

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 9th April, 2025

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Nelson (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, McDonough-Brown, McDowell,
McKay, I. McLaughlin, R. McLaughlin,
O'Neill and Smyth.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development;
Mr. K. Forster, Director of Economic Development;
Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Ms. L. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Mr. C. McCreery, Culture Development Manager;
Ms. C. Cassin, Markets Development Manager; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 12th March were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 1st April.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor Maskey declared an interest in relation to item 6 (a) "Go Succeed Enterprise Support Service Update", in that he had received support through the service and left the meeting whilst this item was under consideration.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following two 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 Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Committee with 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.

She advised the Committee that funding for the city centre portion of the scheme was fully depleted and that it was now closed to applications.

She highlighted the potential for underspends to be realised within the city centre scheme and recommended that a mechanism be put in place to reallocate any underspend to the citywide scheme.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and that it would be supporting up to 57 businesses/organisations to locate or expand into long term vacant units;
- ii. noted that the funding allocated to the City Centre Vacant to Vibrant Grant was now fully committed, and that the scheme was now closed to receiving any further applications;
- iii. noted the decision on application V2V130, as outlined within section 3.20 of the report;
- iv. agreed the recommended city centre grant awards, as outlined within section 3.19 of the report;
- v. agreed the recommended citywide grant awards, as outlined within Section 3.21 of the report; and
- vi. agreed the recommended mechanism to reallocate any potential future underspend realised in the city centre fund to the citywide fund, as outlined within section 3.22 of the report.

Closure of Connswater Shopping Centre Update

The Director of Economic Development provided the Committee with an update in relation to the Council's engagement with the cultural, arts and community organisations that had been affected by the closure of Connswater Shopping Centre.

The Committee noted the engagement to date and the support being offered by the Council to help organisations mitigate the effects of the closure.

Requests to Present

Request to Present - Department for Infrastructure - Eastern Transport Plan

The Committee agreed to receive, at a future meeting, a presentation from the Department for Infrastructure in relation to the Eastern Transport Plan (ETP), and that an invitation be extended to members of the Planning Committee, given the ETP's strategic alignment with the Council's Local Development Plan.

Request to Present - York Street Interchange Alternative Design

The Committee considered a request from local architect Mr. M. Hackett to present at a future meeting on the proposed alternative design to the York Street Interchange.

The Committee:

- i. noted the request to receive a presentation from Mr. M. Hackett in relation to the alternative design to the York Street Interchange, and that the Department for Infrastructure would be presenting the York Street Interchange Update to the Committee in May; and
- ii. agreed to defer the decision to receive the presentation on the alternative design until after the Department for Infrastructure's presentation in May.

Request to Present - Blackstaff Residents' Association - Proposal for a Workhouse Museum and an Interpretive Centre

The Committee considered a request from the Blackstaff Residents' Association to present at a future meeting of the Committee in relation to a proposal for a workhouse museum and interpretive centre within the grounds of Belfast City Hospital.

The Committee agreed that, in the first instance, the request be referred to the South Area Working Group.

Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

Regeneration Tracker

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update on the Belfast City Centre Regeneration Tracker which captures regeneration and development activity which took place in the City Centre during 2024, as aligned to the eight core policies of the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS). The detail of this report will be provided by way of a presentation at Committee.**

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 Members are asked to note that:

- i. An overview of regeneration and development activity which took place in Belfast City Centre and Titanic Quarter during 2024, as aligned to the eight core principles set out in the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy, will be provided by way of a presentation to be made to this Committee on 9th April 2025.**
- ii. This will include identifying challenges and proposed next steps to help unlock the next stage of the delivery of the Regeneration & Investment Strategy priorities in line with the 2024 BCCRIS 10 year stocktake for discussion with Members.**

4.0 Main Report

- 4.1 As members are aware the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) sets out our collective ambition for the continued growth and regeneration of the city core and its surrounding areas for the period 2015 to 2030. It contains a road map of policies to guide city centre decision-making and key projects that translate those policies into action, aligned to our overarching ambitions outlined within the Belfast Agenda. BCCRIS seeks to address the universal elements of a thriving city centre as well as challenges and conditions that are unique to Belfast and is underpinned by the following eight core principles:**

- Increase the Employment Population;**
- Increase the Residential Population;**
- Manage the Retail Offer;**
- Maximise the Tourism Opportunity;**

- Create Regional Learning and Innovation Centres;
- Create a Green, Walkable, Cyclable Centre;
- Connect to the City Around, and
- Shared space and social impact.

4.2 To facilitate the implementation of the eight policies for the city centre, BCCRIS identified a series of projects aimed at creating a liveable and economically thriving city, alongside, identifying the following five Special Action Areas:

- Inner North
- Inner West
- North East Quarter
- Transport Hub and South Centre
- Oxford Street and the Eastern Bank

4.3 The city centre provides an important role for Belfast, the Council and the wider region given Belfast's role as the regional driver and the critical role the city centre in particular plays in terms of employment, investment, tourism, education and a place to live and to visit. , The city centre makes up 2.6% of Belfast's spatial area but represents the largest employment base employing over 86,000 workers across the various sectors, representing c37% of Belfast's workforce. Approx 80% of the Councils income comes from the district rate, with the city centre accounting for 41% of Belfast's non-domestic rates income. The sectors contributing greatest to city centre rates are the office sector (66% of city centre non-domestic rate) and retail (17% of city centre non-domestic rate). From 2020/21 to 2023/24 the city centre non-domestic rate has increased year on year going from £41.9m to £49.1m over this 4-year period.

4.4 In 2024 a stocktake was taken on the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy. the findings of the report are largely in line with the statistics reported in the Regeneration Tracker, focusing on what has been achieved since the Strategies launch in 2015 and to identify work that is yet to be done. After extensive engagement across key city partners and stakeholder, including the CG&R Committee, the Stocktake also identified the key areas of focus to drive catalytic change. These areas of focus include;

- Increase city centre living across all tenures by addressing viability, funding, policy and water infrastructure issues. Recognising the importance of good placemaking and connectivity to creating inclusive and sustainable communities.
- Deliver A Bolder Vision priority projects including a prioritising a number of infrastructure related capital projects, sustainable and active travel, delivering green and climate resilient public realm and open space.

- Unlock major regeneration schemes that have stalled and preserving built heritage where possible. This includes a particular focus on the Tribeca site. This will require concerted public and private sector commitment.
- A multi-Agency approach to Place Keeping and City Management - ensuring the city centre is well managed, clean, safe, accessible, vibrant and animated, capitalising on Belfast's distinct draw.

- 4.5 The purpose of the Regeneration Tracker, which will be presented to this Committee, is to provide Members with an overview of regeneration and development activity which has taken place in Belfast City Centre and Titanic Quarter during 2024 (1st January – 31st December), aligned to the eight core policies outlined within the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy.
- 4.6 A number of the core principles and projects and developments identified within BCCRIS have progressed well since 2015 to date (and in particular during 2024 which will be the focus of the presentation to Committee). This has included retail, office refurbishment, hotel and tourism, purpose-built student accommodation and major developments identified in BCCRIS such as the relocation of the University Ulster, progression of the new Transport Hub and Weavers Cross development, progression of City Deal projects including the Belfast Stories tourist attraction, waterfront development etc. Whilst retail across the UK has remained challenging previous reports to this Committee have shown that city centre ground floor vacancy levels have decreased from 23% to 21% in 2024 and there have been a number of new first to Belfast /first to market brands who have recently located in the city centre.
- 4.7 It is however recognised that challenges remain around city centre living, place-keeping and public realm, dereliction, and infrastructure investment. As reported to CGR in February 2024 and through the BCCRIS Stocktake the lack of regeneration related funding for Belfast (and the wider region) as compared to other UK city regions has put Belfast at a distinct disadvantage in terms of city competitiveness and addressing issues of viability, place making and progressing development and regeneration including housing and increased city centre living. As highlighted to Committee there are a number of funding streams available in other UK cities that have helped accelerate development inc the Brownfield Infrastructure and Land Fund, Future High Streets Fund, Transforming Cities Fund etc. The experience from other cities has shown that these have been critical in order to realise the full regeneration potential of their city centres and to meet wider city region requirements.

- 4.8 Notwithstanding the lack of this external funding, the Regeneration Tracker presentation to be made to Committee will highlight positive development activity during the 2024 period across the private and public sectors. In order to deliver the growth ambitions as set out in the Belfast Agenda to 2035 it has been estimated that this will require c £5.5bn investment and clearly the role of the private sector is critical in this. The Regeneration Tracker details the extensive private sector development delivered in 2024 along with highlighting some of the projects where Belfast City Council are leading on the delivery of addressing some of our key sectors for growth. This includes the Housing Led Regeneration Programme, the Bolder Vision, Strategic Property Acquisitions, Belfast Region City Deal Projects inc Belfast Stories, Cathedral Gardens redevelopment, and the Vacant to Vibrant Programme.
- 4.9 An update on these various areas of work have been brought to both CGR and SP&R Committees. In terms of city centre living specifically it is worth highlighting the update brought to the March 2025 CGR Committee in relation to the housing led regeneration programme. This included an update appointment of Graham as the Council's Delivery Partner for a significant multi-site, residential led mixed use regeneration development opportunity (c £630m GDV). This followed the development of a number of Concept Regeneration Plans for Council and wider public and private sector lands and PADS for each of the cluster sites. Members were also updated on the Inner North West Development Brief which has now been awarded to Clanmil Housing Association. An update was also provided in relation to the city-wide Strategic Site Assessments where planning appraisals and feasibility studies are underway, and a number of sites agreed to progress to exploring delivery options.
- 4.10 It is worth highlighting that there are a significant number of consented residential units / schemes that have come through the planning system in the city centre particularly, and that many of these have not progressed for various reasons including issues around policy, viability, infrastructure etc, most of which are outside Council's responsibility. Notwithstanding this however it is worth noting that there are currently over 950+ homes under construction across 3 city centre sites, and over 1,503 social homes under construction across the city.
- 4.11 The Regeneration Tracker will present an update on the progress of development and regeneration activity within the city centre in 2024 as well as identifying challenges and proposed next steps to unlocking the next stage of the delivery, in line with the BCCRIS Stocktake, for discussion with Members.

5.0 Financial and Resource Implications

None associated with this report.

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

None associated with this report.”

The Director of City Regeneration and Development presented to the Committee a review of the 2024 Belfast City Centre Regeneration Tracker.

She outlined the role of city centre in attracting private sector investment, creating revenue and enabling the sustainability of Council expenditure, and the contribution that the city centre makes to the wider region, including economic growth, job creation, access to services and cultural and recreational amenities.

She highlighted that the 2024 stocktake of BCCRIS had focused on the achievements of the strategy since its launch in 2015, and identifying key areas of focus to drive catalytic change, as outlined within the report.

The Committee was presented with an overview of the regeneration and development activity that had taken place in Belfast City Centre and the Titanic Quarter during 2024, including identified challenges and proposed next steps, as aligned to the following eight core principles set out in the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS):

- Increase the Employment Population;
- Increase the Residential Population;
- Manage the Retail Offer;
- Maximise the Tourism Opportunity;
- Create Regional Learning and Innovation Centres;
- Create a Green, Walkable, Cyclable Centre;
- Connect to the City Around, and
- Shared space and social impact.

The Committee noted:

- i. the contents of the report and presentation, which provided an overview of the regeneration and development activity which had taken place in Belfast City Centre and the Titanic Quarter during 2024, as aligned to the eight core principles set out in the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS); and
- ii. the identified challenges and proposed next steps to help unlock the next stage of the delivery of the Regeneration and Investment Strategy priorities, in line with the 2024 BCCRIS 10 year stocktake.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

Culture Night

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

The purpose of this report is to:

- Update members on sector engagement and recommendations relating to potential delivery and support models for Culture Night 2025 in Belfast and subsequent iterations.
- Seek approval for recommendations within this report and launch a public procurement exercise to deliver the 2025 Culture Night programme up to the value of £150,000

2.0 Recommendation

The Committee is asked to:

- Note the contents of the report and Appendix 1 – ‘Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap for Delivery’
- Seek approval for recommendations within this report and launch a public procurement exercise to deliver the 2025 Culture Night programme including supporting marketing activity up to the value of £150,000

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Background

At the City Growth and Regeneration Committee on 10th April 2024, Deputy Lord Mayor Cllr Groogan, outlined a proposal to support cultural venues in the City to open on the evening of ‘Culture Night’ in September, within the Belfast 2024 Programme of events. The Committee agreed to refer the decision to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for consideration so that further detail of how this could be facilitated, resourced and managed could be provided. After having considered various options, it was agreed that Belfast would not have a Culture Night event in 2024. Reasons included limited officer capacity, limited delivery lead in aligned to budget approval process and recognition of the volume of cultural activity being delivered across the September period as part of the 2024 programme. Papers also presented detail on benchmarking of delivery models in other cities.

- 3.2 At the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 24th May 2024, members agreed an allocation of up to £30,000 to the facilitation of an engagement programme with the wider cultural sector, key funders, partners and other interested parties in relation to culture night, its purpose and potential delivery models from September 2025 and onwards.

3.3 The Culture Night concept

Established in 2009, Culture Night Belfast was a large scale and free cultural event taking place in the Cathedral Quarter and city centre of Belfast. The concept traces its roots to an initiative of Temple Bar Cultural Trust / Dublin City Council in 2006. The first event in Dublin began as an innovative but relatively modest local event with 40 venues opening free and late in the evening in Dublin's Temple Bar, expanding citywide in 2007, more than doubling in size with 87 cultural institutions participating. From this foundation, the Culture Night concept has grown in scale and profile becoming an established and popular part of the cultural calendar across over 40 towns and cities throughout the island of Ireland alongside events internationally such as in London, Paris, Berlin and New York.

3.4 Culture Night in Belfast

Culture Night in Belfast began in 2009 when a number of arts organisations came together to organise the first Belfast Culture Night in September 2010. In 2012/13, the Cathedral Quarter Trust became the custodians of the event, delivering Culture Night in the city until the final event in 2019.

As the largest free shared cultural event in the city-centre, audiences grew to an attendance of over 100,000 for the 2019 event held across two days in September 2019. This event was delivered by a core team of a Creative producer, a programme assistant, a marketing manager, a freelance production manager, 15 area managers, internship placements and over 100 volunteers.

The budget for Culture Night ranged from £240k in 2016 to over £328k in 2019. Culture Night received £12,000 annually from the councils Core Multi Annual Funding programme from 2016 to 2020. The event received the majority of its support coming from other statutory bodies including the Arts Council NI, The Executive Office, Department for Communities and Tourism NI alongside support from trusts and foundations and the private sector.

3.5 The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the suspension of the event in September 2020 – with a digital version staged instead. In 2020, the Cathedral Quarter Trust and Belfast City Council co-commissioned a Strategic Review and Three-year Development Plan for Culture Night Belfast to be delivered by CQT and retain its footprint within the Cathedral Quarter. This review identified that whilst ‘Culture Night Belfast was an extremely well attended, much appreciated and, to some extent, iconic city event, the existing model for Culture Night has become problematic’. The report highlighted various concerns with the previous Culture Night model including:

- The audience for the event has grown exponentially whilst the volume and quality in the programme have not;
- The idea that artists could, would or should give their time for free is no longer a viable delivery model;
- The audience’s relationship with the event has changed so that family audiences feel pushed out and unsafe;
- Critically there is confusion over what the purpose of the event in how and what it delivers for the creative sector is and where the responsibility for it effectively achieving that purpose lies

This review was completed in spring 2022 and the Cathedral Quarter Trust did not run Culture Night in 2022, with organisers stating that the event had ‘become too big and unwieldy and the original intention of providing a platform for our artistic and cultural communities to connect with a much wider audience had been lost.

3.6 In January 2023, the Trust undertook a recruitment process to appoint and employ a Creative Director, to be funded by Belfast City Council, to provide a three-year development and delivery plan for an annual large-scale city-centre cultural event. However, on 6th April 2023, the Cathedral Quarter Trust announced that it is ‘has been forced to cease day to day operational activity, including planning any cultural events, with immediate effect and for the foreseeable future, following the withdrawal of core funding by the Department for Communities.’. The statement continued ‘Following the withdrawal of its core funding CQT will not be directly involved in the delivery of any future Culture Night and as a Board we will continue to work with Belfast City Council and other stakeholders to explore all options around the future of this popular and important event.’ In the operational absence of the Cathedral Quarter Trust, no organisation has taken on the lead organising and delivery role necessary to revive Culture Night in Belfast.

3.7 Culture Night in other locations

In the Republic of Ireland, the Culture Night brand is managed centrally by the Arts Council Ireland, in partnership with local authorities and cultural organisations throughout the island of Ireland. As well as providing financial support to local authorities, Arts Council Ireland manage the core brand, website and major media partnerships such as broadcast events with RTE.

Whilst delivery models and challenges vary across different locations, Culture Night is largely led by local authorities in each area. Investment in Culture Night initiatives range from approximately €30k in Cork (led by council staff) to over €190k in Dublin.

As the largest Culture Night, Dublin Culture Night attracts over 100k people over 350 events. The event is shaped through co-design with the arts sector, audiences and the local authority. The event takes place across arts and cultural organisations and venues of all shapes and sizes, from independent studios and art-spaces to national cultural institutions, by extending opening hours to allow increased access for the public. Unique events and workshops are specifically programmed at participating locations and all activities are made available to the public free of charge. Unlike the Culture Night Belfast model, which was largely about converting the streets of the Cathedral Quarter into a pop-up venue with road closures and on street programming, Culture Night Dublin does not involve road closures and is spread across the whole city.

- 3.8** Dublin City Council manage the event through procurement for 'single operator frameworks', a multi annual arrangement which can be utilised for four years. This procurement covers the operator who in turn tender out for an event management company so they can recruit additional staff/assistants. The Dublin Council Events unit liaise with police/gardai and insure the event. The procurement for the freelance event company is accountable to the arts manager in Dublin City Council.

3.9 Consultation with the cultural sector, audiences and previous funders

Following approval from SP&R in May to proceed with a procurement exercise, Thrive and Daisy Chain Inc. Were appointed as a partnership to deliver this Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap Delivery contract. Together, they investigated:

- What is the purpose of Culture Night and who owns it
- How Culture Night started in Belfast and how it changed over time to better understand the lessons of the past and use these to shape any future iterations
- How the cultural sector and audiences experienced Culture Night in Belfast and what they want it to become in the future
- What past and potential funders' priorities and any likelihood of funding the event in the future

3.10 To find out the above, they carried out the following:

- Desk research into comparable events in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the UK and abroad, to explore and analyse models of programming, budget and delivery
- 1x one-to-one interview with Dublin City Council
- 7x one-to-one interviews with the founders of Culture Night Belfast and people who have worked as producers or event managers for Culture Night Belfast over the years
- A survey aimed at the cultural sector, including artists, venues and producers
- 3x focus groups with members of the cultural sector in Belfast
- 2x focus groups with audiences
- A consultation with past and potential funders, including Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Tourism NI, Arts & Business NI and the city's Business Improvement Districts

An online survey was administered in February 2025 and 938 responses were collected.

This included:

- 203 sector participants (including venues, artists, producers, libraries, and heritage places who participated in CNB before)
- 735 non-participating sector organisations and audiences (people who attended CNB but didn't participate)

3.11 Key findings from the survey include:

- 78% of respondents said they want Culture Night to come back, with just 4% saying no and 18% weren't sure
- 76% said they would be interested in taking part, while just 3%

said no. 21% said they didn't know if they would participate in Culture Night in the future.

- Most people mentioned wanting less alcohol and better crowd management
- Other themes centred around being more artist-led, having more funding or support for artists and venues, and better communication so people don't miss events/performances.
- 39% of those who incurred costs related to the work said they didn't receive any additional funding and operated at a loss. A further 35% said they didn't receive any additional funding, but 'were able to make it work.'
- A quarter of respondents weren't able to pay artists involved in their CNB programme
- Paying people, logistics, and programme costs were the most challenging aspects for the sector

The full report, which includes qualitative feedback from focus groups and funders, is detailed in appendix one of this report.

3.12 Key findings and recommendations from the report

Based on this qualitative and quantitative feedback, coupled with research on comparable events and the context of Belfast, the report's authors have produced a range of recommendations. These include:

3.13 Purpose and ideology

The report recommends that 'any return of Culture Night Belfast must be done with eyes firmly fixed on the core ideological pillars that inspired the creation of the event in the first place', namely:

- Celebrating the diverse arts, culture and heritage ecosystem in Belfast and its connection with the people of this place - including venues, organisations and individuals.
- Giving the opportunity to audiences to visit places and experience culture they may not have encountered before, for free.
- Being inclusive and accessible to all, thus welcoming all kinds of audiences, regardless of age, disability, socioeconomic status or community background.

3.14 Recommendations for a 2025 event

Alongside a range of recommendations for the long-term sustainability of the event, the report recommends an approach to

delivering an event in 2025, namely:

- Whilst a smaller event is deliverable in 2025, with the timeline available, it should be limited to venue-based events.
- Additionally, street-based events should not be included in the programme.
- It is essential that the creative sector are the main focus.
- Given the timeframe for a 2025 event, there is a risk that some organisations and artists won't be able to take part as their programme and schedule for the year are already set. However, it is important that they do not feel obligated to participate.

3.15 Procurement approach

While not a recommended approach for future years, the report recognises that a procurement process is the only approach for 2025.

However, this procurement exercise should take into account that, as well as large-scale event management skills and strong health and safety knowledge, what is being sought is not simply a service but a nuanced understanding of the event and its stakeholders. The skills and requirements for a 2025 provider should include:

- Large-scale event management skills and curation of such events,
- Knowledge of the cultural sector, including funded and non-funded organisations, freelance, artists, libraries and heritage, as well as strong existing relationships with the sector across the city.
- Marketing resources appropriate for an event of this scale.
- The successful appointee will be required to lay the foundation for 2026 and create an independent committee, as referred to in the Governance section of these recommendations.
- Other aspects mentioned in the long-term recommendations should be taken into consideration as part of the procurement process, when possible to deliver within the short timescale for 2025. These include the event's delivery model, safety and marketing.

3.16 Long-term recommendations

The report highlights a range of long-term recommendations relating to governance, the delivery model, funding, safety, marketing and growth. These include:

3.17 Governance

On governance for future events post 2025, the report recommends that:

- Culture Night Belfast should be led by an independent body that shares the values and ethos of the event highlighted in this report and in the previous recommendations. We recognise this is not achievable for the 2025 event but should be explored for future iterations.
- Given CNB's scale and significance, a steering committee is appropriate to ensure the event remains true to its core values in the future. This committee should include and represent Belfast's arts and culture sector in majority.
- This newly constituted entity should lead on programming, curation and fundraising.

3.18 Delivery model

On delivery, the report recommends that:

- Culture Night Belfast to return with a Receiving House model. This means each organisation or artist that will take part in CNB will programme their own event, pay for it and submit it to the central organising body for inclusion in the programme.
- This delivery model will still require a strong, creative, curatorial approach, to ensure the cultural sector stays on the front stage, there is a diverse representation of art forms and organisations and artists can avail of support from the organiser if required
- Events are located and scheduled appropriately to avoid crowding.
- That the delivery organisation has a programming budget to support artists and venues who may not be able to take part in Culture Night without it.
- Belfast City Council may also want to explore alternative ways to engage in some curatorial funding to support creatives to deliver content for the event.
- To ensure artists are paid for submitted events, organisations will be required to show how they will pay artists in order to be part of the programme.

3.19 Funding and sponsorship

The report recommends the following approach to funding and sponsorship of the event:

- a value-led approach should be undertaken when it comes to funding the event.
- Future corporate relationships need carefully managed and rejected if not in line with the event's priorities.

- In terms of its funding, Culture Night should not be treated like any other festival. As a matter of fact, Culture Night is not a festival and sits outside of festival funding schemes. It is rather a sector development initiative.

3.20 Event safety

To ensure future events are safe, the report recommends that:

- As part of a procurement process, health and safety should be a mandatory tender requirement.
- that the scale of the event is expanded across the city instead of focused in Cathedral Quarter.
- Sufficient budget will be needed to ensure the security to be more visible as the event grows

3.21 Marketing and communications

On messaging and communications relating to the event, the report states that:

- Marketing must set clear expectations about the event's evolution, emphasising the new, community-focused approach and expanded reach across the city, while acknowledging the shift away from its previous scale and structure.
- Any communication will have to emphasise that CNB has now expanded into other parts of the city and encourage people to explore their own neighbourhoods.
- Although Culture Night has been described by many as an 'audience development tool', one night of engagement is not enough to deepen relationships with new audiences. For this reason, Culture Night should not be advertised as such.

3.22 Risks and challenges

It is worth noting that delivery of an event in 2025 does come with several risks and challenges. These include:

- The potential of a lack of suitable responses or suppliers to the public procurement exercise
- Subject to approval to issue a tender, the earliest any potential supplier could be appointed is May 2025. This means any supplier would effectively have just over four months to issue an open call, build a programme and ultimately deliver on an event on 19th September 2025

- Given the tight timeframe and challenges within the cultural sector, there may be a limited number of responses from venues and organisations across the city to this open call
- Any contractor will have a challenge to ensure there is clear messaging around the event. This will need to emphasise the shift from being a large, on street event based in the Cathedral Quarter to a more venue based, city wide programme.

3.23 Recommended approach for 2025

In order to deliver on an event in 2025, it is proposed to follow a similar model to Dublin City Council and issue a public tender to market to deliver the event. This procurement exercise will seek to appoint an external organisation to manage an open call for a series of free events in venues across the city. This contractor would act as a receiving house, collating various events from willing participants under one banner and presenting them to the public as a cohesive programme. This external organisation would be expected to lead on programming, production and marketing of the event. As referenced in the report from Thrive, it is important that the specification for this procurement exercise reflects the complexities and essence of Culture Night. Given the timelines for delivery officers are seeking approval to open the tender process in mid-April ahead of council ratification. No spend will be incurred prior to final ratification.

3.24 Financial and Resource Implications

The value of this contract will be up to £150,000. This will be resourced from the 2025/26 budget for the Culture and Tourism section of the Economic Development division of the Place and Economy Departmental budget in line with existing approvals.

3.25 Equality or Good Relations Implications/ Rural Needs Assessment

The cultural strategy, A City Imagining has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and a Rural Needs Assessment (RNA). Specific initiatives as required will be subject to a further equality screening.”

During discussion several Members thanked officers, Thrive and Daisy Chain Inc. for the work that had been undertaken to date in relation to Culture Night including the engagement with the cultural sector, and welcomed the recommendations outlined within the report to deliver a 2025 Culture Night programme.

In response to a Member's suggestion, the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, agreed that officers would explore the potential use of Belfast City Hall as part of the 2025 Culture Night programme, subject to availability.

In relation to support for the 2025 Culture Night, a Member further suggested that the Committee write to the Minister for Infrastructure and Translink to request that late-night public transport services be operated on Culture Night; write to the Minister for Communities to request that the Department for Communities provide funding support for the 2025 programme and Culture Night going forward; and that officers engage with the incoming operator of the Belfast Bikes Scheme on the potential for reduced pricing for bike rentals for 2025 Culture Night.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report and Appendix 1 - "Culture Night Sector Engagement and Roadmap for Delivery";
- ii. approved the recommendation to launch a public procurement exercise to deliver the 2025 Culture Night programme which would include supporting marketing activity up to the value of £150,000;
- iii. agreed that, given the timelines for delivery, officers would open the tender process in mid-April ahead of Council ratification and that no spend would be incurred prior to Council ratification and call-in period;
- iv. agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure and Translink requesting that consideration be given to the operation of late-night public transport services on Culture Night 2025;
- v. agreed to write to the Minister for Communities requesting that consideration be given to the provision of funding to support the 2025 Culture Night programme, and Culture Night going forward; and
- vi. agreed that officers would engage with the incoming operator of the Belfast Bikes Scheme, Beryl, in respect of pricing to support Culture Night 2025.

Invitation to Lord Mayor – Heroes of Irish America Awards

The Committee considered an invitation from the Irish Echo for the Lord Mayor to attend its "Heroes of Irish America Awards" in Buffalo, New York, on 16th May, 2025.

In response to a Member's question in relation to the Council's international engagement approach, the Senior Manager, Economy, advised that an update report would be submitted to the Committee for consideration at its meeting in June, 2025.

The Committee:

- i. approved for the Lord Mayor to attend and address the Irish Echo 'Heroes of Irish America Awards' in Buffalo, New York, on 16th May, 2025; and
- ii. noted that the costs associated with the attendance of the Lord Mayor and one officer at the event, would not exceed £3,400, and that these costs would be covered within the International Relations budget for US-based activities.

Request for External Market Licences

The Committee considered the following requests for market licences:

- an external market to take place on a temporary basis in the former Europa Bus Station building; and
- a one-off market as part of the 25th Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival in mid-May, 2025.

During discussion, the Markets Development Manager and the Senior Manager, Economy, advised that the Market Rights Policy was currently under review and that an update would be provided to the Committee in due course.

After discussion, the Committee approved:

- i. a licence for an external market to take place in the former Europa Bus Station on a monthly basis over the course of the coming months; and
- ii. a licence for a one-off market as part of Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival in May, 2025.

Growing Business & the Economy

Go Succeed Enterprise Support Service Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

"1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update members on the Enterprise Support Service (Go Succeed) – the regional initiative to support business start-up and growth that is being led by Belfast City Council on behalf of the 11 councils.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- Note and endorse the progress to date on the delivery of the Enterprise Support Service across Belfast and beyond, with the objective of driving more and better businesses
- Note the update to the current funding position from MHCLG for the 2025/26 financial year
- Agree to the provision of match funding from Belfast City Council of £314,415 to support delivery for the 2025/26 financial year
- Agree to support the work to secure resources for delivery beyond March 2026.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 At the August 2024 meeting of this Committee, members were provided with an update on progress to operationalise and deliver the Enterprise Support Service which has been branded as Go Succeed. The service has now been operational for around eighteen months and has reached thousands of potential entrepreneurs and businesses across Northern Ireland.

3.2 By way of background, members will recall that Belfast City Council led on a successful funding application to the UK Government's Ministry for Community, Housing and Local Government (MHCLG) for UK Shared Prosperity Fund monies (SPF) to support delivery. This provided £17 million of support for the period to March 2025; £12 million programme delivery and £5 million for small grants.

3.3 Belfast City Council, as lead for the service, has now secured additional funding via an application to UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) of £9.2 million for the 2025/2026 financial year, ensuring continuity of the service. The focus over the next year, alongside delivery of the service, will be working to secure a more permanent funding source. The coming year is considered a "transition" year for Shared Prosperity Fund and work is underway within the NI government departments to consider how they will take a more direct management role in a future Fund from April 2026 onwards.

3.4 The service aims to be the go-to source for expert business advice across the region. It represents the councils' collective response to our statutory responsibility and offers a set of connected enterprise support services where individuals, entrepreneurs or businesses can access a continuum of support to meet their needs, depending on their stage of development.

The concept is that the service will help people get the right support at the right time – and will also help maximise other available funding streams by helping businesses to navigate the complex support ecosystem.

3.5 The service has been established to deliver across three core areas – Start, Grow and Scale – with tailored support for clients aligned with their growth ambitions.

- **Start:** this element of the service aims to identify individuals with entrepreneurial intentions as well as reaching those individuals who do not have an intention to start a business but could be encouraged to do so. There is specific, targeted support for a range of underrepresented groups. The menu of support available includes masterclasses, peer support networks and 1-1 mentoring
- **Grow:** this element of the service provides support for existing businesses. 1-1 mentoring is allocated based on the business' potential to grow and innovate. Masterclass and peer support network activity are also provided to support existing businesses to make key decisions on issues such as entering new markets or accessing finance for growth
- **Scale:** this part of the service is geared to supporting start-ups that have the potential to go on and generate at least £1m in revenue after 3 years. Support is delivered through 1-1 mentoring which aims to enable access to finance or further support through Invest NI, Catalyst or others.

3.6 In addition to the tiered menu of support, small grants of up to £3,000 (up to 50% of capital costs) will be available to entrepreneurs or businesses accessing support through the service who demonstrate growth potential.

3.7 The delivery is underpinned by investments such as a wide-reaching marketing and communications campaign; a call handling service to deal with phone enquiries as well as an online portal to deal with online requests for support and a regional CRM system to enable tracking of client engagement across the service.

3.8 **Regional Performance Update**

Since the service launched in November 2023, we have achieved the following by way of regional performance:

- 18,793 individuals 'reached' through a range of community outreach activities
- 6,202 individuals/entrepreneurs supported through start-up activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks)
- 4,168 businesses supported through growth activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks)
- 1,595 entrepreneurs/businesses have accessed Go Succeed Grants since the launch in February 2024.

3.9 The service provides an opportunity for councils to deliver a consistent approach to enterprise, start-up and growth provision across the region. However it also has the flexibility to adapt to meet the specific needs of entrepreneurs and businesses within local areas. To achieve this, councils have developed local-level annual service plans which identify key areas of focus for outreach and delivery activities. This can include interventions to increase participation and address specific barriers faced by certain under-represented groups including females, individuals with a disability, ethnic minorities etc. It can also allow for targeted sector support activities such as those aimed at the tourism and hospitality sector or creative and digital sector support.

3.10 Belfast Performance Update

Since the service launched in November 2023, we have achieved the following by way of Belfast performance:

- 2,046 individuals 'reached' through a range of community outreach activities. This has included:
 - Sector specific events and self-employment academies for those in the hair and beauty industry including delivery of aspirational workshops and hands-on mentoring support for over 80 newly qualified individuals
 - Delivery of a female-focused 'inspiring enterprise' event for a group of 100 female entrepreneurs providing practical support to starting or growing their enterprise
 - Working with apprenticeship providers across Belfast to deliver aspirational workshops to 100s of 16–18-year-olds encouraging entrepreneurship as a very real and achievable pathway for consideration
 - Facilitation of the '22 under 22' initiative, designed to unearth, recognise and fast track 22 exceptional potential entrepreneurs in the city

- Increasing awareness of enterprise among young people at the Young Enterprise Big Market event in St George's Market in December 2024.
 - 1,036 Belfast entrepreneurs supported through start-up activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks)
 - 756 Belfast businesses supported through growth activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks).
- 3.11 315 Belfast businesses have accessed Go Succeed Grants since the launch in February 2024, drawing down over £1 million. These grants have enabled businesses to purchase capital and/or revenue items which will support their future growth plans.
- 3.12 Critical to the service is the ability to deliver place-based activity and to be responsive to the needs of the local business community. In Belfast, there has been a series of targeted masterclasses for businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector. We have also put in place several information and support sessions to help businesses access other support services such as the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund and the Belfast Business Promise and have organised support clinics to help businesses interested in exploring new markets and introducing new technologies into their business. For the year ahead, planned activity includes:
- Establishing, and building upon, relationships with key stakeholders across the city to put in place targeted interventions to engage with under-represented groups and work to overcome the barriers to starting or growing a business for those groups
 - Continuing to raise awareness of the Social Economy sector, encouraging and supporting new and existing social enterprises and co-operatives as well as improving social value connections across the city
 - Partnering with the council's Employability and Skills team to target self-employed sectors, including childminding, and delivering bespoke academies to break down barriers to self-employment.
- 3.13 Looking ahead, it is critical that funding is secured to enable this service to continue. The SPF funding is currently scheduled to run out in March 2026 and there is no future SPF funding approach beyond this date. There has been some engagement with the Department for the Economy (DfE) and the Minister has been vocal in her support for the service. However, at this point, DfE is not making a financial contribution to support the delivery of NIESS – although councils are using some of resources allocated to them from central government for the delivery of their statutory duty to provide start-up support as their match funding

contribution to the overall funding pot. The councils have developed a detailed stakeholder engagement plan – including political engagement – for the coming months in order to drive home the value and impact of the service and to make the case to relevant departments to prioritise resources for future delivery. Local political support across the region will be critical in building support for this work.

3.14 Financial and Resource Implications

Belfast City Council is currently acting as the lead council on behalf of the 11 councils for delivery of the service. To do so, we have established a delivery and management team which is fully resourced through the SPF funding. The overall indicative SPF budget for the 2025/26 financial year is in the region of £7.2 million revenue, with around £2 million in capital funding available across the funding period for grant support.

- 3.15** A condition of the funding from MHCLG is that projects include match funding as part of the funding package. Members will be aware that Belfast City Council has a statutory obligation to support the promotion of jobs through business start-up activity. Members are therefore asked to note and endorse Belfast City Council's Enterprise and Business Growth Unit contribution of £314,415 in match funding to the NI Enterprise Support Service in order to comply with both the funder's requirement and Council's statutory obligation. The contribution is based on an agreed formula across all council areas, calculated on the number of businesses to be supported.

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

An equality impact assessment for the service has been completed. Local targets for delivery in each council area have been established and will be part of the contractual commitments with delivery partners."

The Committee:

- i. noted and endorsed the progress to date on the delivery of the Enterprise Support Service across Belfast and beyond, with the objective of driving more and better businesses;
- ii. noted the update on the current funding position from the UK Government's Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), for the 2025/26 financial year;

- iii. agreed to the provision of match funding from Belfast City Council of £314,415 to support delivery for the 2025/26 financial year; and
- iv. agreed to support the work to secure resources for delivery beyond March, 2026.

Chairperson