

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



**Belfast
City Council**

3rd October, 2025

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

The above-named Committee will meet in the Lavery Room, City Hall and remotely via MS Teams on Wednesday, 8th October, 2025 at 5.15 pm, for the transaction of the business noted below.

You are requested to attend.

Yours faithfully,

John Walsh

Chief Executive

AGENDA:

1. Routine Matters

- (a) Apologies
- (b) Minutes
- (c) Declarations of Interest

2. Restricted Items

- (a) 2 Royal Avenue Update (report to follow)
- (b) St George's Market Update (Pages 1 - 8)
- (c) Malone House (Pages 9 - 12)

3. Presentation (Restricted)

- (a) Belfast Waterfront Task Group (Pages 13 - 34)

4. Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

- (a) Belfast Waterfront Task Group Update (report to follow)

5. **Positioning Belfast to Compete**

- (a) Events Update (Pages 35 - 38)
- (b) International Engagement - Update on Proposed Approach (Pages 39 - 66)

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

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Belfast
City Council

CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Subject:	Events Update
Date:	08.10.2025
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster - Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Lesley-Ann O'Donnell – Senior Manager Culture, Tourism & Events

Restricted Reports									
Is this report restricted?	Yes ☐ No ☒								
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted. Insert number 1. Information relating to any individual 2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information) 4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter 5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained 6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction 7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime									
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted? <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 70%;">After Committee Decision</td> <td style="width: 30%; text-align: center;">☐</td> </tr> <tr> <td>After Council Decision</td> <td style="text-align: center;">☐</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sometime in the future</td> <td style="text-align: center;">☐</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Never</td> <td style="text-align: center;">☐</td> </tr> </table>		After Committee Decision	☐	After Council Decision	☐	Sometime in the future	☐	Never	☐
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Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes ☒ No ☐

1.0	Purpose of Report / Summary of Main Issues
1.1	- To update members on Culture Night 2025 - To seek approval from Members for a dedicated workshop session to support the development of Belfast City Council's Events Action Plan, ensuring alignment with strategic objectives and effective stakeholder engagement. - To seek approval from Members to facilitate a site visit to Dundalk to view festive lighting scheme as part of planning for future years.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	Members are asked to: - Note the update on Culture night - Approve request to facilitate members workshop for events action plan - Approve request for site visit associated to festive lights
3.0	
3.1	Culture night Members are advised that Culture Night Belfast 2025 was successfully delivered on 19th September, with a diverse programme of cultural activity taking place across the city centre and neighbourhoods. The event featured over 100 individual performances, exhibitions, workshops and community-led activities, delivered in partnership with artists, cultural organisations, local businesses and residents. Attendance was strong, with thousands of people engaging in events throughout the evening, reinforcing the festival's reputation as one of Belfast's flagship cultural celebrations. The programme highlighted the breadth of creative talent across the city and promoted wide public participation, supporting both the cultural sector and the night-time economy. Officers are now progressing the final evaluation and reporting process. This will include detailed analysis of outcomes, audience reach and impact, alongside reflections from

	stakeholders and delivery partners. Recommendations for the future development of Culture Night will be prepared and brought back to Committee in due course for Members' consideration.
3.2	Events action plan Officers are continuing to work on the development of an events action plan. Belfast's programme of events plays a vital role in shaping the city's identity, attracting visitors, supporting the local economy, and fostering civic pride. As the Council looks ahead to the next phase of delivery, it is essential that a refreshed Events Action Plan is developed to: • Reflect the ambitions of the Belfast Agenda and cultural strategy. • Respond to changes in the events landscape post-pandemic. • Support wider city recovery, tourism, and place-making objectives. • Ensure an inclusive and sustainable approach to event planning and delivery. The development of the Action Plan will require input from Members to ensure that the priorities and outcomes reflect the ambitions of the Council and the needs of communities across the city. It is proposed that a workshop be convened with Members (dates to be circulated via democratic services) to: • Provide an overview of the current events programme, highlighting successes, challenges, and areas for improvement. • Explore opportunities for enhancing the city's events offering, including community events, cultural programming, and signature events. • Consider themes such as sustainability, accessibility, economic impact, partnership opportunities, and international positioning. • Discuss priorities and desired outcomes for inclusion in the draft Events Action Plan. • The workshop will be designed to be interactive and informative, giving Members the opportunity to shape the direction of the Plan at an early stage. Feedback from the session will be used to inform the drafting of the Action Plan, which will be presented to Committee for approval later in the year.
3.2	Festive lights – site visit As part of the planning and development for future iterations of the festive lights scheme it is proposed to conduct a site visit to Dundalk at some point between the 2-9th December to see

	an installation that our suppliers have previously delivered as we move towards planning for 2026, and a subsequent members planning workshop in January Dundalk’s “The Northern Light Show” presents a valuable opportunity for Belfast City Council to gain insights into the planning, delivery, and impact of large-scale festive lighting installations. Dundalk’s success in creating a visually captivating and community-driven experience offers a practical model for enhancing Belfast’s own seasonal lighting strategy. Aligning with the objectives of the Belfast Lighting Strategy, particularly in relation to innovation, placemaking, and increasing civic pride. With Belfast introducing new Christmas lights supplier this year, there is a timely opportunity to explore how immersive lighting can be used not only during the festive season but also extended to other key calendar events such as Halloween. These extensions would allow for year-round engagement, encouraging repeat visits and boosting local economic activity. The learnings from Dundalk’s approach, particularly around community involvement, sustainability, and creative design can inform Belfast’s own delivery model, ensuring that future lighting installations are both impactful and inclusive. The Dundalk installation, which formed the centrepiece of the Brigid1500 Festival , attracted an estimated 48,000 visitors within its first few days (Dundalk Democrat) , demonstrating the strong public appetite for high-quality, visually impactful light experiences.
4.0	Financial and Resource Implications
	There are no immediate financial implications associated with this paper.
5.0	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).
6.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	None



Subject:	International engagement – update on proposed approach
Date:	8 October 2025
Reporting Officer:	Damien Martin, Strategic Director, Place and Economy
Contact Officer:	Laura Leonard, EU and International Relations Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted? If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted? After Committee Decision After Council Decision Some time in the future Never ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Yes ☐ No ☒
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted. Insert number 1. Information relating to any individual 2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information) 4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter 5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained 6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction 7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime	

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

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
	The purpose of this report is to respond to Members' queries regarding the proposed approach to the council's engagement in international activity for the coming three-year period following discussion at the August committee, and to propose a new framework for engagement, taking account of the comments received.
2.0	Recommendations
	Members are asked to: • Note the responses to issues raised at the August 2025 Committee set out in section 3.5 of the report • Approve the proposed approach to council activity in international engagement work for the coming three years, as well as the annual action plan for the current financial year.
3.0	Main report
3.1	At the August 2025 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members received a draft International Relations Framework 2025 – 2028 along with an action plan for 2025/26 activity. At that meeting, there was a discussion regarding elements of the draft approach, and it was agreed that officers would review and produce an updated report at a future meeting.
3.2	Members will be aware that since the last International Relations Framework 2017-2021 there have been significant internal and external shifts that require a change of focus. Some of these present opportunities while others are potential threats. The global operating environment is facing significant headwinds and is highly volatile at the present time. Macro-level factors mean that it can be difficult to plan activities with any degree of certainty given that changes such as the introduction of tariffs can impact directly on commitments and ambitions around trade and FDI activity, visa restrictions impact on student mobility and research, and cuts in international funding may impact on international cultural activities.
3.3	At a regional level, The Executive Office is expected to issue a new International Relations Strategy in the coming period aimed towards using its resources – including the international office network and the Invest NI overseas teams – to deliver PfG priorities, principally to “Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy”. Invest NI has also released a new business strategy, including an enhanced focus on both FDI and international trade activity. That strategy also places a significant focus on sub-regional growth, ensuring that all parts of the region are supported.

3.4	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 and Development 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” business and cultural investment opportunities.
3.5	At the August 2025 meeting of the Committee, a series of questions were raised. By way of update, these are summarised below, along with a commentary/update on progress since the August meeting. <u>Questions regarding nature and level of engagement with EU</u> • The draft framework recognises that the June 2025 UK/EU Reset and the unique NI trading relationship offered through the Windsor Framework presents new opportunities for European engagement. It also recognises the potential for working with Invest NI and our universities and businesses to rebuild relationships and enhance opportunities in relation to innovation and knowledge exchange. • In the context of the need to progress these new opportunities the August report outlined officers would be engaging on the value of maintaining Eurocities membership (fee is £16000 per annum) and potential alternative uses in relation to EU engagement. • Members will be aware that the Council has been a member of the Eurocities network since the early 1990s. While the network was a useful source of information on key policy developments and partnering opportunities for collaborative EU funds, this has been less relevant to us since EU exit. Belfast did host a meeting of the Eurocities Culture Forum in 2024 and this provided a good opportunity to showcase the work of Belfast 2024 during the year of cultural celebration. Following the August 2024 meeting of the Committee, the EU and International Relations Manager engaged with officers across the council to explore the level of engagement that they had in the Eurocities network over the course of the previous year. It appears that this was very limited and not providing value for money for the annual investment which is almost €16,000. Although Belfast was a very engaged member of the network for a long period of time, our view is that, in the new operating context, we are still able to access

the relevant insights, networks and contacts that we need through our involvement in the UK Core Cities Group, for which there are no additional fees payable. In addition, through our involvement in the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor work, we have been exploring opportunities for collaborative funding projects with RoI partners and this is one of the priority areas of work within the action plan for the coming year.

- In addition to institutional and funding engagement in the EU, officers consider that there are opportunities to explore additional trade development and collaborative partnership activities with organisations and businesses within the EU member states. The International Relations Manager met with the team from the Invest NI Brussels Office. They have undertaken to carry out scoping work to identify priority events and activities aligned to Belfast's sectors and interests, utilising their networks across different EU cities and regions, as well as in Brussels itself. The NI Bureau has recruited a new Innovation & Economic Development Officer to undertake this work and this resource is available to the Council to help us identify a strategic engagement approach in this area of work. The NI Bureau has also offered the use of its offices and team to work with the Council to host any showcase events to promote the city for business culture, tourism and innovation, and matching similar cities with a presence in Brussels
- It is therefore our recommendation that we develop a scope of work with the NI Bureau Team in Brussels, based on the strategic priorities agreed through this International Relations engagement plan, tapping into their resources, networks and contacts. This scope of work will be completed by end November 2025, with a series of proposals for action within the current and next financial years
- Whilst we will continue to explore options to maintain cultural linkages, we also recommend that we pause our membership of the Eurocities network and refocus those resources towards development of this joint workplan with the NI Bureau and other partners, focusing on priority areas of collaboration across Europe for the benefit of our businesses and in conjunction with our partner organisations.

Questions regarding nature and level of engagement with China

- The NI Executive Office will sign off its International Strategy in the near future. This will give direction at an NI level for opportunities in China and other key international markets. Traditionally, the council has fallen in line with and supported those areas of work where they align with our city and corporate priorities
- Priority areas of work at present include use of the civic office to support annual inward student and research and innovation delegations as well as diplomatic engagement with officials from city, regional and national administrations. To do this work, we collaborate closely with organisations such as the Chinese Consulate and

the Confucius Institute. Through our stakeholder engagement, we facilitate a quarterly exchange of information on matters relating to collaboration between China and various Belfast-based partners

- Invest NI, the NI Executive Office and the Chinese Consulate are currently working on a NI/China Economic Forum which will take place in Belfast on 11-12 November 2025. This is likely to involve a number of large Chinese companies and banks who will be visiting the city to explore opportunities for investment and collaboration. Belfast City Council will work closely with the agencies to ensure that the city is well presented during these engagements and that opportunities for our businesses and partner organisations are maximised.

Questions regarding USA 250 activities

- At the September meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members were updated on the work of partner organisations to mark the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States in 2026, including the development and delivery of a small grants programme, to be supported by DfC. It was agreed that members would be kept updated on progress around these matters in the coming months.

Questions regarding how ethical and environmental considerations are taken account of in international relations activity

- As part of the development work on the international relations framework, an equality screening exercise was undertaken. In addition, sustainable and inclusive growth is a key theme of the draft framework, reflecting the wider council commitments in this field. All of our work will be directed by these commitments. Decisions around foreign direct investment (FDI) will be made by Invest NI but these are likely to be guided by the Minister's vision which focuses on four key pillars, namely good jobs; regional balance; improving productivity and reducing carbon emissions.

Member engagement in international relations activities

- Members raised some concerns at what they perceived to be limited opportunities for engagement in international relations activities in recent years. In line with the approach outlined in the framework which recognises the potential for elected members to play a key civic leadership role where their involvement supports our strategic objectives, since the August Committee, members have been invited to join officers for incoming international visits including the US Legislators visit on 21 August 2025, and the Belfast International Homecoming on 25 September 2025. Officers will continue to flag opportunities for engagement of elected members in relevant inward delegations.

	• With regard to more formal mechanisms for member engagement in international activities, officers are aware of a wider review of governance across the council. We would therefore recommend that discussions on potential structural approaches to engagement are considered as part of this work. • Aligned to this point, members noted that they wished to be kept more informed of international relations issues, including progress against targets and impact of investments. It is proposed that a quarterly review of international relations engagement activities is shared with the committee. This will serve to track progress over the previous quarter and to flag opportunities for engagement and key planned activities for the coming quarter. It will also enable elected members to identify opportunities for engagement in priority activities at an early stage (where these details are available). <u>Tracking of progress and measurement of outcomes</u> • There was discussion regarding the difficulties associated with tracking KPIs for many of the international relations activities, given that progress is rarely linear, and activities can often take some time to come to fruition, following the initial investments. In order to address this, the quarterly reporting to the Committee will give more visibility to this programme of work. Officers have also established a CRM system to help track outcomes and to also help inform decisions around key contacts requiring follow-up as well as those who are more/less likely to help contribute to outcomes. This will help us target our resources more effectively • Members also noted that they wished to see a more detailed implementation plan, with more granular detail around targets and timelines – while acknowledging the difficulties referenced above. The plan in Appendix 2 includes more detail (where available) on planned activities and expected outcomes.
3.6	Taking account of the points raised above, the revised draft approach to council-led international engagement activity for the coming three-year period is set out in Appendix 1 and the supporting delivery plan for year one (2025-26) is set out in Appendix 2. The three-year “framework” document is intended to be a supporting document to other key strategies and plans such as the Belfast Agenda, the Corporate Plan and Local Development Plan – setting out how priority objectives and ambitions in those documents can be supported through international connections, networks and opportunities. Its purpose is to identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that can maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities.
3.7	The role of the council is positioned as using our civic leadership and convening role to:

	• Utilise existing relationships and connections to generate investment, both in our business and in key infrastructure such as housing, increase trade and tourism • Enhance Belfast's global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and offer • Coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment • Support our partner organisations to deliver targets aligned with the Belfast Agenda ambition – with a focus on inclusive economic growth.
3.8	Evolving from the 2017-2021 document, the draft framework comprises three key pillars around which activity is likely to focus, namely: • Trade and investment • Innovation and knowledge exchange • City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development. Each pillar contains a series of headline actions and the specific timeframes, outputs and benefits for each of these in the 2025-26 financial year is set out in Appendix 2.
3.9	Priority activities for the remainder of the current financial year include: • Development and production of new “investment prospectus”: collating key messaging (priority sectors; quality of life proposition; cultural assets; unique selling points) – timeline for completion – January 2026 • Exploring opportunities for outward mission to Boston: explore opportunities to amplify planned activity/engagement by partner organisations, with a likely focus on priority growth sectors (including life and health sciences). Planning work ongoing – potential visit dates – first half of 2026 • Working with Nashville partners to scope out inward life and health sciences business mission: early engagement is taking place to identify potential partners; areas of focus and preferred dates • Finalisation of scoping work with NI Executive Brussels Office on opportunities for engagement to support local businesses in accessing opportunities in EU markets – scoping work complete by November 2025 and proposals for action from January 2026 • Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor: exploring additional funding opportunities including Peace Plus funded project on skills collaboration and addressing barriers to labour mobility. Project submitted – likely decision date October 2025. Delivery timeframe – three years

	• Participation in key international events e.g. Mobile World Congress (Barcelona) – promotion of key investment messaging (based on new investment prospectus) • Engagement in international partnership activity e.g. Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors' Challenge – twelve-month programme with 50 other cities aimed at delivering urban innovation solutions including officers and Innovation Commissioner visit to Columbia • Ongoing hosting opportunities for key inward delegations – prioritising key delegations aligned to city priorities and those with influence to help secure agreed outcomes.
4.0	Financial and Resource Implications
4.1	The EU and International Relations budget was approved as part of the 2025-26 estimates setting process. Budgets for individual activities are the responsibility of the respective teams.
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment
	No specific equality or good relations implications. Activities will focus on support for Belfast-based organisations and companies.
6.0	Appendices
	Appendix 1: Draft International Relations Framework – 2025-28 Appendix 2: International Relations Delivery Plan – 2025-26

Appendix 1: Draft International Relations Framework 2025-2028

Background

For many years, Belfast City Council has been actively engaged in international relations activity – working with and in support of our local partners. The nature of that work has changed over time and in response to changes in the internal and external operating context.

The most recent framework document (2017-2021) set out a strategic approach for engagement, focused on three key pillars, namely:

- Business – investment (including capital), export/trade activity and supporting the development of business-to-business collaboration
- Tourism development and promotion – for both business and leisure markets
- Education – professional development partnerships, research and innovation exchanges, student mobility and global education initiatives.

Global changes in the last number of years have been unprecedented in recent history. This makes long-term planning more challenging – and requires flexibility and responsiveness to adapt to the new ways of working. In response, our proposal is for a three-year framework approach, supported by a series of one-year action plans. We are mindful of the need to remain responsive to opportunities that can help deliver on strategic objectives, in the context of limited resources. We note the need to develop a more rigorous approach to the assessment of emerging opportunities, ensuring that these support the city's inclusive growth ambitions as set out in the Belfast Agenda.

In addition to external changes, there have been significant internal changes since the previous framework was established. New teams are focused on international engagement activity as part of their day to day working. The EU and International Relations Unit (EUIRU) is likely to remain the focal point for the council's international civic engagement work, coordinating the critical civic engagement activities (alongside the office of the Lord Mayor), managing key sister city relationships and facilitating relevant inward visits. Individual teams will be responsible for leading out on their own areas of work and will be accountable for associated outcomes.

This current framework provides a strategic approach that seeks to focus our financial and staff resources to position Belfast as a globally-connected, forward looking city that is open, inclusive and

ambitious, attracting trade, investment, talent and visitors while sharing the city's unique story and values with the world.

Our international partners

As with all International Relations activity, the success of transnational partnership working is dependent on a mutual willingness of partners to reciprocate and support project initiation and development.

Given the resources available (both human and financial), Belfast City Council has strategically focussed a significant element of its international relations activity on its established Sister City relations. However, it remains open to partner with other cities and locations on strategic initiatives where this collaboration fulfils council's objectives as outlined in the Belfast Agenda, Corporate Plan and associated plans and frameworks . An example of this flexible approach is the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2023 with Sejong which supports city-city working in the field of innovation.

Belfast City Council has three established Sister City partnerships:

- Nashville (Tennessee) – council's oldest Sister City relationship signed in 1995
- Boston (Massachusetts) – signed in 2014
- Shenyang (China) – agreed in 2016

The Council has also engaged in other networks such as Eurocities (incorporating more than 200 cities and municipalities across Europe) as well as other sector-specific and issue-based networks that are critical for learning, information-sharing and city promotion. The June 2025 UK/EU Reset along the unique NI trading relationship offered through the Windsor Framework presents new opportunities for European engagement overall – working alongside partners such as the Northern Ireland Executive team in Brussels.

As previously noted, international connectivity is not restricted to the work of the EUIR team and this framework and supporting action plan encompass and profile the international engagement work across other departments and units such as Innovation City Belfast, the City Innovation team, Climate and Resilience team, and the City Regeneration and Development team.

Strategic Context

Belfast City Council's International Relations Framework is not a stand-alone document. It is, rather, a supporting document, creating opportunities for the delivery of city priorities as set out in critical strategies such as the Belfast Agenda and the new Corporate Plan in particular.

Our approach in developing the framework

In developing this new framework, the EU and International Relations team undertook extensive engagement with a range of internal teams involved in this work. They also engaged directly with key city partners such as the universities, Invest NI, Visit Belfast, British Council, TEO and Catalyst. The findings from these engagements have formed the basis of this revised framework, shaping not only the content but also considerations on ways of working and opportunities for data-sharing and resource maximisation, as well as focusing on what specific areas of added value the framework can support.

The vision, purpose and strategic objectives are set out below and delivery against these is to be focused on three key work pillars, namely:

- Trade and investment
- Innovation and knowledge exchange
- City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development.

Vision

To position Belfast as a globally-connected, forward looking city that is open, inclusive and ambitious, attracting trade, investment, talent and visitors while sharing the city's unique story, culture and values with the world.

Purpose

The purpose of this framework is to identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that can maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities.

Council's Role

Belfast City Council will work alongside its strategic partners to :

- Develop and utilise international relationships and connections to generate investment, trade and tourism
- Enhance Belfast's positive global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and attractions
- Coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment
- Support delivery of priority activities aligned with the Belfast Agenda's vision for inclusive economic growth.

Our priority work pillars

Building on our work on international relations to date as well as our analysis of emerging market issues and taking account of the discussions through our engagement with internal and external partners, we have identified three core pillars of activity to focus our work under this framework.

Pillar 1: Trade and investment

While FDI investment may have dominated the narrative in more recent years, there is an increasing focus on trade development. An emerging regional entrepreneurship strategy is likely to include a specific focus on high-growth businesses – Innovation Driven Enterprises (or potentially AI Driven Enterprises). These businesses are global by nature and need new sources of capital and international research and business partnerships. There is an opportunity to explore how Belfast's existing civic relationships can support greater business to business collaborations – with a focus on creating jobs; driving productivity and building new joint ventures and partnerships.

Successive economic strategies have noted that export-led growth is a key economic driver. In 2023, external sales by NI companies were estimated to be £33.3 billion, a 15.7% increase from the previous year. The USA is a critical sales market for Belfast-based Invest NI client companies, accounting for more than half of all sales by value (£). Despite the current headwinds, it is likely to remain a strong market for Belfast-based businesses – in particular opportunities aligned to our growth sectors (tech and digital; life and health sciences). New relationships – still in their infancy – with partners in our sister city of Nashville have the potential to generate positive business-to-business connections, particularly in key growth sectors such as life and health sciences.

The need for external capital is not confined to trading businesses. It is also critical for bringing forward key infrastructure and investment projects.. As the council and its city partners double down on the

delivery of its high-level ambitions set out in the Belfast Agenda – particularly focusing on job and population growth – developers and project promoters are increasingly exploring opportunities for international mobile, patient capital to support delivery. In the short term, the need to drive investment in housing is a strategic priority and will be a priority activity in the coming year, following previous progress in relation to Grade A office, Purpose Build Student Accommodation and Hotels.

Pillar 2: Innovation and knowledge exchange

Belfast Region City Deal is a £1billion programme of investment that aims to create more than 20,000 new jobs over the next decade. Digital transformation and sectoral growth are at the heart of many of the Belfast-based projects. These emerging centres of excellence present an opportunity not only to compete globally on collaborative research activities but also to attract additional talent and investment to the Belfast Region. As these centres are established, they will become critical components of the city’s investment narrative, enabling a focus towards higher-value jobs and helping drive productivity in line with city ambitions.

There has been a recent resurgence of work through Innovation City Belfast – a partnership focused on bringing together public and private sector partners along with academia to generate investment; maximise the societal and economic impact of the innovation ecosystem; improve the reach and quality of the city’s digital infrastructure and grow the entrepreneurial ecosystem to support the development of more innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs). Active engagement in global networks to support this work is critical to ensuring that our investments are world-class and that the Belfast offer is heard and understood among key decision-makers. ICB is currently mapping out an engagement plan to take account of critical events and activities. We will work with them to consider shared and consistent messaging and to explore opportunities for participation by relevant of partners. One specific angle that we want to learn from and share learning on is “inclusive innovation” – in keeping with our commitments to support inclusive economic growth.

Belfast has a number of FDI and indigenous companies across a range of growth sectors that are world leading in their field and competing in a global marketplace – as illustrated through the Invest NI trade statistics. Sectors include net zero; life and health sciences and digital technology. The challenge is to drive more businesses to think and operate globally. We will work closely with Invest NI and sector support organisations to identify opportunities for market access and market engagement activities as well as opportunities to secure capital to support growing businesses in these sectors – including through our sister cities, wider civic connections in the USA, and rebuilding European relations to exploit the unique trading position secured through the Windsor Framework.

Belfast is home to two leading universities – both of whom are extremely active in international markets for the purpose of developing research collaborations, attracting talent and increasing international student numbers. Through this framework, we will explore opportunities to support this work, principally through the civic office and by identifying new opportunities with our partner cities.

Pillar 3: City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

Belfast is a culturally vibrant destination that attracts growing numbers of visitors each year. It is a UNESCO city of music – one of only 59 across the world and the only one on the island of Ireland. The rich cultural traditions – and the music in particular – are at the core of our unique and authentic tourism product.

Attracting international visitors (either for conferences, other business or leisure) is an important element of any international relations framework. Belfast is the gateway for most visitors to Northern Ireland and the council has already demonstrated its commitment to growing tourism numbers by investing in ICC Belfast – to drive new and high-value business tourism to the city. As a new business tourism strategy emerges, it is critical that the role of Belfast is reinforced. For leisure tourism, the value of large-scale events in attracting visitors – particularly Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann – is likely to present significant opportunities in the coming two years in particular. Early engagement and promotion in key markets – working closely with partners in Visit Belfast, Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland – will be essential if we are to deliver on the economic regeneration benefits from this large-scale event.

A recurring insight from international partners is the strength of the networks in Belfast and the value of the “Team Belfast” approach in helping them to access key decision-makers and expediting decision-making. A priority for the period of this framework will be to develop a suite of assets that can be shared by all partners involved in international activity, including Belfast Region partners, focusing on the key investment messaging – both the ask and the offer.

The important role of the Lord Mayor and the civic office

In addition to playing a convening and complementary role with our partners, Belfast City Council’s civic role in international relations is a critical one. It enables and facilitates access to key influencers and networks. The role of the Lord Mayor, in particular, is a critical asset that can elevate the messaging and create a positive experience of engagement in outward visits and in hosting delegations that visit

the city. This factor was widely recognised and acknowledged by our city partners as providing significant added value. Likewise, the ability to involve our elected members in conversations with investors and visitors to the city is seen by our partners as a key part of the “Team Belfast” ethos. We will ensure that our elected members play a key civic leadership role where their involvement supports our strategic objectives and will continue to work with the Lord Mayor and the team to identify opportunities for involvement in critical inward visits and international engagement activities.

How we work

In addition to considering **what** we do, it is equally important to consider **how** we do it. Through our engagement with partners, we have identified a number of key principles that sit behind our activity plan and that, if properly considered, can help make our individual and collaborative efforts more effective. These include:

Objective assessment of opportunity

A recurring discussion during our engagement with internal and external partners was the need to create a consistent approach to due diligence around requests to host inward visits; attend international events and enter into new formal partnerships.

The scale of interest in Belfast from external partners is welcome. In the last year alone, the EU and International Relations Team supported more than 45 inward visits. In the context of constrained resources across all partners, it is clear that a more robust process of evaluating and assessing opportunities presented in order to make recommendations as to how (and whether) these are supported is essential. Work has already been undertaken on a new approach and this will be further refined before being introduced across all teams in the coming year.

Measuring and communicating success

Another recurring theme in engagement meetings was the challenge associated with assessing and measuring impact directly related to specific international engagement activities.

Our research into experiences from other locations highlighted that this was not unique to Belfast and it is something that most locations are challenged by. This is because the relationships required to attract capital investment or develop new research or business-to-business partnerships can often take a long time to develop and are reliant on relationship-building – rather than being simple transactions. Likewise, engagement at a single event will rarely deliver an immediate outcome; it may take a number

of follow up engagements or it could be that fortuitous connections are made which ultimately lead to outcomes that had not been previously foreseen.

Given that the framework is a supporting document rather than a stand-alone strategy, the outputs and benefits delivered by this framework will support and are aligned to outcomes from the Belfast Agenda and other key strategies highlighted elsewhere in this framework. These are likely to include securing additional investment for local businesses; increasing investment in innovation; supporting delivery of housing targets (through investment attraction) and increasing visitor numbers. The supporting action plan that sits with this framework will identify relevant outputs and performance measures and progress against these will be reported back to Committee on a quarterly basis.

In order to help track outputs and benefits from inward and outward visits, a new CRM system will be introduced. This will enable officers to record support offered and identify outputs and outcomes as a result of that support (where information is available). It will enable us to take a more informed approach to how we deal with requests that have not, to date, generated a return and will support better information-sharing across the various teams involved in this work.

Accountability

While the CRM system will help coordinate and manage data better, it can only be effective if officers can get access to the information they require from other partners. This document and the associated action plan provide an overarching perspective of the council's international engagement activity across a number of teams. Each team is accountable for securing delivery against their stated objectives and associated reporting through committee. The EU and International Relations team may generate connections for businesses and organisations, but the responsibility and accountability for follow-up sits with the individual organisation. Likewise, the EUIR team will endeavour to track progress and collate information on outputs and outcomes associated with this work, but it is reliant on other parties to secure that information.

Maintaining strong partnerships

Belfast's international focus aligns well with the emerging approach from the NI Executive and that of key city and Belfast Region partners. Recent years have seen a new impetus behind our Sister City agreements in North America in particular as well as China. There has been a revitalisation of support for the work of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor and there are numerous opportunities for collaboration with partners along the corridor to support inclusive economic growth, positioning this seamless cross-border corridor in a global context. Likewise, new opportunities to secure external

funding to support collaborative activity on areas of shared interest (skills; circular economy; key economic growth sectors) are a focus of the DBEC work for the coming year. Maximising the outcomes from these agreements, rather than developing new partnerships, will be a focus throughout the period of this framework. Complementing their activity and amplifying its impact is both a core role of the Council and a key principle of this framework.

We will work with these partners to ensure our role contributes to theirs for the benefit of the city; our measures of success will be developed in conjunction with these partners to further cement this 'additionality' role and ensure our resources are deployed towards shared outcomes. In practical terms, this will mean continuing to work closely with our partners through formal and informal relationships – including the stakeholder engagement groups and wider engagement mechanisms that provide opportunities for information-sharing and forward planning for collaborative activities.

Appendix 1: Case studies from recent international relations engagement work

Case Study: Nashville Economic and Civic Mission Feb 2025

Objectives:

- Mark 30 years Sister City Relationship
- Meet economic leaders and explore business, partnership and investment opportunities
- Support Queens, Fisk and Belmont Universities' led Peace Summit

Highlights:

- 30 Year Sister City milestone-strengthened long standing civic diplomacy through official LM engagements, including with the Mayor of Nashville, and high level meetings
- Trade and innovation-focused Belfast start-ups, researchers and civic leaders connected with over 40 stakeholders in Tennessee's Life & Health Sciences, Venture Capital, Tech, Sports and Culture
- Education & Research: laid groundwork for bilateral student exchanges, collaborative research and medical education partnerships
- Culture & Heritage: deepened creative and heritage links including connections for 250th Anniversary of the USA, country music programming and Scots Irish initiatives.

Case study: Aflac

"Belfast, the 'city of talent and innovation' became the standout choice for company investment due to its talent pool, digital capability, and alignment with the company's overall strategy. Not to mention the personality of the city felt by the key decision makers on a fact-finding trip.

The start up and ongoing success of Aflac NI has been strongly supported and elevated with the continued backing of Belfast City Hall, which has been greatly appreciated by the company. The council ensures that VIP global visitors from Aflac are given a special City Hall welcome to show how the city values the investment, job creation, and further growth".

Case study: TalentSensus

"The International Relations function is an invaluable asset to Belfast City Council and the businesses it supports. It has been instrumental in driving significant growth for my business, Upskill Enterprise, in the USA.

It has provided invaluable support in hosting numerous high-profile delegations from the United States and played a crucial role in facilitating an important trade mission to Northern Ireland for a delegation from Pennsylvania.

The impact of these visits has been truly remarkable. Thanks to the connections fostered, our company, Upskill Enterprise, and our TalentSensus Technology have gained direct access to key individuals in the US public workforce system. This has resulted in an impressive \$4.2 million in revenue for 2025.”

Case study: Friendship Four

The Friendship Four tournament is the first and only NCAA Division One Hockey tournament to be held outside of the United States. The tournament brings up to 1,000 Bostonians to Belfast for a week over the Thanksgiving period.

The tournament is important to Belfast as it aligns to a number of corporate objectives:

- Economic development: on a number of occasions, a business delegation has accompanied the sports teams, through the office of The Boston Irish Business Association (BIBA)
- Education and skills: in addition to participating student athletes’ mobility, the players also undertake education outreach. Visits to Belfast schools profile how sport can support educational pathways and community cohesion. University partnerships have also spun out of tournament participation e.g. Northeastern University has developed a partnership with Queen’s University Belfast, bringing almost 200 students to study in Belfast for a semester over the last two years
- Tourism development: taking place during the tourism “off-season”, spend by international guests in Belfast during the week of Friendship Four amounts to £500,000 and generates 3,000 bed nights for local hotels. During game intermissions, Belfast is profiled directly into millions of Canadian and American households through a series of promotional messages aired on TV channel NESN.

From 2026, the tournament will encompass four women’s teams – building on the prior success and reach of the female Friendship Series which engaged two colleges - proof that the appetite for these quality experiences for international visitors, and Belfast’s reputation for delivering them continues to grow.

Case study: St Mary's University College

"As a small institution with limited international resources, St Mary's struggled to engage with the US market or make significant connections. Introductions made through Belfast City Council to Nashville Sister Cities changed that.

Positive PR created through undertaking outward and inward visits with Nashville has been priceless - positioning St Mary's University College as an international, outward looking institution with talented students – both domestically across Northern Ireland and in the States. The development of our students' skillset has been phenomenal. The relationship also gave St Mary's the confidence to launch our International Summer school.

St Mary's would like to acknowledge the incredible work of Belfast City Council's International Unit who have been invaluable to the development of a footprint for St Mary's in the US".

Appendix 2: Belfast City Council – International engagement activity: Delivery Plan 2025-2026

Trade and Investment					
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
New York, New Belfast 2025	Annual event and supporting side programme focused on engaging with key east coast USA economic “champions” and pipeline FDI companies considering investing in Belfast and potential trade opportunities for local companies. Also opportunity to position Belfast’s latest Tourism messaging (Fleadh 2026) and capital assets for investment	EU and International Relations Team (EUIRT)	Event organisers Invest NI US office and Belfast Chamber	June 2025 (<i>now complete</i>)	Investment leads for City assets and trade leads for Belfast businesses Support Invest NI for investment and trade pipeline Promotion of major events
Homecoming 2025	Business conference promoting Belfast to diaspora communities, particularly US-based.	EUIRT	Event organisers	October 2025	Tailored messaging and engagement to focus on capital investment opportunities. Showcase will also draw on cultural engagement, including profiling Fleadh Cheoil
US Sister City collaboration engagement	Development work to explore re-engagement with Boston, using same successful “Team Belfast” model used for Nashville mission. Boston focus will also be Life and Health Sciences including access to innovation partnerships/VCs	EUIRT; Enterprise and Business Growth Team	ICB; universities; Catalyst; individual businesses	Indicative working date – Q4 2025/6 (subject to partner agreement)	Partnerships & access to finance / trade for Belfast businesses, with focus on L&HS Promotion of Belfast as a study and tourism destination

Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
	Nashville inward trade mission: engagement with VCs and sector bodies to develop and delivery inward (to NI) business mission, focusing on life and health sciences	EUIRT, working with EBG Team	Invest NI; Global Health Connector; HIRANI	June 2026 (indicative date). Preparatory work to commence September 2025	Exploring FDI opportunities in key growth sectors; expanding business base in Belfast for key growth sectors
Developing new EU business connections	Undertaking scoping work with NI Executive Office in Brussels and Invest NI to explore opportunities for additional engagement in EU/Brussels-based activities, with a focus on increasing business engagement in new markets	EUIRT; EBG	NI Executive Office in Brussels, Invest NI	Initial exploratory work completed – November 2025. Action plan agreed and implementation from January 2026	New market engagement opportunities for local businesses
Belfast City and Region Place Partnership	Joint public/private sector-led initiative focused on place positioning to attract investment and deliver on inclusive growth. Key events include MIPIM (France, March each year) and UK ReiiF (Leeds, May each year). Other special/one-off events may also be involved, in line with opportunities. The Partnership also produces resources such as a website and investment prospectus. Will also undertake targeted work to identify and engage with new international investment opportunities, with a focus on supporting priority city investments e.g. new housing	City Regeneration and Development team	Other BRCD councils, Belfast Harbour, Universities, Invest NI, developers, construction companies, legal and financial services	Annual programme of work, with attendance at a number of flagship events	Leads generated in support of investment attracted and developments supported

Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
Develop and maintain updated Belfast's city proposition messaging and new products	Review and update of existing collateral to focus on key investment messaging for specific target markets – complement innovation proposition (below) and Invest NI collateral	Internal BCC teams (EUIR; Comms; Research; ED; CRD)	Invest NI; universities and colleges; City Deal project leads	Review current: Q2 2025; revised products: Q4	High quality products identifying unique investment opportunities; shared messaging among partner organisations
Inward Delegations: facilitate requests for presentations on Belfast's ED proposition	Facilitating inward visits, and using opportunity to showcase opportunities for investment, trade collaboration and good practice across a range of ED areas (note: will put in place "qualification" process to identify projects with potential for positive impact)	EUIRT (coordinate); input from relevant council and other partner leads	Range of city partners – depending on area of priority	Ongoing	Follow up engagement leading to more specific plans for investment /trade or collaboration (e.g. meeting with President of Babson College)
Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor	Work in collaboration with 8 councils along the corridor to take forward collaborative projects across several areas including sector development; research and innovation; skills development	Enterprise and Business Growth team	EUIR Team; other DBEC council partners; universities; NI/ RoI government depts	Ongoing work programme agreed with partner councils	Funded project activity in priority areas (circular economy; sector development; skills development). Note: decision on skills development project due October 2025

Innovation and Knowledge Exchange					
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
Belfast Innovation value proposition	Developing a shared investable value proposition for the Belfast innovation ecosystem – including the City Deal funded investments	City Innovation Office	Innovation City Belfast partners	Draft proposition to be tested at Smart Cities World Congress (November 25)	Greater coherence and clarity of messaging to priority market segments
Bloomberg Philanthropies 2025 Mayors Challenge	A two phase, 12-month programme with 50 other cities aimed at delivering urban innovation solutions including officers and Innovation Commissioner visit to Columbia	City Innovation Office	Innovation City Belfast and challenge partners	First workshop planned for late Spring 2025	Collaborative proposals for solving urban innovation challenges
Smart City World Congress (Barcelona)	Promotion of city messaging, focusing on opportunities for partnership, investment, research and trade in relation to digital innovation	Innovation City Belfast	ICB Partners	Q3	Leads in relation to partnerships, investment, research & funding opportunities
Upsurge Initiative	EU Funded climate demonstrator project linking Belfast to Maribor, Budapest, Breda, Katowice including officer visits to each partner city	Climate Team	CNS Team; Neighbourhood Services; QUB; EU Partners; Community orgs	Netherland visit – October 2025	Inform and evidence viability of nature-based solutions for sustainable food production
Support education partners' international activity (focus on sister city links)	Use civic linkages to enhance international collaborations in innovation, research and attraction of international talent	EUIRT, City Innovation, ICB	Third level education partners	Ongoing	Education partners secure research income; attract international students

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development					
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Belfast City Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority outputs and benefits
Supporting strategic tourism stakeholders in attracting and promoting major tourism and cultural events	Collaborating with Visit Belfast, Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI to drive sectoral growth and positioning Belfast as a host city for major events and international exhibitions – focus on Fleadh Cheoil for coming year	Tourism and Fleadh teams	Visit Belfast Tourism Ireland Tourism NI	Engagement plan finalised – October 2025; marketing and comms campaign implementation starts Jan 2026	International positioning and profiling opportunities; increasing visitor numbers
Friendship Four – Men and Women’s Tournaments	US College Ice Hockey Tournaments linked to Boston Sister City; associated STEM Festival and promotion of city via US TV airtime	EUIRU Tourism team	Odyssey Trust NI Connections DfC Tourism NI	Q3	Economic impact on city – bed nights, Arena venue, US and global press coverage value, socially and impact on schools and community groups making US ice hockey links for future cooperation
Your Roots Are Showing	Folk music conference and trade fair which attracts over 100 artists – scheduled for January 2026	Culture Team	Visit Belfast ICC Belfast	January 2026	Improved city positioning (focusing on music/culture)
Celebrate Chinese New Year	Participation in city partner events to mark New Lunar year	Civic Offices (esp. Lord Mayor) EUIRT	Good Relations Team; Chinese Welfare Association; Chinese Chamber; Chinese Consulate, Confucius	Q4	Enhances civic relations with Chinese players locally and internationally at civic, business and community level

UNESCO City of Culture	Ongoing collaborative exchanges and investment in local music sector – as one of 59 international cities of culture (music). International activities include October 2025 visit to South Korea	Culture Team	Cultural sector	Ongoing programme of activity (approved annually via CGR)	Support development of local music sector; profile sector on international stage; present opportunities for international engagement by local artists
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In addition to above workstreams, Council teams currently participate in strategic thematic networks aligned to the above themes including:

Council for Global City CIOs	Information and opportunity exchange between innovation cities across the world including virtual speaking opportunity at UN Global Health Connector event for Belfast Innovation Commissioner and attendance and participation at the Connector Innovation Summit in Las Vegas
European & UK Learning Cities Networks	Exchanging best practice and developing initiatives to support community learning including officer engagement in Learning Cities network events in Paris and Shenyang, promoting Belfast's best practice programmes., including the role of lifelong learning in aging societies. (fully paid by network)
UNESCO City of Music	Active participation in UNESCO cultural networks with reciprocal benefits between the cities including but not limited to partnerships with UCoM cities Kansas City (US) Hannover (Germany) Daegu (South Korea), Conde (Brazil), Ghent (Belgium) and Bologna (Italy). This year an officer will travel to each partner city (fully paid by network)
IETM	International cultural network representing over 500 member organisations and individual professionals working in the contemporary performing arts worldwide. Belfast City Council and several of its cultural partners locally are members of the network

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