

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 12th March, 2025

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor I. McLaughlin (Deputy Chairperson);
The Deputy Lord Mayor, Councillor McCormick;
The High Sheriff, Councillor McAteer;
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, de Faoite, D. Douglas, Duffy,
Hanvey, Kelly, Lyons, Maskey, McCabe,
McDonough-Brown, McDowell, McKay,
R. McLaughlin, O'Neill and Smyth.

In attendance: Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Ms. L. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Ms. E. Clark, Programme Manager;
Ms. L. Leonard, European and International Relations
Manager;
Mr. J. Uprichard, Business and Research Development
Manager; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of the Chairperson, Councillor Nelson.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 5th February were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 3rd March.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor O'Neill declared an interest in item 2a) 'Visit Belfast', as he was on the Board of Visit Belfast but as this was a Council appointment, he did not leave the meeting whilst the item was being considered.

In relation to item 3a) 'Vacant to Vibrant Scheme', Councillor Duffy declared an interest in that his employer had submitted an application to the scheme and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration. Councillors R. McLaughlin and Black declared an interest in the same item, as they were Members of the West Belfast Partnership Board but as these were Council appointments, they did not leave the meeting whilst the item was being considered.

Councillor R. McLaughlin declared an interest in item 4a) 'Response to the Department for Infrastructure Review of Trust Ports Consultation', as he was on the Board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Presentations

Visit Belfast

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed Mr. G. Lennon, Chief Executive, Visit Belfast, and Ms. M. McGivern, Chair, Visit Belfast, to the Committee and they were admitted to the meeting.

The Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, advised the Committee that the Visit Belfast representatives were in attendance to present its annual funding request for 2025/26 and to set out its strategic development and operational delivery, focused on supporting tourism growth.

She highlighted the continued growth within the tourism sector and that Belfast had hosted 1.7 million overnight trips that accounted for 31 per cent of all overnight trips across Northern Ireland. She reported that the overnight trips had generated £538 million in tourism spend, 44 per cent of all tourism spend across Northern Ireland. She explained that challenges included staffing, costs of doing business within the tourism and hospitality sector and the impact of opening hours on hospitality.

She advised the Committee that the Council had worked closely with Visit Belfast, Belfast's Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO), to ensure that Visit Belfast's 2024-2027 strategy 'New Horizons for Belfast', and its year 2 business plan 2025/26, aligned with the four themes of the Council's 'Make Yourself at Home' tourism plan:

- **Grow** the visitor economy in the Belfast city region in an inclusive and sustainable way;
- **Position** the Belfast city region as a front of mind destination for leisure visits, business events and days out;
- Enhance the **Experience** for visitors by showcasing Belfast city region as a diverse and welcoming destination with a unique neighbourhood offer, and;
- **Sustain** its approach to championing sustainability, pioneering impactful initiatives, inspiring sustainable choices amongst visitors and clients and telling Belfast's sustainability story.

The representatives provided a summary of the 2024-2027 strategy 'New Horizons for Belfast', including growth targets and its key pillars.

The Committee was presented with an update on the progress of year one of the strategy, 2024/25, including performance highlights, and the economic, social and environmental impact.

In relation to the business plan for year two, 2025/26, Mr. Lennon provided the Committee with a summary of the policy and market context, advising that work had been done to ensure the plan and strategy aligned with existing strategies, such as the Belfast Agenda and the Department for the Economy's Economic Vision and Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland, in order that the actions of Visit Belfast delivered on the objectives of all policies.

He summarised the outlook for 2025/26, including opportunities in relation to major events, strategy, investment and growth, and the challenges in relation to the economy, policy, infrastructure and experience.

He outlined the focus areas for 2025/26:

- Growing demand by leveraging major events and infrastructure;
- Expanding year-round demand - shoulder season and midweek;
- Capitalising on increased tourism demand for Belfast to spread benefits of tourism including into our city neighbourhoods;
- Demonstrating sustainable leadership and innovation;
- Promoting Belfast's emerging luxury and premium offer;
- Extreme collaboration across industry partnerships;
- Driving growth and innovation through AI, digital and data; and
- Developing our people and next-generation talent within Visit Belfast and across our industry.

In respect of delivery, he provided the Committee with a detailed breakdown of the targets, outputs and approach in relation to marketing and communications, visitor servicing and destination management, business events and leisure trade.

The representatives concluded the presentation by highlighting the economic impact of the 2025/26 plan, which would deliver £141 million to the city's economy. It was further highlighted that the plan would place an equal focus on the economic, social and environmental impact.

During discussion, the representatives answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to cruise ships, the impact of Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) on tourism, business tourism and conferences, inner-city connectivity, Airbnbs, and social media.

After discussion, the Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance, and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the presentation;
- ii. noted the draft Visit Belfast Business Plan for 2025/26 and that the overall funding requirement for Visit Belfast for the financial year 2025/26 had been taken account of in the

revenue estimates that had been approved by the Council;
and

- iii. approved a funding allocation of £2,076,356 for 2025/26, subject to the development of a funding agreement, priority areas of activity and agreed targets.

Restricted Items

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

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

Members were also reminded that the content of 'restricted' reports and any discussion which took place during closed session must be treated as 'confidential information' and that no such information should be disclosed to the public as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Code of Conduct.

Vacant to Vibrant Scheme

The Committee considered a report that provided an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Scheme and outlined the recommendations from the Vacant to Vibrant Assessment Panel following the receipt and assessment of recent applications.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and that it would be supporting up to 52 businesses to locate or expand into long term vacant units;
- ii. noted the update on the City Centre funding position, as outlined within section 3.20 of the report;
- iii. agreed the recommended city centre grant awards, as outlined within section 3.22 of the report;
- iv. noted the decision on application V2V147, as outlined within section 3.23 of the report; and
- v. agreed the recommended city-wide grant awards, as outlined within section 3.24 of the report.

Sandy Row Revitalisation Update

The Committee considered a report that provided an update in relation to the Sandy Row Revitalisation Scheme.

The Committee noted:

- i. the update on the Department for Communities funded Sandy Row Revitalisation Scheme; and
- ii. the eligibility criteria and timelines, as outlined within Section 4.0 and Appendix A of the report.

Markets Update and Business Plan 2025/26

The Committee considered a report that provided an update in relation to city markets and the St George's Market business plan for 2025/26.

During discussion, the Senior Manager, Economy, answered questions from several Members in relation to the Christmas Market.

After discussion, the Committee noted:

- i. the update on city markets, with a focus on St George's Market;
- ii. the priority actions for the coming quarter and that further progress updates would be brought back to the Committee at future meetings; and
- iii. the updated Markets Business Plan 2025/26.

Belfast Castle and Malone House - Scale of Charges 2025/26

The Senior Manager, Economy presented to the Committee a report that set out the proposed scale of charges, that included a new facilitation charge, for Belfast Castle and Malone House for the financial year 2025/26.

The Committee:

- i. agreed the price increases for booking fees as outlined within section 3.3 of the report, and that, subject to ratification by the Council, they would take effect from 14th April, 2025; and
- ii. approved a new facilitation charge, as outlined within section 3.4 of the report.

Financial Reporting - Quarter 3 2024/25

The Committee noted the contents of the report and the associated financial reporting pack.

Belfast 2024 Update and Evaluation (Verbal Update)

The Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, and the Programme Manager presented to the Committee an update on the Belfast 2024 programme.

The Programme Manager outlined the programme's timeline, objectives and key principles.

She provided a summary of the programme's progress to date, including events, contracts, projects, strategic partnerships and marketing and communications activity.

She highlighted that the Belfast 2024 programme had been recognised as best practice and shortlisted for awards by local and international bodies.

She concluded the presentation by providing the Committee with feedback that had been received in relation to the programme.

During discussion, a Member suggested that a Committee Workshop be held to enable Members to consider the information that had been presented and provide feedback to inform the Belfast 2024 final evaluation report.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the update; and
- ii. agreed to hold a workshop on 26th March, 2025, to provide feedback on Belfast 2024 and inform the final evaluation report.

Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

Response to the Department for Infrastructure

Review of Trust Ports Consultation

The Committee agreed the response to the Department for Infrastructure's Review of Trust Ports consultation, as outlined within section 3.7 of the report.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

International Engagement Approach

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

"1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues"

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on work to date on developing a new approach to international

engagement activity by the council and to set out emerging thinking ahead of a final draft being presented to a future meeting of this committee, as well as to request approval for council engagement in the June 2025 New York-New Belfast event.

2.0 Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the range of engagement to date and feedback from internal and external partners
- Note and consider the emerging thinking on the content and approach for the new international engagement activity
- Share any additional feedback on the emerging propositions in order to inform the final report that will be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee
- Agree to support and engage in the annual New York-New Belfast event in June 2025 at a cost of £5,000 towards sponsorship and up to a maximum of £7,500 towards travel and accommodation costs for the Lord Mayor and relevant senior officers.

3.0 Main Report

- 3.1 At the October 2024 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members noted and agreed a series of high-level considerations to shape the work around a new approach to international engagement and agreed that a more detailed report setting out the proposed approach would be brought back to a future meeting.
- 3.2 Since that time, officers have been engaging with teams across a number of relevant council departments as well as key external partners and have also looked at how other cities carry out this work. We have distilled the findings from that engagement and research work into a series of emerging proposals that we consider will shape the final draft report.
- 3.3 The global operating environment is obviously facing significant headwinds and is highly volatile at the present time. Macro-level factors such as these mean that it is difficult to plan activities with any degree of certainty given that changes such as the introduction of tariffs can impact direct on commitments and ambitions around trade and FDI activity. At a regional level, Invest NI has released a new business strategy, including an enhanced focus on both FDI and international trade activity.

- 3.4 More locally, the recent Belfast Agenda refresh and collective commitment to a series of agreed priority actions means that any future approach needs to align with and support these actions. Within the council, the changing operational structures – with new teams established over recent years focusing on activities such as Innovation, Climate and City Regeneration – mean that many officers are engaging in international networks and partnerships as part of their ‘business as usual’. This would not have been the case when the original international relations framework was established in 2017. In addition, the increased focus on international events such as One Young World and Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, as well as the planned investment in Belfast Stories demonstrate an enhanced focus on attracting international visitors to Belfast. This presents additional opportunities not only for developing and implementing a strong city narrative for key audiences, but also to consider opportunities for ‘layering up’ business and cultural investment opportunities.
- 3.5 Officers have now met with numerous teams across the council involved in international activity in order to understand planned activity as well as the level of financial and staff resources allocated to that activity. We have also met some of our key external partners involved in international activity (including universities; colleges; British Council; Invest NI; Visit Belfast). We noted an extensive programme of engagement in formal and informal networks, partnerships and programmes across a range of disciplines – much of which is carried out as discreet, stand-alone activity relating to those specific business areas. Teams identified some areas where they could benefit from (and contribute to) added value products and services such as improving information sharing; insights and data collation – particularly focusing on key messages and unique selling points. It was recognised that emerging investments such as the City Deal projects present an opportunity for enhancing that messaging.
- 3.6 The role of the Lord Mayor remains a key resource in ‘fronting up’ engagements with potential investors or supporting on city promotion activities. Access to the City Hall is widely valued by partner organisations and can be a very useful tool in our wider menu of investment and city promotion support.
- 3.7 Taking account of the issues raised during the engagement work, officers are of the view that there are a number of opportunities for establishing more effective ways of working across internal teams and with external partners, as well as considering new products that can be used by all partners to generate a coherent, positive messaging around the city as a

vibrant business and investment location. We also consider that there is value in focusing on a small number of areas in which we can add value – while recognising that partner organisations and internal teams will be moving ahead on a wider range of activities that are fairly self-contained or which they are able to deliver independently.

3.8 By way of areas of focus, these may include:

- Capital investment – focus on engagement at key events and targeting specific investment opportunities/funds to deliver corporate and city ambitions
- Digital innovation – focus on engagement in key events and networks – and considering how to integrate project-based opportunities (including emerging City Deal investments) into wider city promotion messaging
- Trade and investment – helping more local businesses to engage in export and supporting Invest NI in FDI promotion activity
- Education – we expect that this work will be led by universities but that there may be opportunities to add value e.g. through civic engagement.

3.9 To move this forward, it is proposed that the collective range of international engagement activity will be ‘packaged’ together and presented to the committee as a cohesive programme of work on an annual basis, but as part of a wider strategic approach. Delivery responsibility will sit across a number of council teams and partner organisations but the collaborative programme of work will give members a picture of the scale of engagement – as well as demonstrating the added value that is being generated from relevant individual connections.

3.10 New York New Belfast – request for financial support and agreement to attend

As noted above, the plan for the coming years is to present an overarching programme of work sets out the collective commitments for that coming year. Each team will be responsible for securing individual approvals – including budgetary approvals – to progress their planned activities. Ahead of this more strategic approach being implemented, it is likely that there will be a number of activities that need to come to the committee for approval, given timelines for decision. One of those activities is New York New Belfast (NYNB). Member will be aware that this is an annual event which takes place in New York and which promotes business and investment opportunities in Belfast to a selected audience of government, private business and civic leaders.

The 2025 event will take place on 12 June 2025. Over 150 delegates are expected to attend the event which incorporates discussions on the themes of tourism, innovation, infrastructure and excellence in technology.

- 3.11 While the focus to date has been on selling Belfast as an investment location, the 2025 programme will include an enhanced focus on Belfast's indigenous entrepreneurial strengths. Under the banner of 'Meet the Belfast Maker' a number of city CEOs will highlight their contribution to the capital's economy and outline opportunities for collaboration and investment from external partners. This June's event will also include a delegation of businesses from the Belfast Chamber of Commerce. Members are asked to agree to sponsor the event at a cost of £5,000 and to agree to attendance at the event by the Lord Mayor and appropriate senior officers, at a cost not to exceed £7,500.

3.12 Financial and Resource Implications

New approach to international relations: no specific resource implications at this point. The action plan that will be presented to a future meeting of this committee will include a detailed breakdown of expenditure on relevant activities.

- 3.13 New York New Belfast event: Members are asked to contribute £5,000 towards sponsorship for the 2025 event and to agree to attendance at the event by the Lord Mayor and relevant senior officers, up to a maximum estimated cost of £7,500. The above costs are set aside within the existing International Relations budget 2025/26.

3.14 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

There are no direct Equality or Good Relations implications associated with this report."

During discussion, in response to a Member's question regarding the stakeholder groups that contribute to the international engagement work, the Senior Manager, Economy, advised the Committee that a final draft report would be submitted to a future meeting that would include further detail in relation to the issues raised.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the range of engagement to date and the feedback from internal and external partners;
- ii. noted the emerging thinking on the content and approach for the new international engagement activity;
- iii. agreed to support and engage in the annual New York-New Belfast event in June, 2025, at a cost of £5,000 towards sponsorship and up to a maximum of £7,500 towards travel and accommodation costs for the Lord Mayor and relevant senior officers; and
- iv. agreed that, as part of a final report that would be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee, further detail would be provided in respect of the appropriate governance and management arrangements to support the delivery of priority actions.

Events Action Plan

The Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism presented to the Committee the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Members on the proposed approach to development of a Tourism Events Action Plan -

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 Committee is asked to:

- Note the contents of this paper and subsequent next steps for the development of a Tourism Events Action Plan.
- Recommendations relate to the information contained in section 8.0 of the report, Members are asked to agree to the development of an action plan, and associated ToR with budget of up to £40,000

3.0 Main Report

Strategic Context of City Events:

Belfast Agenda:

The Council has set out a strategic mandate to develop a city for everyone in its Community Plan the Belfast Agenda, where the vision is that:

Belfast will be a city re-imagined and resurgent. A great place to live and work for everyone. Beautiful, well connected and culturally vibrant, it will be a sustainable city shared and loved by all its citizens, free from the legacy of conflict. A compassionate city offering opportunities for everyone. A confident and successful city energising a dynamic and prosperous city region. A magnet for talent and business and admired around the world. A city people dream to visit.

City Imagining:

To achieve this vision, the Council launched a ten-year Cultural Strategy in 2019 - *A City Imagining* which sets out a long-term commitment to facilitating a new integrated phase of culture-led progress and development for Belfast. The strategy brings together the culture, events and tourism functions within Council, as well as identifying areas of cross departmental working to support the Belfast Agenda.

Belfast's Cultural strategy, *A City Imagining*, recognises the importance of events and programming to the wider cultural and tourism profile of Belfast. Events can tell stories, connect people and present new perspectives on our place.

As cities move on from the impacts of COVID-19, consumer sentiment research has indicated that events will take on a new significance as motivators for travel and an opportunity for destinations to differentiate their offer. Events can also create immersive spaces for the visitor to become part of an ever-evolving story.

The benefits of events and cultural programmes to cities are considerable. Many cities have used events to engage with local people, build civic pride and transform their reputation internationally. Events are one of the best ways to measure the economic, social and environmental impact of tourism as they bring together a cross-section of city stakeholders. Importantly they also have the ability to create legacy.

Make Yourself at Home:

To realise the ambitions of the Cultural Strategy, Council developed the Tourism Plan *Make Yourself at Home*, which is a ten-year blueprint to develop and grow tourism in the city with its four directional themes – Grow, Sustain, Experience and Position.

The plan recognises the need to expand the city's experience mix that will encourage visitors to stay longer and increase dwell time to increase economic development and support the environment.

Events also have a key role to play as a motivator to travel as well as delivering direct economic impact

Make Yourself at Home also states that a sustained programme of activity including an annual calendar of signature events, will help attract visitors back to our city following Covid, providing a much-needed boost for citizens as well as the cultural and hospitality sectors and the wider tourism industry.

It further recognises that events will be an exemplar for the four strategic themes of the plan: Grow, Position, Experience and Sustain. These events will:

- Directly contribute to the growth of the tourism industry in Belfast through an increase in out-of-state visitors, dwell time and spend
- Challenge perceptions of Belfast and raise awareness of the diversity and richness of the city's culture, arts and heritage
- Create authentic and contemporary Belfast Experiences of quality
- Establish a model for carbon neutral activity.

Finally, *Make Yourself at Home* notes that events of ambition within the city have the potential to be truly transformative. They will tell contemporary Belfast stories with an unprecedented international reach by fusing digital and real-life experiences. They will leave a lasting legacy of skills and capacity, that will support future generations of tourism ambassadors, creative talent and storytellers.

4.0 Impact of Covid 19:

The Covid-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on events across the globe:

- Mass gatherings were unsafe for an extensive period
- Public confidence in events was affected
- Considerable negative impact on suppliers to the event industry - staff shortages, redundancies, business closure
- Spiralling costs.

Within Council, all events were cancelled during 2020, and in 2021, those which returned were delivered differently, recognising the on-going need for social distancing.

Council events have now in - large returned to pre - pandemic delivery levels, however that is not withstanding the fact that events staff, suppliers and providers are now more difficult to source, with many moving to work in other sectors during the pandemic, infrastructure and ancillary costs have as a result increased substantially and the Council events budget does not currently fully reflect this 'new world' of event delivery post - Covid.

5.0 Status Quo - Current Delivery:

Traditionally the Events team within the Tourism and Events Unit are responsible for a range of event activity which can be largely categorised below:

- Delivery of civic events in the city - the St Patrick's celebrations, Lord Mayors Day, and Christmas Lights Switch on. This would also include ad hoc events of this scale, recent examples being Operation Shamrock and the King's Coronation
- The development and delivery of the Belfast Maritime Festival – a signature event for Belfast – now on a biennial basis as a result of a major strategic review
- Thirdly, the team have a multitude of roles in respect of major or mega events. Often, these are events involving NI wide stakeholders with a number currently in the pipeline, namely; The Oireachtas in 2025 and Ongoing Bidding for the All Ireland Fleadh Cheoil in 2026/27 Past examples included the Giro D'Italia, World Police and Fire Games, MTV Music awards, Tall Ships, One Young World

Delivery of these events, no matter the scale, involves a vast spectrum of tasks which range from stakeholder liaison, consultation, managing contractors, health and safety, legal and insurance, traffic management, community co-design, and significant procurement. Whilst ensuring strategic alignment and maximising the opportunities presented for the city.

Whilst the cultural strategy recognises the opportunity that hosting of major events has for city positioning it recommends delivery of 1 major event every 5 years, and should we be successful in our current bidding we could be in the position of one major every year for the next 3 years.

The remit of the Events team also includes management of funding streams (Support for Sport) and oversight and contract management of the City's Festive Lighting Scheme.

6.0 Other events associated with Council:

Managed by the Culture Unit in Council, the CMAG budget is £2.43m annually. This is broken down as:

- £473,425 to 16 Festivals and Events organisations for two years (minimum audiences of 10,000)
- 600,240 to four Festivals and Events organisations for four years (minimum audiences of 65,000)
- £791,783 to nine Arts and Heritage organisations for four years (audiences over (50,000).
- £564,562 to 27 Arts and Heritage organisations for two years

Finally, City and Neighbourhood Services also deliver a series of community and parks events throughout the year, with key projects being the Spring and Autumn Fairs.

These events make up the calendar of city events and present an opportunity for cultural vibrancy and visitor experience but also opportunities for closer alignment of delivery, coordinated marketing and initiatives on sustainability and inclusivity.

7.0 Previous development work

In July 2017, Council commissioned Festivals and Events International (FEI) to undertake a review of our investment in and support for Events and Festivals, with a view to developing a new Events strategy for the Council and its strategic partners.

In March 2018, a Committee paper to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee presented the key FEI recommendations and proposed a way forward, in conjunction with key partners.

The consultancy team's key recommendations focused on a number of areas including Funding Streams, Capacity Building Support, Evaluation and Measurement and Governance and Delivery.

CG&R adopted the recommendations within the report on 7th March 2018, these were subsequently integrated into the long term cultural strategy 'A City Imagining'. While these reports refer to the 'integration' of the recommendations within the FEI report, there was a definitive shift in strategic

direction which resulted in no stand-alone 'Festival and Events strategy' or Action plan being developed at that time.

That decision was also taken within the context of a number of important developments and milestones, such as the cessation of the European Capital of Culture bidding process, initial recommendations arising from the draft Festival and Events Strategy and the conclusion in March 2020, of the current Cultural Framework and Tourism Strategy.

It is important to also remind Members that the subsequent period of strategy development took place against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and there has been significant change in market demand as well as delivery models, supplier infrastructure and costs.

Tourism currently has a stand - alone plan to underpin 'A City Imagining' in the form of 'Make Yourself at Home' while City Events does not.

8.0 Need for an Updated Events Action Plan

After significant scoping work, Officers are now of the view that while the FEI report still contains important and relevant information which needs reflected in an updated Events Action Plan to underpin both 'A City Imagining' and 'Make Yourself at Home' through the remainder of their life span (2029 / 2030), a new Events action Plan should be considered

Additionally, Officers have experienced key 'Lessons Learned' in the period since both *City Imagining* and *Make Yourself at Home* began operational roll - out in relation to Council Managed Events - these should be reflected in an updated resourced Events Action Plan with review milestones, KPI's and associated ownership.

This Events Action Plan will require in its formation a period of sectoral, strategic and Elected Member engagement to ensure future 'best fit' of Council - managed events and will address the following points,

Strategic Context:

- Strategic alignment to Belfast Agenda, City Imagining and Make Yourself at Home as well as other regional strategies (eg DfE Tourism strategy, ACNI strategy) is needed,

- Ensure that Council city events delivered align to the strategic ambitions and priorities of Council
- Consideration of the Council city events portfolio within the context of the events life cycle and rejuvenation points needed at specific future gateways
- Clear articulation and rationalisation needed on what events Council should deliver - 'who, what where, when and why' approach
- Horizon scanning is needed for Officers to identify emerging trends and opportunities for new events
- An aligned approach to ensure that Council events align to the new Tourism NI Events Strategic Vision.
- Consideration of bidding process and decision making frameworks for major/bid for events

Filtering Mechanism:

- Review and rationalisation of both the quality and quantity of Council events currently being delivered and to be delivered in the future
- Consideration is also required as to the appropriateness of Council as the delivery agent for each event in the portfolio or whether other city stakeholders are best placed to deliver certain events or city animation e.g. ongoing work to consider councils role in delivery of culture night.

Development Plans:

- Developmental pathway for each Council event with a Tourism lens and associated budget profiling is needed to ensure tourism and positioning potential is fully exploited.

Budget / Procurement:

- The Council Events Team has a developmental remit, which is not being fully exploited due to constraints on current resources – multi-annual budget consideration is required to allow for developmental pathways- annual budgets present developmental challenges meaning that focus is often on in year delivery.
- The Council events budget has been 'stand still' without 'year on year' developmental or inflationary increases –
- Cultural co-design capability requires enhancement

- Lead-in time for the sector needs to be longer and 2 - 3 year procurement deals are required to allow events to develop / grow

Segmentation:

- Clear visitor segmentation for events is required for each event and Council delivery approach tailored accordingly - much of the portfolio is currently a 'Family Fun' segment, with a limited offering for other identified market segments – there are opportunities to reach some of the more targeted segments.

Programming:

- Balance is needed between cultural co-design / commissioning and 'buying in' programming content as needed for event standout (capacity and capability to deliver must be reviewed). Local input on programming v international input needs considered.
- Internally, a balance is also needed on robust event governance, event development and operational delivery for Officers - all of which are functions associated with the internal Tourism and Events Unit.

Events Team Resourcing:

- The role of the Events Team is currently varied - Event Delivery Agents v Event Development v Major Event / Bidding, a clear resource plan is needed and staffing structure allocated accordingly
- Contingency / flexibility is needed in future event resource planning, especially in relation to major event planning and delivery, as period of high / peak season.
- Flexibility to deal with and respond to ad hoc opportunities

Major Events:

- A new approach needs developed for Major Event Bidding in the City - this is currently reactive for Officers
- A direction is needed on the number of major events to be delivered over the coming years with associated resourcing

Alignment between Culture and Events:

- Further integration on how CMAG events and Council-managed events can best deliver for the culture and tourism offering within the city
- Benchmarking of synergies between tourism and cultural events with other Local Authorities is required reflecting 'best practice' – beyond NI
- The role of city events within the existing Festivals Forum
- The legacy impact of Belfast 2024 on cultural / tourism event delivery. Belfast 2024 puts Belfast on an international stage as a culturally vibrant destination and this will present ongoing opportunities to deliver a compelling proposition for the city as a home of events.

Delivery Structures / Governance:

- Streamlining of governance arrangements across events in the City events calendar across delivery partners
- The potential establishment of new Events Forum for the city needs explored

Belfast Event Positioning:

- The status of Belfast as gateway events destination for the region needs further exploration - to include benchmarking within the NI context and beyond
- Event themes aligned to our tourism positioning require further analysis - UNESCO City of Music, Maritime etc, ensuring Belfast can position itself as a 'Home of Events' and international events destination
- An updated events SWOT for the city and event gap analysis against thematic areas is required. This will inform event development as well as funding and bidding strategies
- New and emerging event 'hooks' through the ongoing 'Belfast Stories' project needs to be considered, including developing accessible and sustainable events
- The consideration of how new tourism product is developed around the city managed events portfolio requires further exploration, as well as how visitor experience can be maximised.

Categorisation / Events Criteria:

- A clearly defined event criteria and purpose is required- tourism, civic, community, cultural, business, corporate (or a combination of these) and the associated hierarchy of city events and subsequent growth potential
- This new pyramid structure should include definitions and criteria for segmentation, programming, categorisation of events which best lend themselves to co-design / commissioning as well as measuring impact / success
- Consideration of event city centre and geographic dispersal across the city centre and neighbourhoods is needed, in line with Neighbourhood Tourism
- A resourced evaluation / monitoring mechanism is required for each category and tier of event and metrics need considered in light of existing models, such as eventIMPACTS and emerging industry updates, while considering Council's own bespoke evaluation, monitoring and reporting needs that take into account social and cultural impact in addition to economic.

Marketing:

- An analysis is needed of the Communications, PR and MARCOMM's approach to each Council-managed event and 'best fit' future direction on the consumer / corporate approach with associated budget requirements.
- Consideration to opportunities to leverage international marcomms opportunities

Funding Synergies / Sponsorship:

- Consideration is needed as to how Council aligns with other event funders in terms of maximising budgets in the current economic climate – the use of co-investment models
- Sponsorship options for Council events also need consideration within the context of financial sustainability.

Policy Context:

- An analysis is needed in terms of gaps on current event policy such as Charity and Community /

Business Engagement - considering benchmarking data and recommendations for future approach.

Training / Education:

- A review of current and future training, networking and advocacy needs of the city events sector is needed to consolidate Council's role as 'leaders' in 'best practice' tourism / cultural event delivery.

To this end, Council Officers are proposing the development of an Events Action Plan for City Events which would underpin both *City Imagining* and *Make Yourself at Home*, which would consolidate the previous findings of the FEI report from 2018, while incorporating new recommendations from the 'Lessons Learned' of Officers, and delivery partners, over the last two plus years.

This would include an assessment on issues highlighted as above, while detailing a future approach to events, including internal resourcing requirements and associated staff skills, governance arrangements and budget requirements to ensure city events are maximised to their full potential in the years ahead.

This Action Plan would allow Officers to agree formalised developmental pathways for the Council-managed portfolio. Findings will be brought back to Committee for consideration in due course. This will inform the Events Unit business planning over the period of the new Action Plan.

Officers are therefore requesting permission to develop a Terms of Reference for issue to market in the coming weeks, for providers to assist with the development of this Events Action Plan, with an associated budget requirement of up to £40,000 to be financed within core budgets.

The commissioned work will incorporate a process of sectoral consultation with relevant stakeholders and Elected Member engagement to inform the Action Plan.

9.0 Financial and Resource Implications:

The development of an Events Action Plan has a budget of up to £40,000 to be allocated for existing budgets.

10.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment:

Any future Events Action Plan will be screened as required.”

The Committee:

- i. agreed to the development of a Tourism Events Action Plan;
- ii. agreed that a Terms of Reference would be issued to market for providers to assist with the development of a Tourism Events Action Plan, with an associated budget requirement of up to £40,000, to be financed within core budgets; and
- iii. noted the contents of the report and the subsequent next steps for the development of a Tourism Events Action Plan.

Growing Businesses and the Economy

Sub-Regional Economic Growth Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on progress with the development of the Local Economic Partnership (LEP) – a key element of the Department for the Economy’s (DfE) sub-regional economic plan.**

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the update on the Department for the Economy’s [Sub-Regional Economic Plan](#)
- Note the agreed financial allocations for Belfast City Council
- Note the emerging priority areas of focus, subject to further engagement with internal and external partners
- Agree to renew the council’s membership of and contribution to the work of the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre for a 2-year period at a cost of £40,000 per year
- Consider the merits of engagement in the Local Enterprise training being delivered via NAC (NI) and, if there is agreement to participate, nominate elected members to take part in this training.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 At the 6 December 2024 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members were updated on the Department for the Economy's 'sub-regional economic plan', including the commitment to establish Local Economic Partnerships in each council area with an overall financial allocation of £45million over three years.

3.2 Since the December meeting, the Department has made some progress on both finalising the financial allocation to each council area and also on agreeing broad areas of eligible spend and metrics to track progress.

3.3 Financial allocations

The financial allocations for each council area have now been confirmed. Belfast City Council will receive up to £956,000 per year – a total of £2,868,000 over three years. DfE is currently in the process of finalising the business case for the funding. Based on feedback from councils, it is expected that the spend profile in year one will be lower than in other years – given the time taken to mobilise partnerships, agree priority projects and recruit staff to lead and oversee project development and delivery.

3.4 As previously noted, it is disappointing that the narrative on sub-regional growth appears to start from the premise that the recent economic progress in Belfast means that additional investment should be focused in other parts of the region. As members will be aware, Belfast is a major economic generator for the rest of NI – almost half of the people that work in Belfast do not live here. However, Belfast also has significant economic inclusion challenges - 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. Officers will be actively working to develop proposals to help ensure that the economic importance of the city and the challenges facing many of our citizens are more clearly understood and to develop approaches to inclusive innovation that maximise benefits across society.

3.5 Eligible activity

In line with the Minister's vision and the sub-regional economic plan, the priority outcome for activities supported through the Local Economic Partnerships funding is higher productivity. The guidance notes suggest that there are a range of categories that are eligible for support including:

- Commercial property/land development
- Entrepreneurship support
- Sectoral entrepreneurship support
- Scaling support
- Sectoral scaling support
- R&D investment
- Energy efficiency
- Upskilling/reskilling in digital/engineering skills
- Sectoral cluster development

3.6 In order to maximise the available resources, there will be a requirement on LEPs to consult and where possible to work in partnership with bodies doing existing work in an area they are seeking to address. There is potential therefore to supplement funding for existing programmes to drive additional impact in a local area.

3.7 Each LEP will be required to submit an annual action plan outlining priority areas for action in the year ahead. As previously noted, DfE have made a number of stipulations as to mandatory representation on any Local Economic Partnership (including from Local Enterprise Agencies, Chambers of Commerce and FE Colleges). They have also confirmed that DfE and Invest NI are to be involved in each partnership to provide advice on project selection and delivery and to ensure alignment with wider activity and investment.

3.8 Potential approach to partnership

As previously advised at the December 2024 meeting, officers considered a number of options as to the most appropriate structure to perform the role of the LEP. This included utilising existing structures such as the Labour Market Partnership, the 'Our Economy' Board for Community Planning or the Innovation City Belfast Board or alternatively, creating another structure for this specific purpose. Given the available resources, the alignment with existing work and the constraints on partner resources, our initial proposal was to utilise the Labour Market Partnership structure as the 'partnership' – through which priority projects would be developed and to which progress would be reported. Having had further clarification as to eligible areas of spend and available resources, officers remain of the view that the most appropriate, expedient and effective conduit to act as the local LEP is the Belfast Labour Market Partnership – in the interim at least. It is our understanding that this approach is to be used in a number of councils. If this is agreed, officers will work with both DfE and DfC to consider how the partnerships can align most effectively and also to ensure that the governance requirements for both funders can be met. Our proposal is that we explore this option as an initial

way forward – but that we keep it under review in order to ensure that it remains appropriate for the priority work areas agreed. Regular updates will also be provided to committee and the final action plan for each year will be brought to the committee for endorsement.

3.9 Potential priority work areas – initial considerations

At the December 2024 meeting, a number of indicative work areas were set out for consideration. These included:

- **Inclusive employment pathways to high value roles:** through the council's employability and skills work, we have been able to develop targeted responses to meet employer needs across a range of sectors. In more recent years, we have explored opportunities to move up the value chain and create better paid roles with opportunities for career progression. There is currently engagement work underway with DfE to develop a new 'inclusive apprenticeship' approach and this would enable us to provide a seamless transfer from the employment academy into an apprenticeship. While these activities are working well at a small scale, there may be an opportunity to scale up much more significantly, with the potential to make an impact on our economic inactivity levels which have remained stubbornly high over decades
- **Maximising the impact of City Deal investments for local SMEs:** the original business case for the City Deal identified the potential to create 20,000 new and better jobs. As the projects begin to come forward, there are opportunities to consider how our local businesses can access the research expertise and facilities established through the City Deal funding – helping them develop new products and increase their employment numbers. This may include innovation and technology transfer activities; access to challenge programmes and funds and use of the specialist facilities and equipment
- **Enhancement of 'Go Succeed' activities:** Go Succeed is the core business support offer for those starting or growing a business. Over the last year, the service has been funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). Following the recent budget statement, the government has announced a one-year extension of SPF – albeit with a 40% reduction in the overall budget. Officers are still working through the implications for Go Succeed but, as a collective, councils are considering whether there is an opportunity to use their LEP resources to 'top up' any budget shortfall.

3.10 Officers have undertaken some engagement work with key partners over recent weeks to validate this early thinking and to test other potential actions that may emerge, in keeping with the priority areas for action identified by the Department. It is our view that these indicative areas remain valid. There may also be an opportunity to consider net zero interventions given that this is one of the key areas of focus within the Sub-regional Economic Plan. Subject to member agreement, we will use these early concepts as well as the economic insights generated through both the Community Planning refresh process and the development of the annual labour market assessment for the Labour Market Partnership, supplemented by wider research, to work towards a draft final action plan. One of the key principles that we are considering is that we should focus on a smaller number of impactful interventions – rather than having a range of small schemes. This aligns with the Department’s requirements around impact measurement. It also recognises that the financial allocation to Belfast is the smallest of all council areas (alongside Antrim and Newtownabbey).

3.11 **Support for UU Economic Policy Centre**

Ulster University’s Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) has provided research and insights to the council over many years to develop the underpinning monitoring framework of the Belfast Agenda, undertake research for the Local Development Plan and more recently Local Policies Plan. The Centre has also supported our work on addressing economic inactivity, including undertaking the Belfast-level analysis that formed the foundation pillar of the large-scale event that we hosted in UU Belfast last year. To support the development of local actions for the Local Enterprise Partnership, alongside wider insights relating to skills, planning and regeneration issues, it is proposed that the Council renews its membership and contribution to the work of the UUEPC for a further 2-year period.

3.12 NAC training on Enterprise issues

The Chief Executive has recently received correspondence from the NI branch of the National Association of Councillors (NAC) regarding a series of four training workshops that they are organising for local councillors and officials involved in enterprise issues. The objective of these sessions is to enhance participants' insights and knowledge of these matters and create a council-wide network of 'Local Enterprise Champions'.

3.13 The dates and themes for each of the workshops have been set and are as follows:

- Friday 25 April, 12pm-4pm, Belfast – Overview of the Local Economy
- Friday 30 May, 12pm-3.30pm, Derry/Londonderry – Strategies, Funding and Key Partners
- Friday 20 June, 12pm-3.30pm, Craigavon – Roles and Responsibilities of Councillors
- Friday 5 September, 12pm-4pm, Mallusk – Enterprise site visit and forward planning.

3.14 In order to maximise the learning opportunities, NAC (NI) is keen that all participants share, learn and develop their own enterprise insights, using the principle of co-design. As such, the workshops will be interactive, collaborative and outcomes driven via core, specialist facilitation rather than 'top-down' presentations. To ensure the very best outcome for all proposed Local Enterprise Champions, they are encouraging councils to nominate up to four elected members including – at council's discretion – a senior support officer. Members are asked to consider the merits of engagement and, if there is agreement to participate, nominate elected members to take part in this training.

3.15 Financial and Resource Implications

DfE have now confirmed that the resources for the Local Enterprise Plan in Belfast are £956,000 per annum over three years. This includes an element of staff resources to manage the programme of work.

UUEPC: The annual £40,000 contribution to the UUEPC has been included in Departmental estimates.

Local Enterprise training – the cost per participant for attendance at the four workshops is £395. This can be met within existing budgets.

3.16 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

All activities to be undertaken will be subject to equality screening. This funding formula was determined by the Department for the Economy.”

During discussion, a Member highlighted the establishment of the Local Economic Partnerships and suggested that it would be appropriate for each of the Area Working Groups to be provided with further information in respect of the development of the Local Economic Partnerships.

During further discussion, in relation to the Local Enterprise training that had been organised by the National Association of Councillors (NAC) NI, a Member suggested that, should Members wish to attend the training, they use their training allowance.

In response to a Member’s question, the Business and Research Development Manager provided the Committee with further information in respect of the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC).

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the update on the Department for the Economy’s Sub-Regional Economic Plan;
- ii. noted the agreed financial allocations for Belfast City Council;
- iii. noted the emerging priority areas of focus, subject to further engagement with internal and external partners;
- iv. agreed to renew the Council’s membership, and contribution to the work, of the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre for a 2-year period at a cost of £40,000 per year;
- v. agreed that a report be presented to each of the Area Working Groups in respect of the development of the Local Economic Partnerships; and
- vi. agreed that Members would consider the Local Enterprise training organised by the National Association of Councillors (NAC) NI, and that, should they wish to attend, Members would use their training allowance.

Strategic and Operational Issues

Notice of Motion Update

The Committee noted the update to all Notices of Motion and Issues Raised in Advance that the Committee was responsible for, as outlined within Appendix 1 of the report.

Issues Raised in Advance by Members

Closure of Connswater Shopping Centre - Support for Tenants (the High Sheriff, Councillor McAteer to raise)

The High Sheriff, Councillor McAteer, raised the issue of the recent announcement that Connswater Shopping Centre was set to close. She highlighted the financial and operational challenges that the independent businesses and charities faced, following the short notice of the closure. She further highlighted the need for the Council to support, where possible, the independent businesses and charities that had been affected.

With the permission of the Deputy Chairperson, Councillor R. Brooks addressed the Committee in relation to this issue.

During discussion, a Member suggested that the issue be raised at the next meeting of the Party Group Leaders' Forum.

Accordingly, the Committee agreed:

- i. that a report would be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee that would outline potential areas of support that the Council could provide to the charities and independent businesses that had been affected by the closure of Connswater Shopping Centre; and
- ii. that the issue would be raised at the next meeting of the Party Group Leaders' Forum.

Impact of Belfast Grand Central Station on Grosvenor Road and Durham Street (Councillor Black to raise)

Councillor Black raised the issue of the impact of the works to Belfast Grand Central Station on retailers, hospitality and service providers within the areas of the Grosvenor Road and Durham Street.

At the request of Councillor Black, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Communities to request:

- i. that, given the impact of Belfast Grand Central Station on retailers, hospitality and service providers, a Revitalisation Scheme be funded for the areas of the Grosvenor Road and Durham Street; and
- ii. an update on the establishment of a multi-agency taskforce that the Minister had proposed to address the wider impact of the works to Belfast Grand Central Station on Sandy Row, Grosvenor Road, Durham Street and other impacted areas.

Committee Workshop

The Committee noted that the Special Committee meeting, scheduled for 26th March, would be used as a workshop to consider the 2025/26 Committee Plan and Belfast 2024.

Chairperson