

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 6th August, 2025

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor I. McLaughlin (Chairperson);
The High Sheriff, Councillor McAteer;
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, Bunting, de Faoite, S. Douglas,
Duffy, Groogan, Hanvey, Lyons, McCabe,
McCallin, McCormick, McKay, R. McLaughlin,
Murray, Nelson and O'Neill.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mrs. L. Leonard, European and International Relations
Manager;
Mr. A. Ferguson, Senior Development Manager;
Mr. C. McCreery, Culture Development Manager; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor Maskey.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 4th and 25th June, 2025, 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 July, 2025, subject to the following amendments:

- the Committee's decision under the heading 'York Street Interchange Placemaking and Active Travel Review (PATR) – Committee Response' was amended to provide that the issues raised by Councillor Groogan be included in the Council's formal response to the Minister for Infrastructure; and
- the Committee's decision under the heading 'Belfast Zoo Q4 Performance Report' was amended to provide that membership of the proposed Council body to focus on the long-term financial sustainability of Belfast Zoo and complementary assets, be appointed using the Sainte-Laguë method.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor Duffy declared an interest in relation to item 2(a) 'Vacant to Vibrant Programme' in that his employer was in the process of submitting an application to the scheme. As this was not related to any application under consideration, he was not required to leave the meeting.

Councillor Groogan declared an interest in relation to the same item in that her employer was in receipt of a grant through the scheme. As this was not related to any application under consideration, she was not required to leave the meeting.

Councillor Groogan also declared an interest in relation to item 2(b) 'Artist Studio Organisational Grant 2025/26' in that she was acquainted with an applicant to the scheme and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following three 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 Programme

The Committee was provided with an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and the associated recommendations from the assessment panel.

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy highlighted that, subject to the Committee's approval of the recommendations by the assessment panel set out within the report, the available funding for the city-wide Vacant to Vibrant scheme would be almost fully depleted. He advised that officers would continue to seek additional funding to extend the city-wide scheme.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme which would be supporting up to 72 businesses/organisations to locate or expand into long term vacant units;
- ii. agreed the recommended city-wide grant awards as outlined within the report; and
- iii. noted that the city-wide fund was now almost completely expended, and that officers would continue to seek additional funding to extend the scheme.

Artist Studio Organisational Grant 2025/26

The Culture Development Manager provided the Committee with an update on the Artist Studios Organisational Grants for 2025/26 and the associated recommended grants.

The Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report; and
- ii. agreed the recommendations for Artist Studios Organisational Grants for 2025/26, as set out in the report.

Financial Reporting - Quarter 4 2024/25

The Committee considered a report which provided an update in relation to its Quarter 4 financial position.

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

Requests to Present

Belfast Waterfront Task Group

The Committee considered a request from the Waterfront Task Group to attend its next meeting to present Members with an update on the progress of the Belfast Waterfront Framework.

The Committee agreed to receive a presentation from the Waterfront Task Group at its meeting on 10th September, 2025.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The Committee considered a report which highlighted recent correspondence from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to all Councillors in relation to the City Centre Waiting List. The report recommended that the NIHE be invited to attend a special meeting of the Committee to discuss the City Centre Waiting List, and that an invite also be extended to the Members of the People and Communities Committee and the Planning Committee.

The Committee agreed:

- i. to invite the Housing Executive to attend its special meeting on 27th August, 2025, to discuss the City Centre Waiting List;
- ii. to extend an invitation to Members of the People and Communities Committee and the Planning Committee; and

- iii. That Members should submit questions to be forwarded to the Housing Executive, specifically in relation to the City Centre Waiting List, in advance of the special meeting.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

Events Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is

- to provide a programme update on the 2025 Belfast Maritime Festival.
- to provide members with an update on Halloween

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to

- note the contents of the Maritime Programme
- consider and approve funding to Bid One for Halloween activity

3.0 Main report

3.1 Maritime Festival 2025 Programme

Planning is well advanced for the Maritime Festival to be delivered across the weekend of the 6-7th September 2025. Officers continue to work with internal and external stakeholders on a range of matters to ensure the successful delivery of this signature project.

Titanic Quarter is all set for a weekend of free fun from 11am-6pm each day. Organised by Belfast City Council's Events team, in partnership with Maritime Belfast Trust, the Belfast Maritime Festival is also supported by Belfast Harbour, Titanic Quarter Limited, Titanic Belfast, Department for Communities, Tourism NI and the Odyssey Trust.

People of all ages are invited to dive deep into a celebration of Belfast's rich maritime past and innovative future along the Maritime Mile – from Sailorstown/City Quays to HMS Caroline.

Visitors can hop on board visiting ships docked at Queen's Quay and the Abercorn Marina, including the stunning Andalusía – a Spanish galleon replica. Sailability will also operate from the marina, offering accessible sailing, and educational tours.

Queens Quay will also host Science Street, back by popular demand, transforming the waterfront into a space for hands-on learning and discovery – from marine biology and climate change to biodiversity. Close by is Kids Cove, where younger visitors will enjoy arts and crafts, circus and dance and pirate play time.

‘Maritime Presents Festival of Fools by the Sea’ at the Arc; a mix of live street circus, theatre and walkabout animation. Close by the Nomadic, the Hamilton Dock Maritime Village will celebrate past and future with immersive technology, interactive exhibits and boat building exhibitions.

The historic Slipways is the venue for a music programme & funfair with an extended Saturday evening programme (with headline Act ‘Hothouse Flowers’ backed by ‘Honey Feet’) delivered in partnerships with Maritime Belfast Trust. The Slipways Street Food Market is also located here, with regional producers showcasing and selling their goods supported by DAERA, through the NI Regional Food Programme (NIRFP).

New to the programme for 2025, is ‘City Sensations’, an Accessible & Inclusive programme of activities held on the Antrim side of the river in the recently developed City Quays Gardens.

Between City Quays and the footbridge, DRIFT, a legacy project from 2024, will be located at Donegal Quay. This unique floating installation will provide workshops.

To compliment the musical offering at the Slipways, there will be three further performance spaces along the Maritime Mile, extending from Donegal Quay, to the Soundyard, and finally as far as HMS Caroline/Titanic Distillers.

A Community Co-design project engaging Sailortown Regeneration, The Met and Passers by will provide programme enhancements in the form of public art, theatre or performance. There has also been ongoing engagement across the industry to showcase local offerings in conjunction with the overall festival programme. Our media partner Bauer Media Group will be on site with prizes, games and giveaways.

Visitors attending the Belfast Maritime Festival are encouraged to walk, cycle, take the Glider from Belfast city centre directly to the Titanic Quarter, or travel by train to Titanic Quarter Halt. Cycle parking is available outside Titanic Belfast and at Belfast Bike docks at the SSE Arena and SS Nomadic.

3.2 Halloween

Members will be aware of support that was offered to BID one to deliver Halloween activity in 2024 and a revised proposal has been submitted for 2025. 2024 activity delivered:

- **Monster Installations** - 7 Giant inflatable monsters adorned prominent city buildings, drawing a remarkable 1 Million + total views and 500,000 reach across social media platforms. These installations encouraged footfall, inspired social media content, and instilled a sense of community pride. Local businesses such as Thompsons and Lush participated by creating complementary displays.
- **Pumpkin Patch** - In collaboration with Belfast City Council, the Pumpkin Patch distributed 1,600 pumpkins and hosted approximately 5,000 visitors. The event was widely praised for its value and organisation. Attendees received maps and brochures highlighting other Halloween activities and attractions in the area.
- **Spooktacular Activity Centre** - Located at 2 Royal Avenue, the centre hosted over 5,000 visitors throughout the weekend. Activities included pumpkin painting workshops, face painting, Halloween decoration creation, and a Creepy Crawly Farm featuring snakes and spiders. Quiet sessions each morning catered to children with additional needs, ensuring inclusivity

2025

The proposal for 2025 is a continuation of this activity with an ask to uplift the proposed number of monster installations to 10. The Halloween offering, including the rooftop monsters and city-wide installations has the potential to be expanded further to bring a real sense of fun and animation across the city centre. This will not only enhance the visitor experience but also strengthens city vibrancy during a key festive period.

The return of the pumpkin patch will again offer families an economical and engaging reason to come into the city. This type of activity encourages footfall and translates into spend across our retail and hospitality sectors, helping drive economic benefit while reinforcing the city centre as a welcoming, diverse family-friendly space for all.

Monster Installations

- 10 Large, inflatable monsters placed on buildings throughout the City Centre.
- These award-winning installations are visually impactful, sharing, and proven to attract footfall in other cities.
-

Belfast One Pumpkin Patch – City Hall Grounds

- A two-day free ticketed event hosted at City Hall.
- Visitors will receive a pumpkin and be encouraged to visit 2 Royal Avenue, where they can decorate or carve at dedicated design stations and avail of activity similar to that delivered in 2024 – with 2 Royal Avenue becoming a dedicated ‘fun hub’ for the period
- This format encourages city movement and adds an interactive creative element to the overall experience.

Total costs to deliver extended monster installation and pumpkin patch including install, derig, insurances, event management, performers and staffing is estimated to be £80,000.

Members should note BID one are also seeking to deliver other activities including:

Cultural Engagement – Halloween Stories from Around the World & Living Window Animations

- Olive Tree House animated with projections acting out folk tales (e.g. Japanese yokai, Indian Diwali, Dia de Los Muertos).
- Window displays combine projection and theatrical storytelling.
- Performances run in loops across evenings.

Dia De Los Muertos Procession

- A twilight procession with music, dance and processional sculpture. The route for this could be in and around the Corn Market area.

BID one have advised that many businesses have expressed enthusiasm for getting involved again this year. They've made clear that investment from partners like Belfast City Council and Belfast One provides them with the confidence and support to contribute meaningfully to the event with their own in kind activation.

Outcomes and Impact For 2025

- Positive city experience for families and residents through interactive, safe, and festive events.
- Broader cultural engagement through stories and displays celebrating Halloween across global traditions.
- Increased footfall across the City Centre during Halloween.
- Support for local businesses through increased visibility and targeted promotions.
- High social media engagement via visual installations and visitor content.

Funding of 50K would support the increased number of monster installations as proposed and the pumpkin patch, including the hub at 2 Royal Avenue, with BID one funding the remaining costs. This would be an uplift of last year's support of £40,000.

Members had raised previously about potential for provision of support for Halloween activities in communities however capacity, timelines and resources has proved challenging in this area. Halloween activity can already be supported through the community festivals fund currently with one applicant being successful in receiving funding for activity with The Beat Carnival delivering Tales and Traditions: A Neighbourhood Festival of Global Halloween Heritage. The CFF grant is now closed and officers will continue to highlight that Halloween activity is eligible for future years.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

Financial resources will be met from within existing departmental budgets and from specified reserves.

5.0 Equality and 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."

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy drew Members attention to the information provided within the report in respect of the Maritime Festival 2025 Programme.

In relation to Halloween, he highlighted the support provided by the Council to the Belfast One Business Improvement District (BID) to deliver Halloween activity in 2024 and outlined a recommendation to increase funding support for Belfast One BID to deliver Halloween activity in 2025.

During discussion, several Members welcomed the update provided on the proposed Halloween activity for 2025 and the recommended uplift of funding support to Belfast One BID, which would enable an increase to the number of monster installations throughout the city centre.

A Member highlighted the key role of the BIDs within the city centre and requested that representatives of each of the BIDs be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to provide Members with further detail on their work and how the Council could provide support.

In relation to future events updates, the Strategic Director of Place and Economy advised the Committee that it would be provided with a more detailed update on the Fleadh Cheoil at a future meeting. Members also requested that updates be provided in respect of the upcoming Oireachtas na Samhna and options for a New Year's Eve Event.

A Member highlighted an announcement by the Minister for Communities in April 2025, that funding would be made available for organisations to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the United States Declaration of Independence in 2026. The Member requested that, given the strong cultural and historical links with the United States, officers explore options in respect of the city marking the 250th anniversary.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report including the Maritime Festival 2025 Programme update;
- ii. approved funding to Belfast One Business Improvement District (BID) for Halloween activity;
- iii. agreed that a report be submitted to its next meeting to provide an update on the Oireachtas na Samhna;
- iv. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting to provide an update in relation to options for a New Year's Eve Event;
- v. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting in respect of options to support the marking of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the US Declaration of Independence in 2026; and
- vi. agreed to invite representatives of the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to a future meeting to provide an update on their work.

International Engagement - Proposed Approach

The Committee considered a report which set out a proposed approach for the Council's engagement in international activity which included a draft International Relations Framework for 2025-28 and an International Relations Delivery Plan for 2025-26.

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy and the European and International Relations Manager provided the Committee with an overview of the draft Framework which included:

- **Previous Framework 2017-21** – Acted as a workplan for the Council's European and International Relations Unit; key priorities of the Economy, Education and Tourism; key new Council work areas not included such as city regeneration, city innovation and climate;
- **Changing Operational Context (Internal)** – New Framework's alignment with the Belfast Agenda;
- **Changing Operational Context (External)** – Impact of global politics, new EU trading relationships, alignment with the Executive's Programme for Government and the new Invest NI business strategy focused on trade and investment;
- **Review of Practice from Other Cities** - Focused on the strategies/frameworks of UK and Ireland core cities and highlighted the challenges in measuring success;
- **Vision** – To position Belfast as a globally-connected, forward looking city that would be open, inclusive and ambitious, attract trade, investment, talent and visitors whilst sharing the city's unique story and values with the world;
- **Purpose** - To identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that could maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities;
- **Role of Council** - To use the Council's civic leadership and convening role to:
 - develop and utilise international relationships and connections to generate investment, trade and tourism and enhance Belfast's global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and offer;
 - Coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment; and

- Support our partner organisations to deliver their organisational targets with a focus on inclusive economic growth;
- **Framework Pillars and Priority Activities for 2025/26:**
 - Trade and Investment;
 - Innovation and Knowledge Exchange; and
 - City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development;
- **Tracking Impact** – All cities and partners found it difficult to accurately track impact of individual activities; introduction of a bespoke CRM (Customer Relationship Management); value of case studies; and
- **Oversight** – International activity would be presented to the Committee in an annual action plan with an additional focus on measuring performance and increasing opportunities for members in shaping agenda.

During discussion, the Strategic Director of Place and Economy and the European and International Relations Manager answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to engagement with China, messaging for international stakeholders and EU engagement.

Members also requested that the Framework include an Implementation Plan, quarterly updates, the continued membership of the Eurocities Network and consideration of future participation in the European Week of Regions and Cities, environmental and ethical elements, further detail on Member engagement with international stakeholders and measurable outcomes.

In response, the Strategic Director advised that officers would submit a further report, for the Committee's consideration, which would address the issues and requests raised by the Members.

After discussion, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of the draft International Relations Framework 2025-28 and the International Relations Delivery Plan 2025-26 to enable a further report to be submitted to provide detail on the issues raised by Members.

Culture Night - Correspondence from the Minister for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities

The Committee considered the following responses in relation to Belfast Culture Night 2025:

- **Minister for Infrastructure** - Response to the Committee's request for late-night public transport to support Culture Night. The Minister welcomed the engagement between the Council and Translink in respect of Culture Night and stated that she was

committed to finding a solution to extend late-night public transport services on a year-round basis. The Minister advised that she would continue to build on recent positive engagement with the Minister for the Economy and the Council; and

- **Department for Communities (DfC)** – Response to the Committee's request that DfC consider providing funding support towards Culture Night 2025, and Culture Night going forward. DfC advised that it did not have any funding streams available to provide support for Culture Night 2025.

During discussion, several Members expressed their disappointment regarding the responses received and highlighted the need for late-night public transport within the city and the value of investment in Culture Night.

A Member requested that the Committee write to the Minister for Communities to request engagement with the Council in respect of DfC providing funding support towards Culture Night 2026.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the correspondence received from the Minister for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities in relation to Culture Night; and
- ii. agreed to write to the Minister for Communities to request engagement with the Council in respect of DfC funding support for Culture Night 2026.

Strategic and Operational Issues

Minutes of the City Regeneration Members' Working Group - 19th June 2025 and 4th August 2025

The Committee approved the minutes of the City Regeneration Members' Working Group meetings of 19th June and 4th August, 2025.

Issues Raised in Advance

Artist and Creative Studio Space (Councillor Groogan to raise)

Councillor Groogan raised concern in relation to studio space within the city for artist and creative use.

She highlighted the value of the sector to the city and welcomed the Council's approach to providing support, however, she stated that this support needed to be matched by the Executive.

Councillor Groogan requested, as a way of the Council providing further support to the sector, that a review of the Council estate be undertaken to identify potential studio space for artist and creative use.

Accordingly, the Committee agreed to recommend that a review of the Council estate be undertaken to identify potential studio space for artist and creative use and reported to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Chairperson