recommendation regarding IT system controls; three priority three recommendations regarding financial regulations, financial instruments and related party transactions and councillor allowances and; one observation regarding overtime governance and monitoring. An action plan to address these findings will be included in the final report.
3.4	The accounts are due to be published on the council's website by the legislative deadline of 30th September 2026.
	Key reports
3.5	The Panel noted the **progress being made against the annual audit plan**, with the following three assignments finalised in the period June - August 2026; Payroll – Data Analytics; Labour Market Partnership and the Local Economic Partnership.
3.6	The Panel also received a management update report on conflicts of interest, gifts and hospitality and City and Neighbourhood audit actions.

3.7	The Panel considered the **corporate risk dashboard** which provided an analysis and update on the progress being made to manage the 15 risks that are considered to present the greatest threat to the delivery corporate priorities and / or compliance with key statutory requirements. The Panel noted the **quarterly assurances provided by directors** regarding the arrangements in place for the management of risk (including formal departmental risk management arrangements) and the implementation of agreed audit actions.
3.8	Regarding **business continuity management**, the Panel received assurance that all critical services had been reminded of the BCM policy requirements for the year 2026/27.
3.9	The Panel also received **quarter 1 reports on corporate health and safety and absence management.**
3.10	The Panel also considered the **Performance Improvement** Self-Assessment report for 2025/26
	External member to the Panel
3.11	The Panel received an update on the recruitment for the external member to the Panel, with the post due to be advertised in late September 2026. It is intended that the successful candidate will attend the Audit & Risk Panel in December.
	Financial and Resource Implications
3.12	None
	Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment
3.13	None known at this time.
4.0	**Appendices - Documents Attached**
	Appendix A - Minutes of Audit & Risk Panel 11 September 2026

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Audit and Risk Panel

Friday, 11th September, 2026

MEETING OF AUDIT AND RISK PANEL

Members present: Councillor R. McLaughlin (Chairperson);
Alderman Rodgers;
Councillors Groogan; and
Mr. D. Wilson (External Member).

In attendance: Ms. S. McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services;
Ms. N. Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services;
Mr. T. Wallace, Director of Finance;
Mr. D. Sales, Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services;
Ms. H. Lyons, Corporate Finance Manager;
Ms. C. O'Prey, Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services;
Mr. M. Whitmore, Audit, Governance and Risk Services Manager;
Ms. E. Eaton, Corporate Health and Safety Manager
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-poverty;
Ms. K. Fennell-Jenkins, Corporate HR Manager; and
Ms. C. Donnelly, Committee Services Officer.

Also attended: Mr. C. McGeown, Northern Ireland Audit Office;

Pre-Meeting

In line with best practice including the Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector the Audit and Risk Panel met privately with the Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services prior to the meeting commencing, to enable the Panel Members to raise any concerns around the work of internal audit or the Council's risk, control and governance arrangements and to make appropriate enquiries of the Head of AGRS to determine whether there were any restrictions on their scope, access, authority or resources and if there were, whether those restrictions limit the functions ability to carry out its responsibilities effectively.

Apologies

An apology for inability to attend was reported for Councillor Verner.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 9th June, 2026, were approved by the Panel.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Audit and Risk Panel Terms of Reference

The Panel noted the Statement of Purpose and Terms of Reference.

Absence Performance – Quarter One – 2026/27

The Corporate HR Manager provided the Panel with a summary of the sickness absence data for the quarter ending in June, 2027 and highlighted the following key performance indicators:

- Average sickness absence reduced from 3.81 days to 3.32 days;
- 75.74% of employees recorded no recorded absence during the quarter, an improvement from 74.70% during the same period last year;
- Long-term absence (20+ days) reduced significantly by 813.81 days, from 5977.32 days to 5163.51 days;
- The Council achieved the Q1 target of 3.65 days per FTE, recording a performance of 3.32 days; and
- Depression/anxiety/stress (34.65% of total days lost) and Musculo-skeletal (23.71% of total days lost) continue to be the top two reasons for absence

She stated that the figures demonstrated a positive overall trend in attendance performance, driven largely by reductions in long-term sickness absence.

She informed the Panel that following implementation of the ResourceLink absence management system on 1st April, 2026, the transition period had required extensive testing and validation of reporting functionality and, as a result, monthly spot check meetings had not been undertaken during April and May, 2026 but and that reporting functionality was approved in mid-June, allowing monthly review meetings to recommence.

She explained that the Quarter 1 performance represented a positive start to 2026/27, with the Council achieving its absence target and recording reductions in both overall and long-term sickness absence, however, a relatively small number of long-term absence cases continued to have a disproportionate impact on departmental performance and continued management focus, timely intervention, robust application of the Attendance Policy and effective departmental oversight would be critical in sustaining improvement throughout the remainder of the financial year.

The Panel noted the report and commended the target being achieved for quarter one and the completion of departmental absence improvement plans.

Corporate Health and Safety Performance Report

The Corporate Health and Safety Manager provided the Panel with an update on the corporate health and safety performance and activities for the quarter ending 30th June, 2026.

She updated the Panel on progress against key performance indicators, agreed health and safety and fire safety recommendations implemented, employee and non-employee accidents and health and safety statutory agency enquiries and correspondence, she summarised the following health and safety data:

- Percentage compliance rates by department; and
- Employee and non-employee accidents.

She reported that there had been eight enquiries from the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) and one from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Services (NIFRS) during quarter one 2026/27 and she summarised the content of the correspondence.

She outlined the outstanding health and safety and fire safety actions and confirmed all outstanding high priority actions had been completed since the end of quarter.

The Panel noted the report.

AGRS Progress Report

The Audit, Governance and Risk Manager provided an overview of the Service's activity for the period from June to August, 2026 and reported that the following three assurance assignments had been finalised and provided the Panel with a summary of each:

- Payroll – Data Analytics;
- Labour Market Partnership; and
- Local Economic Partnership.

He explained that 29% of the planned activity within the delivery of the 2026/27 audit plan was either underway or completed and that the unit was continuing to provide advice and consultancy services to management and summarised work which had been undertaken by AGRS from June to August, 2026.

He provided the Panel with an update on the National Fraud Initiative and outlined that the Council's approach would be the same as in previous years. In relation to Fraud and Raising Concerns, he explained that initial enquiries into two concerns had been completed and outlined further concerns which were being addressed. Further updates would be provided to the Panel as appropriate.

He advised that it was intended that the external Member recruitment would take place in late September, with shortlisting to take place in mid-October and Panel interviews scheduled for early November. He stated that the successful candidate would attend the next meeting of the Panel, scheduled to take place in December.

The Panel noted the report.

Corporate Risk Management

The Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services submitted for the Panel's consideration the Corporate Risk Dashboard which summarised the key updates from the risk review for the quarter-ending June, 2026.

She advised that, Audit, Government and Risk Services (AGRS) had met with risk owners to support them in their quarterly review of the corporate risks and inform the Corporate Risk Management Dashboard.

She provided an update on a number of corporate risks and outlined the actions undertaken to manage them. She explained that the corporate risk on asset management did not have a mitigation plan in place and that the Director of Property and Projects was the risk owner and responsible for ensuring that a risk action plan would be prepared.

The Head of Audit, Governance and Risk Services reported that horizon scanning had been built into the quarterly risk management review process and that no new matters had been identified in the quarter, she added that directors had agreed the formal arrangements for the management of risk at departmental level and were required to sign off on the adequacy and effectiveness of those arrangements in their respective Quarterly Assurance Statements and she provided a summary of the assurance being provided by each director.

The Panel was also provided with an update on business continuity management arrangements and advised that AGRS had completed the review and update of the Business Continuity Management Policy, subject to discussion and agreement with Commercial and Procurement Services with regard to the addition of purchasing and procurement to the list of critical services.

The Panel:

- Noted the corporate risk management dashboard and agreed the updates for QE June 2026;
- Noted the assurances from senior management with regard to compliance with the Risk Strategy, based on the assurance statements for QE June 2026; and
- Noted the update on business continuity management.

Financial Statement of Accounts

The Corporate Finance Manager provided the Panel with an overview of the Council's Statement of Accounts and incorporated Annual Governance Statement for the year ended 31st March, 2026.

She reported that she was awaiting confirmation of the Local Government Auditor's opinion that:

- the financial statements give a true and fair view, in accordance with relevant legal and statutory requirements and the Code of Practice on Local Authority Accounting in the United Kingdom 2025-26, of the financial position of Belfast City Council as at 31st March, 2026 and its income and expenditure for the year then ended;
- the statement of accounts had been properly prepared in accordance with the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Department for Communities directions issued thereunder;
- the part of the Remuneration Report to be audited had been properly prepared in accordance with the Department for Communities directions made under the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015; and
- the information given in the Narrative Report for the financial year ended 31st March, 2026 was consistent with the financial statements.

She summarised the following Council Reserves for the Panel:

- General Fund;
- Capital Fund;
- Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund;
- Leisure Mobilisation Fund;
- Capital Receipts Reserve; and
- Other Fund Balances and Reserves.

She explained that the overall level of trade debtors was standing at £3.97m at 31st March, 2026 in comparison to £4.73m at 31st March, 2025. She reported that the average time taken to pay creditor invoices was 15 days and the Council endeavoured to process invoices as quickly as possible and had an improvement plan to support the process.

The Corporate Finance Manager summarised the Annual Governance Statement for the year 2025/26 and highlighted the following key considerations:

- scope of responsibility;
- the purpose of the governance framework;
- the governance framework in place;
- review of effectiveness;
- update on the significant governance issues declared last year; and
- significant governance issues for current year.

She stated that the Annual Governance Statement had been approved by the Chairperson of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee and the Chief Executive and was subject to review by the Northern Ireland Audit Office as part of its annual audit.

The Panel:

- Noted the Council's Statement of Accounts and incorporated Annual Governance Statement for the year ended 31st March, 2026;
- Recommend that the Strategic Policy and Resource Committee approve the Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance Statement; and
- Noted the legislative requirements under Regulation 8 of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the requirement on the Council to publish these accounts no later than 30th September, 2026.

Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) – Report to those charged with Governance

Mr. C. McGeown, Director, Northern Ireland Audit Office attended in relation to this item. He provided the Panel with an overview of the Belfast City Council – Draft Report to those charged with Governance 2025/26.

He explained that it was proposed that the Local Government Auditor would report on the 2025/26 financial statements with an unqualified audit opinion, without modification and that the audit of accounts would be certified, in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 and the Local Government Code of Audit Practice.

He highlighted the following key areas of the Draft Report to those charged with Governance for the Panel's Consideration:

- Status of the Audit;
- Audit Scope;
- Group Considerations;
- Significant Risk; and
- Findings from the Audit.

The Panel noted the Draft Report to those charged with Governance 2025/26 and that the misstatements should not be corrected as correction would have no material impact on the audit of the 2025/26 financial statements.

Management Update on Conflicts of Interest, Gifts and Hospitality

The City Solicitor provided the Panel with an update on the progress to address issues which had been highlighted in a recent audit of Conflict of Interests, Gifts and Hospitality Policy.

She explained that the audit had identified a number of issues and that the Governance and Compliance Service had assigned a dedicated officer to oversee implementation of agreed audit actions and to work with Chief Officers and Departments to strengthen compliance across the organisation.

She referred the Panel to each agreed audit action, the timeframe for implementation and next steps.

She advised that further update reports would be brought to the Corporate Management Team and the Audit Assurance Board on a six-monthly basis, in line with the Conflicts of Interest, Gifts and Hospitality departmental reporting timetable.

The Panel noted the report.

CNS Management Update on Audit Actions

The Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services provided the Panel with an overview of the undernoted report:

"1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

The purpose of this report is to provide the Audit and Risk Panel with an update on health and safety activities and progress in implementing audit recommendations across the CNS.

2.0 Recommendations

The Panel is asked to note the report.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Health and Safety

Members of the panel have received an update on H&S actions for the department as part of the corporate health and safety report. Outstanding actions, risk assessments and incidents are reviewed regularly by senior managers in advance of both service and departmental H&S committee meetings, and any areas of concern are also discussed with Directors as part of the quarterly governance meetings with the Strategic Director at C&NS SDMT. The departmental H&S committee, which is also attended by a representative of the corporate H&S team, are also updated on policies, legislation or trends emerging from the corporate H&S committee.

3.2 H&S Outstanding Actions

At the end of June 2026 (Q1) there were 86 actions across the department, with 38 completed, leaving 48 outstanding actions which has since been reduced to 36 actions as per the Corporate H&S report. In relation to

the current outstanding actions, for 10x actions CHSU are awaiting confirmation / evidence from Service, for 8x Actions updates have just received awaiting CHSU review, for 5x Actions staff are awaiting training, for 4x actions the service is awaiting update / works for PMU, for 2x actions service are awaiting final noise reports from CHSU and for 1x action the Service is awaiting a lighting survey to be completed.

For the remaining 6x actions no update was provided on the system, and these have been raised with management to address any issues with updates to be provided as a priority.

Progress with all above outstanding actions will be raised at next service and departmental H&S committees with updates required for review with Directors and C&NS Departmental Management Team on 16th September.

3.3 **Audit Actions**

At the end of July 2026, CNS had 37 open audit actions, accounting for 19% of the 196 open audit actions across the Council. Of these, 8 actions have been fully implemented, 16 are partially implemented, and 13 remain not implemented. (Details of the actions are provided in Appendix 1).

Of the 29 actions that are still active, approximately 11 are expected to be submitted to AGRS for closure as part of the next verification exercise scheduled for November/December 2026. Progress continues to be made in advancing the implementation of all outstanding CNS audit actions.

AGRS provides regular reports to the Department outlining the status of audit actions and attends Senior Departmental Management Team (SDMT) meetings to discuss progress. Audit actions are also reviewed at Departmental Management Team (DMT) meetings to monitor implementation and facilitate their closure.

4.0 **Financial and Resource Implications**

There are no financial and resource implications to the proposals within this report.

5.0 **Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment**

There are no known equality or good relations / rural needs assessment associated with this report at this time."

Noted.

Performance Improvement Update

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty summarised the following report for the Panel:

"1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 To provide the Audit and Risk Panel (ARP) with an update on:

i. Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2025-2026.
ii. Performance Improvement Plan 2026-2027.
iii. NIAO Section 95 Audit and Assessment 2026-2027.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Panel is asked to note:

i. The Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2025-2026 (Appendix 1).
ii. The agreed Performance Improvement Plan 2026-2027.
iii. That a mid-year progress report will be brought to the ARP on 8 December 2026.
iv. That the NIAO Section 95 Audit and Assessment 2026-2027 will take place during October/ November 2026.

3.0 Main report

Background

3.1 Part 12 of the Local Government (NI) Act requires councils to agree improvement objectives on an annual basis and publish these in the form of a Performance Improvement Plan, to be published by 30 June. The Act also requires that progress is regularly monitored against the improvement objectives and reported in an annual Self-Assessment of performance, to be published by 30 September.

Performance Improvement Self-Assessment 2025-2026

3.2 The Panel is advised that as per the update provided by officers at the preceding June Panel meeting, the Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2025-2026 (Appendix 1) was approved by the Strategic, Policy and Resources (SP&R) Committee on 21 August 2026 and ratified by the full council on 1 September 2026.

Performance Improvement Plan 2026-2027

3.3 The Performance Improvement Plan 2026-2027 was approved by the SP&R on 22 May 2026, ratified by the full council on 1 June 2026 and published on the website in compliance with the statutory deadline of 30 June. The Panel will receive quarterly reports (from quarter 2 onwards) on progress against the performance improvement objectives 2026-2027. The first quarterly performance update will be presented to the Panel on the 8 December 2026.

NIAO Section 95 Audit and Assessment 2026-27

3.4 Under Section 95 of the Local Government Act, the NIAO are required to conduct an annual audit and assessment of councils' performance management arrangements. The Strategic Performance team will submit the Performance Improvement Audit Questionnaire 2026-2027 to the NIAO by the deadline of 1 October 2026. The timetable according to the NIAO 2025-2026 Audit Strategy is as follows:

NIAO Planning and Fieldwork	**October/November 2026**
Draft S95 report issued to officers for factual accuracy agreement	**14 November 2026**
Final S95 report issued to the council and DfC	**30 November 2026**

The NIAO/Strategic Performance Team will contact relevant officer(s) to obtain evidence during fieldwork. The outcome of the audit will be reported to the ARP following receipt of the final audit report from the NIAO.

3.5 Next steps

i. This report will be noted through the minutes at the SP&R Committee on 18 September.

ii. The Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2025-2026 will be published on the council website by the statutory deadline of 30 September.

iii. The Strategic Performance team will submit the NIAO Performance Improvement Audit Questionnaire 2026-2027 to the NIAO by 1 October 2026.

iv. The Panel will receive a mid-year progress report 2026-2027 on the 8 December 2026.

v. Council officers will liaise with the NIAO during their fieldwork in October or November 2026 and the NIAO Section 95 report will be presented to the Panel when available.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

4.1 There are no financial or human resource implications arising directly from this report.

5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

5.1 There are no equality, good relations or rural needs implications arising directly from this report."

The Panel noted:

- The Performance Improvement Self-Assessment report 2025-2026;
- The agreed Performance Improvement Plan 2026-2027;
- That a mid-year progress report would be brought to the Panel in December, 2026; and
- That the NIAO Section 95 Audit and Assessment 2026-2027 would take place during October/ November 2026.

The Panel thanked Mr Wilson for his contribution to the work of the Audit and Risk Panel over the previous three years.

Chairperson

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STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Belfast City Council

Subject:	Request for the use of Tommy Patton Bowling Pavilion
Date:	Friday 18th September 2026
Reporting Officer:	Stephen Leonard, Director of Neighbourhood Services.
Contact Officer:	Paula Irvine, Parks Events and Outreach Manager

Restricted Reports

Is this report restricted? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☒ X

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 ☐

Call-in

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? **Yes** ☒ x **No** ☐

1.0	**Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues**
1.1	The Committee is asked to note that Council has received a late request from East Belfast Football Club to host a supporter and volunteer dinner in Alderman and Tommy Patton bowling

	pavilion on Saturday the 26th September 2026. The request was received with no opportunity to include it within the request going to the September meeting of P&C. Members should also note that if approved the event will take place prior to the decision being ratified at full Council on 01st Oct 2026.
2.0	**Recommendation**
2.1 2.2 2.3	The Committee is asked to grant authority to the applicant for the proposed event on the date noted; subject to the completion of the appropriate event management plans and satisfactory terms being agreed by the Director of City & Neighbourhood Services and on the condition that the Event Organisers: I. resolves all operational issues to the Council's satisfaction; II. meets all statutory requirements including Public Liability Insurance cover, Health and Safety, and licensing responsibilities; and III. shall consult with adjoining public bodies and local communities as necessary. Committee are also asked to approve free use of the facility to include the staff costs to open, close and manage the building during the event. Please note that the above recommendations are taken as a pre-policy position in advance of the Council agreeing a more structured framework and policy for 'Events', which is currently being taken forward in conjunction with the Councils Commercial team.
3.0	**Main Report**
  3.1 3.2 3.3 3.4	**<u>Key Issues</u>** East Belfast Football Club has advised that they have organised the evening as a Supporters and Volunteers Dinner, primarily as a way for the club to say thank you to the many volunteers, supporters and other individuals who continually give their time and support to keep the club going. A number of distinguished guests will be in attendance on the evening who have supported the club and its work. Anticipated numbers in attendance are around 50 people. The event itself will run from approximately 7.00pm until 10.30pm. The organisers will however require access to the pavilion in advance of the event to allow club volunteers and the caterer to set up tables, prepare the room and have everything ready before guests arrive. Suitable access and staffing arrangements will be agreed with the OSS manager.

3.5	The organisers are seeking free use of the facility, to include all Council staffing costs associated with opening / closing and managing the building during the event.
3.6	For catering, the organisers intend to use an external contractor, Seventy Catering & BBQ Hire.
3.7	The club has advised that there will be no alcohol sold, supplied or provided by East Belfast Football Club at the event. However guests who have been invited have already been informed that they may bring their own alcohol or other refreshments should they wish to do so. This is contrary to Council policy.
3.8	Entertainment will be low-key. Local singer Kristine Robinson will provide live entertainment during part of the evening. There will also be a short presentation during which the club intends to hand out a small number of gifts as a gesture of appreciation.
3.9	The evening is not being operated as a commercial or fundraising event. The entire cost of the dinner and entertainment is being met by East Belfast Football Club from funds that the club has raised. Nothing is being charged to those attending.
3.10	**<u>Financial and Resource Implications</u>** The organisers have asked for free use of the bowling pavilion to host the event. The associated costs are as follows: Loss of income from room hire - £160.80 Staff costs to be absorbed from existing revenue budget - £96.00
	<u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u>
3.11	There are no known implications.
4.0	**Appendices – Documents Attached**
	None

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