

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 5th November, 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, Hanvey, Lyons, McCabe, McCallin, McCormick,
McKay, R. McLaughlin, Meenehan,
Murray, Nelson and O'Neill.

Also attended: Councillor 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;
Ms. C. Cassin, Markets Development Manager; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was received from Councillor Groogan.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 8th October, 2025, were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that the minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 3rd November, 2025, subject to the minute under the heading "International Engagement" being amended to provide that:

- the Council writes to the Department of Education asking it to remove the content posted on its communication channels regarding the Minister's trip to occupied Palestine and declaring that the Council has no confidence in the Minister of Education; and to write to the Minister of Education to inform him of the Council's position; and
- the Council, in acknowledging that Ireland will assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in July, 2026, for six months, writes to the Irish Government and to the President of the EU Council to advise that the Council wishes to deepen its engagement with the European Union and that it would encourage

European representatives to visit Northern Ireland during that six month period.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor R. McLaughlin declared an interest in relation to item 5(b) 'Department for Infrastructure Consultation on Sailortown and Ulster University Pedestrian and Cycling Improvements - Council Response', in that he was on the Board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and left the meeting whilst the matter was under consideration.

Schedule of Meetings 2026

The Committee approved its schedule of meetings for 2026, as set out below:

- Wednesday 14th January at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 28th January at 5:15pm (Special);
- Wednesday 11th February at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 11th March at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 25th March at 5:15pm (Special);
- Wednesday 15th April at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 13th May at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 27th May at 5:15pm (Special);
- Wednesday 10th June at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 12th August at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 26th August at 5:15pm (Special);
- Wednesday 9th September at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 7th October at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 21st October at 5:15pm (Special);
- Wednesday 11th November at 5.15 pm;
- Wednesday 25th November at 5:15pm (Special); and
- Wednesday 9th December at 5.15 pm.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following four 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.

Restricted Items

Presentation - St George's Market Traders

The Chairperson welcomed Ms. C. McLaverty, Mr. P. Lynn and Mr. S. McCann, representing St George's Market traders, to the meeting.

Ms. McLaverty highlighted the importance of St George's Market to the city's economy, tourism and small businesses. She outlined to the Committee the representatives' key issues which included:

- communication and engagement between the Markets management team and the traders;
- Market standards and facilities;
- the potential impact of the proposed Market Storage Policy on traders; and
- the protection of traders rights.

In respect of the proposed Market Storage Policy, Ms. McLaverty highlighted the potential impact of the policy and associated fees on traders and requested that further consultation be undertaken with traders in relation to the proposed policy. She also requested that formal communication structures be put in place to improve engagement and relations between management and the traders.

During discussion, the representatives answered a range of question from the Members on the issues raised within the presentation including communication and engagement between management and the traders, and the proposed Market Storage Policy.

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

The Committee noted the information which had been provided within the presentation.

St George's Market Update - Storage Proposals

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the feedback received following recent engagement with St George's Market traders in relation to the proposed introduction of a new storage policy for the Market; provided an overview of the draft policy's key elements; and recommended the introduction of the new policy and associated fees from 1st April, 2026, subject to the finalisation of the policy in conjunction with Legal Services and ongoing engagement with traders in respect of specific operational requirements.

During discussion, the Director of Economic Development, the Senior Manager, Economy and the Markets Development Manager answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to the draft Market Storage Policy, engagement and communication with the traders, updated trader documentation, and the support for officers responsible for carrying out the operational management activities of the market.

In response to a Member's request, the Senior Manager, Economy, advised that further detail in relation to the stall fee benchmarking exercise would be provided to the Committee.

After lengthy discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the feedback provided following recent engagement with the St George's Market traders in respect of the introduction of a new Market Storage Policy;
- ii. noted the key elements of the draft Market Storage Policy; and
- iii. agreed, in principle, to proceed with the introduction of the new Market Storage Policy and associated fees from 1st April, 2026, subject to the finalisation of the policy in conjunction with Legal Services; the ongoing engagement with traders regarding specific operational requirements; and further information being brought back to the Committee in respect of future engagement and communication with the traders.

2 Royal Avenue Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development reminded the Committee that, at its meeting in October, it had agreed not to progress with the recommended proposal for the future use of 2 Royal Avenue's ground floor, and that a further report be submitted to provide further detail and options.

Accordingly, the Director submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which recommended that a new Expression of Interest exercise be undertaken in respect of the future use of 2 Royal Avenue's ground floor. She advised that, following the completion of the EOI exercise, a further report would be submitted in relation to the next stage of the process.

The Committee:

- i. agreed for a new two-stage Expression of Interest process to be commenced for the long-term future use of the ground floor of 2 Royal Avenue; and
- ii. noted that a report would be submitted to a future meeting following the initial Expression of Interest (Stage 1) exercise.

Vacant to Vibrant Programme

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Committee with an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and the upper floor vacant spaces aligned to an emerging Homes On Upper Spaces for Everyone (H.O.U.S.E) Programme.

The Committee was reminded that the Vacant to Vibrant city centre and citywide grant programmes were now closed to further applications due to the full expenditure of the available funding and that, at its meeting on 1st October, 2025, the Council had agreed to write to the Minister for Communities and the Minister for the Economy to request additional funding for the Vacant to Vibrant Programme. The Director of City Regeneration and Development drew Members attention to correspondence that had been received from the Department for Communities (DfC) and the Minister for the Economy in response to the Council's funding request.

She advised the Committee that a funding application, submitted to DfC to extend the citywide scheme, had been agreed in principle subject to a business case appraisal and sign-off by DfC and the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee's approval of a further allocation of Council funding.

The Committee was provided with an update on the work that had been undertaken to reactivate vacant upper floor spaces within the city centre and advised that further information in respect of this work and the wider H.O.U.S.E grant programme would be brought back for the Committee's consideration in due course.

During discussion, the Director of City Regeneration and Development and the Senior Development Manager answered questions from the Members in relation to the potential extension of the Vacant to Vibrant Citywide scheme. A Member suggested that, should the Vacant to Vibrant citywide scheme be extended, drop-in information sessions should be held across the city.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted correspondence received from the Department for Communities and the Minister for the Economy in response to the Council's request for additional funding for the Vacant to Vibrant scheme;
- ii. agreed to extend the Citywide Vacant to Vibrant scheme, as set out within the report, subject to the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee and approval of the business case by the Department for Communities;
- iii. agreed that drop-in information sessions would be held across the city in relation to the extended Citywide Vacant to Vibrant Scheme; and
- iv. noted the update on upper floor vacancy; the overview of schemes to address similar vacancy issues in other areas; and the emerging Homes on Upper Floor Space for Everyone

(H.O.U.S.E) programme, with further detail to be brought back to the Committee in the near future.

Matters referred back from Council/Motions

Notice of Motion - Bike Bunker Trial

(Councillor Smyth attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 23rd October, 2025, the Standards and Business Committee had referred the following motion, which had been proposed by Councillor Smyth and seconded by Councillor Groogan, to the City Growth and Regeneration Committee for its consideration:

“This Council notes the progress being made by Dublin City Council in regard to the Bike Bunkers Scheme and their recent trial of this project. They are a way to securely store bikes for those who don’t have easy access to off street storage, particularly in terrace housing.

This Council will seek to commit to carrying out a trial to find where demand is across Belfast and where people can register their interest. As well as working collaboratively with our partners such as the Department of Infrastructure and cycling advocacy groups, as we look to find way to support and expand practical sustainable city living.”

Councillor Smyth outlined to the Committee that the purpose of the motion was to, in the first instance, ascertain the demand for, and the viability of, a potential Bike Bunkers Scheme.

During discussion, a Member welcomed the motion and highlighted the potential to explore opportunities through existing Belfast Bike docking stations.

After discussion, the Committee noted that the motion had been received and agreed that a report would be brought back which would outline a detailed consideration of the motion including potential costs implications.

Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

Housing Association Grant (HAG) Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 To advise Members of recent changes to Housing Association Grant (HAG) rates announced by the Department for Communities (DfC) and outline the potential implications for the delivery of social housing within Belfast.**

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 The Committee are asked to:

- I. note the recent changes to Housing Association Grant (HAG) announced by DfC;
- II. note the potential challenges these changes present for the delivery of social housing in Belfast; and
- III. note that a more comprehensive report will be brought back to Committee at a later stage following detailed review of this announcement and further engagement with the statutory partners and delivery agents.

3.0 Main Report

- 3.1** The Minister for Communities has recently announced changes in grant funding for the delivery of new social homes across Northern Ireland. The Minister confirmed that the proportion of Housing Association Grant funding (HAG) provided by the Department for Communities (DfC) for new social housing starts will decrease, with the average grant reducing from 54% to 46% of total costs. The benchmark costs will increase by 13.7 percentage points on average to take account of changes to construction costs, inflation, rent levels and interest rates and will apply from 1 December 2025 until the end of the 2026/27 financial year. However, the grant associated with the development of new social housing will reduce by 7.7 percentage points on average. What this means is that the calculation has taken account of relevant recent changes to costs and concluded that against these higher costs, and anticipated higher income from rent, the grant can reduce slightly.
- 3.2** The Minister explained that, given the challenging financial context, the changes are intended to secure the maximum number of new homes from the Department's £177.5 million budget this year.
- 3.3** The Department has confirmed that the revised framework will reduce the average level of grant support available to housing associations, with the stated aim of ensuring consistency across the region and maximising the number of schemes that can be supported within existing budgets.
- 3.4** The Minister acknowledged that meeting the Programme for Government target of 5,850 new social homes within this mandate will be difficult. However, he emphasised the need to 'achieve more, for less' and expressed confidence that housing associations will continue to deliver for those most in need.

- 3.5 Under the previous funding model, Belfast received an average grant level of around 54% of scheme costs. As previously discussed with Members, this level of grant funding presented viability challenges for delivery of certain housing products within the Belfast Boundary area. These challenges were particularly acute in the City Centre where the Local Development Plan identifies significant housing growth as a strategic priority.
- 3.6 Following the announcement, the regional average grant rate has now been reduced from 54% to 46%, a decrease of 8 percentage points. Belfast is set to receive an even lower rate of 42.5%, which is 11.5 percentage points below its previous level. For Belfast, this represents just over 21% reduction relative to the original regional average, placing Belfast at a distinct disadvantage compared to other areas. Housing Associations will need to secure more private finance or absorb higher costs to deliver the same schemes.
- 3.7 While the Department has emphasised the need for efficiency, the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) has expressed serious concern about the impact of these changes. NIFHA warned that *'the budget for the Social Housing Development Programme is already insufficient to meet need, and that the reduction in grant rates will render many schemes financially unviable, particularly in Belfast where costs are higher'*. Analysis carried out last year *'indicated that, at a 48% regional grant rate and 44.5% for Belfast, 70% of 75 sites examined were unviable and unlikely to progress. With the Belfast rate now expected to fall further to 42.5%, notably below the new regional average, the consequences are expected to be more severe, with a significant proportion of planned developments at risk of delay or cancellation'*. NIFHA have also expressed concerns that *'as the funding gap will have to be met by housing associations, this will require longer repayment terms and higher borrowing costs which in turn could have the potential to impact rents. For Housing Associations, pursuing schemes where rents become unaffordable is simply not viable'*. NIFHA also advise that the *'initial investigation into the impact of the rate changes suggest new build developments appear to be more viable in regional and rural areas outside of Belfast'*.
- 3.8 At this stage, the full impact of the Department's announcement is yet to be fully understood. However, following the joint meeting of the City Regeneration & Growth and People & Communities Committee on 27th August 2025 when NIHE presented on the city centre

waiting list, officers had already commenced work to assess the viability challenges associated with delivering homes within the city centre under the then-existing Total Cost Indicators (TCI) and Housing Association Grant (HAG) levels. The relationship between these calculations in determining the level of grant funding is outlined in Appendix 1. These rates were already perceived as insufficient to support delivery in high-cost urban areas. Work to date has included engagement across the sector to consider the cost basis specific for city centre housing development and explore how housing associations, the private sector and Council might advocate for a more refined, market sensitive approach, particularly in progressing a dedicated city centre TCI. This would reflect the Local Development Plan's demographic assessment and the strategic importance of housing in the city centre.

- 3.9 With this recent announcement of further reductions to the grant rate, it is now critical to understand the full impact of these revised grant levels, which seem to have the potential to exacerbate existing viability concerns and pose greater risks to housing delivery especially given the current housing need of 13,599 people across the city (as at June 2025, NIHE data), spanning families, young people, and the elderly. Of these, 11,371 have been identified as being in housing stress.
- 3.10 Whilst further analysis will be required there are concerns that lower grant rates are likely to slow the pace of new social housing delivery, reduce the number of schemes that can proceed, and make it harder to meet housing targets.
- 3.11 Council officers will continue to engage with DfC, the Housing Executive, Housing Associations, Developers and NIFHA to understand the detailed implications for Belfast-based schemes. A fuller report will be brought back to Council in due course, setting out the scale of the impact, options for mitigating risks, and any recommendations for Council engagement or advocacy.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

None associated with this report.

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

There are no Equality, Good Relations or Rural Needs implications associated with this report.”

During discussion, several Members expressed concern regarding the recent announcement by the Minister for Communities and highlighted the potential impact that the reduction to the Housing Association Grant (HAG) rate would have on the delivery of social housing, particularly in relation to the city centre.

The Director of City Regeneration and Development advised that officers would continue to review the changes announced by the Minister to fully understand the impact on social housing delivery within the city. She highlighted that, in order to inform a comprehensive review of the changes, further detail from the Department for Communities (DfC) in respect of the new Total Cost Indicator (TCI) and HAG rates would be beneficial.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Nelson,

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to invite the Minister for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to attend a future special meeting of the Committee to discuss the rationale for the recent changes to the Housing Association Grant (HAG) and the potential impact of those changes on the delivery of social housing within the city.

Further Proposal

Moved by Councillor Nelson,
Seconded by Councillor Duffy,

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to write to the Minister for Communities to request further detail in respect of the Total Cost Indicator (TCI) and Housing Association Grant (HAG) rates, in order to inform a detailed review of the changes announced and the potential impact on the delivery of social housing within the city.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the recent changes to the Housing Association Grant (HAG) announced by DfC; the potential challenges those changes would present in respect of social housing delivery within the city; and that a more comprehensive report would be brought back to Committee at a later stage following a detailed review of the announcement and further engagement with statutory partners and delivery agents;

- ii. agreed to write to the Minister for Communities to request further detail in respect of the Total Cost Indicators (TCI) and the Housing Association Grant (HAG) rates, in order to inform a detailed review of the changes announced the potential impact on the delivery of social housing within the city; and
- iii. agreed to invite the Minister for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to attend a future special meeting of the Committee to discuss the rationale for the recent changes to the Housing Association Grant (HAG) and the potential impact of those changes on the delivery of social housing within the city.

**Department for Infrastructure Consultation on
Sailortown and Ulster University Pedestrian
and Cycling Improvements - Council Response**

The Committee considered a report in respect of a Department for Infrastructure (DfI) consultation on Sailortown and Ulster University Pedestrian and Cycling Improvements.

The Senior Development Manager advised the Committee that DfI had developed proposals for Sailortown and Ulster University pedestrian and cycle improvements which would aim to provide new high quality active travel infrastructure to connect York Street Station to Ulster University and the Cathedral Quarter.

He outlined a draft Council response to the consultation for the Committee's consideration, as set out in Appendix B of the report, which stated that the Council supported the proposed pedestrian and cycling improvements given their alignment with the ambitions and targets set out in the Belfast Agenda, the city's Community Plan, 'A Bolder Vision' and the emerging development landscape, however, requested that DfI:

- continue to engage with the local communities to address the safety concerns highlighted with the Dock Street Underpass arrangement through effective design within the scheme;
- continue to engage with the Under the Bridges design team to optimise the key connectivity links that both schemes would bring to the area, including maximising the desire lines between City Quays/Sailortown and the city centre along Gamble Street;
- support the creation of a two-way cycle lane through the Under the Bridges site to connect Corporation Street with Donegal Quay;
- continue to engage with the Under the Bridges and the Corporation Street housing-led regeneration design teams to optimise the locations of the proposed crossings; and

- take cognisance of the proposed 'Sailortown/Titanic Quarter Bridge' to ensure alignment with future active travel provision within the area.

The Senior Development Manager advised the Committee that the consultation would close on 14th November, 2025, therefore, it was recommended that a draft response be submitted to DfI by the deadline stating that it would be subject to ratification by the Council at its meeting on 1st December, 2025.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Black,
Seconded by Councillor McKay,

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to write to the Minister for Infrastructure in respect of the potential to reimagine the Westlink Footbridge, which links Cullingtree Road to Durham Street.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report in relation to the proposed Sailortown and Ulster University Pedestrian and Cycling Improvements;
- ii. agreed the Council's draft response, as set out within the report, to the Department for Infrastructure consultation on the proposed Sailortown and Ulster University Pedestrian and Cycling Improvements;
- iii. noted that the draft response would be submitted to the Department for Infrastructure by the deadline of 14th November, 2025, stating that it would be subject to Council ratification on 1st December, 2025; and
- iv. agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure in respect of the potential to reimagine the Westlink Footbridge, which links Cullingtree Road to Durham Street.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

International Engagement – Update on Proposed Approach

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided an update in respect of the proposed approach to the Council's engagement in international activity for the coming three-year period following discussion at the August and October Committee meetings.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Lyons,

That the Committee agrees to defer consideration of the draft International Relations Framework for 2025-28 and the International Relations Delivery Plan for 2025/26 to enable an updated draft Framework to be submitted to reflect the decisions agreed at the Committee meeting on 8th October, 2025, in relation to international engagement.

On a vote, thirteen Members voted for the proposal and four against and it was declared carried.

In addition, a Member suggested that the updated draft Framework be submitted to the next special meeting of the Committee scheduled to be held on 26th November, 2025.

Accordingly, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of the draft International Relations Framework 2025-28 and the International Relations Delivery Plan 2025/26 to its special meeting on 26th November, 2025, to enable an updated draft Framework to be submitted which would reflect the decisions agreed at its meeting on 8th October, 2025, in relation to international engagement.

Major Events Update – Christmas Animation Programme 2025

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 Christmas Lights Switch On & additional animation throughout the festive period.**

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to note the contents of the Switch On Programme and additional Christmas animation.**

3.0 Main report

3.1 Belfast Christmas Lights Switch On

Planning is well advanced for the Switch On event to be delivered on Saturday 15 November 2025. Officers continue to work with internal and external stakeholders on a range of

matters to ensure the successful delivery of this signature project.

The Christmas Lights Switch On event will be a free of charge ticketed event, with the stage providing family-oriented entertainment including local musicians and performers culminating in the switch on of the lights by our Lord Mayor.

Members will be aware that a report to committee in June 2023 recommended several adjustments to the Christmas light switch on to mitigate identified health and safety risks - these included:

- Event build in the early hours involving staggered road and lane closures
- The careful co-ordination of deliveries of equipment and stock of the Christmas market to facilitate an appropriate cut off to allow for the build of the stage and rig.
- The stage and all associated equipment and infrastructure should remain in situ following the event to allow roads to reopen immediately after the event. This will allow of a de-rig to take place on Sunday morning during a less busy period.

Members should be aware that the mitigation outlined above has increased some costs related to equipment rental and security. Any expenditure will be found from existing corporate budgets.

This year's Switch On programme will be presented by Cool Fm on Saturday 15 November 6.00 -7.30 pm. Donegall Road Primary School will open the show, leading into festive performances from local acts that include Avenue Arts Academy, The O'Hara Sisters and St Agnes's Choral Society to name a few. Two local inspirational personalities will be appearing, champion boxer Lewis Crocker and West End/TV actress/singer Rachel Tucker. The evening guarantees a great show for the City of Belfast.

3.2 Additional Christmas Animation Programme

As in recent years, 2 Royal Avenue will provide a programme of Christmas themed activities across the six weeks of Christmas to supplement the Switch On and provide a focus throughout the festive period. The programme will be delivered by the operators of the venue, MayWe Events.

The Winter Den programme, hosted at 2 Royal Avenue, offers a diverse array of festive events and activities for all ages, running from Saturday, 15 November, through to New Year's Eve on Wednesday, 31 December. Highlights include musical performances, craft workshops, storytelling, a seniors tea dance, and special events tailored to different audiences,

beginning with a 'Quiet Christmas Tree Switch On' for those with sensory needs. While the programme encompasses classic Christmas celebrations sustainability and inclusivity themes are addressed. The annual Santa's Post Office is available throughout, and the programme culminates on New Year's Eve with a festive 'NYE Ceili' celebration. The programme provides a comprehensive schedule of holiday entertainment and community engagement throughout the winter season.

Officers have, through a competitive procurement process, engaged two organisations to curate and programme further animation throughout the festive period in the City Centre; one programme has a live music focus, whereas the second specifies other types of animation such as street performance. These programmes will ensure that a full range of animation is showcased throughout the city centre during the busy festive shopping period.

3.3 Marketing and Communications Activity

Council will operate a digital campaign with online advertising to promote the fact that there is an event taking place on 15 November, as well as festive animation across the city centre after the switch-on and seasonal activities in 2 Royal Avenue. There will also be a post-switch-on digital campaign with a slight variation on artwork to highlight the fact that other activities are taking place across the city throughout the Christmas period.

For the switch-on ad campaign, council will be directing people to the Visit Belfast website where tickets will be available from 4 November. For all press and social media activity and post-switch on promotion, council will be directing people to the www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas URL. This URL will display all Christmas activity and the switch-on event information will be displayed prominently on the page. As information is finalised on the event schedule, online messaging will be strengthened.

Promotion will take place across digital platforms and via key partners including BID One and Visit Belfast. City Matters went to print before ticket release details were confirmed, but a generic update was provided to highlight the switch-on date and other Christmas activity including Winter's Den at 2 Royal Avenue, the Christmas Market and post switch-on animation. The winter edition will be circulated to just under 160k homes throughout the first week of November. A press release will also be issued to promote the ticket release and the confirmed details of the event schedule.

Members should note that the ticketing of the event involves two releases – one at 10am and a second at 7pm.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

Financial resources will be met from within existing departmental budgets.

5.0 Equality & 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, the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to the Christmas lights switch-on event, engagement on the potential to expand the Christmas Market and the corporate communication of additional Christmas activities within the city centre. In response to a Member’s question, the Senior Manager agreed to provide further detail in respect of the breakdown of ticketing for the Christmas lights switch-on event.

After discussion, the Committee noted the contents of the report.

Growing Business and the Economy

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 as well as sector-based activities being supported by the Enterprise and Business Growth team.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- Note the update on progress at regional and Belfast level on the Enterprise Support Service

- Note the current funding challenges to the service post-March 2026 and agree to receive a further update report in the coming months to identify potential next steps
- Agree to provide funding of £25,000 to HIRANI to support delivery of the year two programme of work under the Launchpad initiative.

3.0 Main Report

- 3.1** At the April 2025 meeting of this Committee, members were provided with a performance update on the Northern Ireland Enterprise Support Service (Go Succeed). The service began operation in November 2023 and has supported thousands of potential entrepreneurs and existing businesses across Northern Ireland in that time.
- 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, subsequently secured a further tranche of 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 of our activity for this year has been on ensuring the effective delivery of the service, while also exploring a more sustainable financial model beyond the March 2026 date. The current financial year is considered a 'transition' year for Shared Prosperity Fund and the 11 June 2025 budget statement included high level details of a new approach to funding in the form of the 'Local Growth Fund', to take effect from March 2026.
- 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. In addition to the tiered menu of support, small grants of up to £3,000 (up to 50% of capital costs) are available to entrepreneurs or businesses accessing support through the service who demonstrate growth potential.

3.6 Regional Performance Update

Performance in the first two quarters of this financial year across the region includes:

- More than 4,000 individuals 'reached' through community outreach activities
- More than 2,200 individuals/entrepreneurs supported through start-up activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks)
- More than 1,800 businesses supported through growth activity 1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks)
- More than 380 entrepreneurs/businesses have accessed Go Succeed Grants, attracting around £2million in support which is matched by a similar contribution from the businesses themselves. Note that the final call for grant funding in this year is currently live and will close on 5 November 2025.

3.6 Belfast Performance Update

At a Belfast level, activity planned for the coming financial year includes:

- Significant programme of outreach and engagement support covering under-represented groups. Examples of activities are:
 - Sector specific events for those in the hair and beauty industry including delivery of aspirational workshops and a masterclass with successful entrepreneurs from the sector
 - Hosting a female-focused 'Inspiring Entrepreneurship Conference' event for over 300 school-aged emerging female leaders on the regional SistersIN mentorship programme and 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 (especially in trades) as a very real and achievable pathway
 - Facilitation of the 'Young Entrepreneurs to Watch' initiative, designed to unearth, recognise and fast track 20 exceptional potential entrepreneurs
 - Planned conference on disability and entrepreneurship to take place in February 2026 advocating for disability inclusion in business whilst sharing entrepreneurial journeys and insights and providing aspiring disabled entrepreneurs with tangible support at each stage of their journey
 - Supporting those who are economically inactive to access specialist support alongside financial incentives to address barriers to starting a new business
- 360 Belfast entrepreneurs supported through start-up activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks)
 - 346 Belfast businesses supported through growth activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks)
 - 48 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.

3.7 Critical to the service is the ability to deliver place-based activity and to be responsive to the needs of local businesses. In Belfast, key areas of focus in the current year include:

- 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, including driving investment to support the acceleration of new social enterprises
- 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

- Developing a programme of support to businesses to raise awareness of opportunities arising from major events such as Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and helping them to maximise revenue generation through these events
- Building strong local supply chains through Meet the Buyer events, including working with the construction sector (public housing focused opportunities) and food to go sector. Companies will be directed to targeted support to improve their chances of accessing public sector procurement opportunities as well as access new supply chain opportunities with private sector partners.

- 3.8 Given the substantial interest in and uptake of the service, there is some concern at recent commentary from UK Government that the Local Growth Fund is likely to be heavily capital-focused (likely split 66% capital; 34% revenue funding). This will, undoubtedly, have a significant impact on any future allocation to support this type of activity, given that the current funding breakdown is 24% capital (mainly for grants) and 76% revenue funding.
- 3.9 Officers have been seeking to engage with officials from MHCLG, NIO and the regional government departments to understand the likely impact of these changes on the support for local businesses. At this stage, there has been very limited formal communication from any of the agencies although it is understood that the NIO team is planning a series of engagement sessions in November 2025 (no details forthcoming currently). We have also made all councils aware of the current situation and have been looking at a range of scenarios to minimise the impact on service delivery including leveraging resources from elsewhere (DfE, Local Economic Partnerships etc.). In reality, it is very difficult to plan with any degree of certainty given both the lack of official information being circulated and the potentially endless range of scenarios, depending on the final funding decision from the UK Government. The added complication is that the delay in any formal communication makes it difficult to manage customer and stakeholder expectations as well as creating operational challenges for the Programme Management Office, given that are roles are fixed-term and therefore reliant on funding availability.

- 3.10 Officers will continue to seek clarity from the various government agencies and departments with a view to maximising the overall resources available to support enterprise and local business growth. A report will be brought back to a future meeting of this Committee to update on progress and to set out the likely approach at a Belfast and regional level.

3.11 Sector support activities

In addition to the 'core' business support interventions through Go Succeed, the Council's Enterprise and Business Growth Team also works with partner organisations to support targeted activities across a range of key business sectors that are critical for the city's economic growth.

- 3.12 One of the key growth sectors in Belfast is life and health sciences. At a regional level, the sector supports high value roles in companies such as Almac. In Belfast, the universities are driving sectoral excellence in areas such as diagnostics, clinical trials and medical instruments and City Deal investments such as Ulster University's Centre for Digital and Healthcare Technology at the City Hospital and QUB's iREACH Centre at City Hospital will support the further development of this sector – along with the associated societal and health-related benefits for the local population and beyond.

- 3.13 In May 2024, this Committee agreed to support the life and health sciences cluster organisation HIRANI, providing a financial contribution of £25,000 towards a new 'Health and Life Sciences Launchpad' in Northern Ireland. The Launchpad is a mentoring and investment initiative for small businesses in the health and life sciences sector, focusing on helping them to commercialise investments, attract funding and explore new market opportunities. It is a two-year project, and the principal funders are Invest NI and Innovate UK.

- 3.14 To date, the Launchpad has provided funding to 14 projects (12 SME-led and 2 collaborative R&D), and an additional 18 SMEs have received direct financial support to facilitate help progress product commercialisation work. Planning for year two activities is well advanced. It will involve the recruitment of at least 40 new participants who will avail of support such as matching them with mentors from clinical, academic, industry, and investment backgrounds, accelerating innovation readiness and commercialisation. A specific area of focus this year will be include artificial

intelligence (AI) applications in health, digital transformation, and regulatory readiness, given the advances in this space. In keeping with the commitments in year one, it is proposed that a budget allocation of £25,000 is made towards the operation of the Launchpad in Year 2. Officers will work closely with HIRANI in the course of the year to maximise referrals from other council support and engagement activities. We will also explore the 'exit strategy'/next steps following the launchpad, with a particular focus on understanding implications for the new City Deal projects in this sector.

4.0 Financial & Resource Implications

NISS: 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.

HIRANI: Funding request is for a contribution of £25,000 to year two activities as part of the Launchpad initiative.

5.0 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 the update on the progress, at both regional and city level, of the Enterprise Support Service;
- ii. noted the current funding challenges to the service post-March 2026;
- iii. agreed to receive a further update report in the coming months to identify potential next steps; and
- iv. agreed to provide funding of £25,000 to Health Innovation Research Alliance Northern Ireland (HIRANI) to support the delivery of the year two programme of work under the Launchpad initiative.

Strategic and Operational Issues

City Growth and Regeneration Committee Plan – Mid-Year Report

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided a mid-year progress update on the keys actions and Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) as outlined within the 2025/26 Committee Plan, agreed at its meeting on 4th June, 2025.

During discussion, the Strategic Director of Place and Economy and the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, answered questions from Members in relation to the mid-year progress update on the next round of Cultural Multi-Annual Grants (CMAG) for 2025-28 and the performance against target in respect of the percentage of female participation in the Belfast Go Succeed programme.

After discussion, the Committee noted the contents of the mid-year report and the progress against agreed actions and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as set out within the 2025/26 Committee Plan.

Minutes of the Belfast Stories Working Group – 18th September 2025

The Committee approved and adopted the minutes of the Belfast Stories Working Group of 18th September, 2025.

Minutes of the City Regeneration Members' Working Group – 13th October 2025

The Committee approved and adopted the minutes of the City Regeneration Members' Working Group of 13th October, 2025.

Chairperson