

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 13th May, 2026

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor I. McLaughlin (Chairperson);
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, de Faoite, S. Douglas,
Duffy, Groogan, Lyons, McCabe, McCallin,
McCormick, McKay, R. McLaughlin,
Meenehan, Nelson and Ó Néill.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and
Development;
Ms. L. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Ms. M. McKay, Enterprise and Business Growth Manager;
Ms. E. Clark, Creative Producer, Culture Tourism and
Events; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported on behalf on Councillors Bunting, Hanvey, McAteer and McDonough-Brown.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 15th April, 2026, were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 5th May, 2026.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor Groogan declared an interest in relation to the item 'Vacant to Vibrant Programme Update' in that her employer was in receipt of a grant through the scheme. Councillor Groogan also declared an interest in relation to the item '2 Royal Avenue Update' in that she had recently engaged with organisations which had expressed an interest in respect of the long-term use of 2 Royal Avenue's ground floor. The Member was not required to leave the meeting for either item.

In relation to the item 'Neighbourhood Tourism Investment Programme', Councillor Groogan declared an interest in that her employer was referenced within the report and she left the meeting whilst this item was under consideration.

Councillor R. McLaughlin declared an interest in relation to item 'Request to Present - Belfast City and Region Place Partnership' in that he was on the Board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. As this item did not become the subject of discussion or debate, he was not required to leave the meeting.

Councillor Black declared an interest in relation to the item 'Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann Update' in so far as her employer was partnered with Queen's University Belfast who presented at the Bank of Ideas event but was not required to leave the meeting.

Restricted Items

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

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

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

Vacant to Vibrant Programme Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and which sought approval for recommendations from the Vacant to Vibrant assessment panel following the receipt and assessment of recent applications.

The report also recommended an extension to the programme's Match Maker Service and an amendment to the eligibility criteria section of the Vacant to Vibrant Guidance Notes.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme which would be supporting up to 82 businesses/organisations to locate or expand into long term vacant units;
- ii. agreed the extension of the Match Maker Service provision;
- iii. agreed the recommended citywide grant awards as outlined within the report; and
- iv. agreed the recommended amendment to the eligibility criteria within the Vacant to Vibrant Guidance Notes as outlined the report.

2 Royal Avenue Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Committee with an update on the expression of interest process for the future long-term use of 2 Royal Avenue's ground floor and outlined proposed next steps for Stage Two of the process.

The Committee was reminded that at its meeting in April, 2026, it had agreed to defer consideration of the proposed next steps for Stage Two of the process to enable further engagement to be undertaken, and that Stage One of the process be closed following the Council meeting in May and the associated call-in period. The Director advised that Stage One would close in line with the agreed timeline and that further engagement had taken place with Members, including a roundtable discussion on 23rd April, 2026.

The Director set out the proposed next steps for Stage Two of the process which would include a request for businesses/organisations to submit detailed proposals and business plans. She also provided the Committee with an overview of the proposed scoring and assessment criteria.

She highlighted the limited timeframe for Stage Two of process given the key interdependent timelines for the various activities associated with 2 Royal Avenue which would include the completion and outworkings of the building's condition survey, the expiration of the current meanwhile use contract and the PEACEPLUS funded works to the first floor of the building.

The Committee:

- i. agreed the proposed next steps for Stage Two of the Expression of Interest process for the future long-term use of the ground floor of 2 Royal Avenue, as set out within the report, including the request for detailed proposals and business plans, and the proposed scoring assessment and criteria;
- ii. noted the proposed timelines for the Stage Two of the process as set out within the report; and
- iii. noted the interdependent timelines for the various activities associated with 2 Royal Avenue including the duration of the current meanwhile use; completion and outworkings of the condition survey; and the PEACEPLUS funded works for the first floor, which would all underpin the criticality for timely decision making in relation to the ground floor long term use.

Neighbourhood Tourism Investment Programme

The Director of Economic Development submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided an update on the continued development of neighbourhood tourism within the city. The report set out the draft findings from the development work on Tourism Development Plans for North and South Belfast and highlighted the ongoing work in respect of a Development Plan for the Greater Shankill

area. The report also set out the proposed strategic direction and delivery approach for 2026/27, which would include funding to support delivery through EastSide Partnership and Fáilte Feirste Thiar, subject to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee's approval of funding for neighbourhood tourism at its meeting in May, 2026.

During discussion, the Senior Manager for Culture and Tourism answered questions from the Members in relation to the Tourism Development Plans for North and South Belfast, and the Greater Shankill area.

In response to a Member's request, the Senior Manager advised that further information would be provided to Members in respect of the stakeholder engagement which helped inform the development of the plans for North and South Belfast.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Duffy,
Seconded by Councillor Ó Néill, and

Resolved - That the Committee agrees to:

- i. defer consideration of the proposed strategic direction and phased delivery approach as set out within the Tourism Plans for North and South Belfast to enable further information to be provided to Members; and
- ii. that approval be sought from the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for the funding of £300,000 for neighbourhood tourism.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report, which included progress to date on neighbourhood tourism development and the findings from the Neighbourhood Tourism Investment Programme;
- ii. agreed to defer consideration of the proposed strategic direction and phased delivery approach as set out within the Tourism Plans for North and South Belfast;
- iii. agreed that approval be sought from the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for the funding of £300,000 for neighbourhood tourism;
- iv. agreed that the approach to support neighbourhood tourism delivery would be outcome based and consistent with the existing approach adopted in East and West Belfast, with the delivery aligned to the Council's neighbourhood tourism and cultural investment programmes and local area plans; and

- v. approved the continuation of funding to EastSide Partnership and Fáilte Feirste Thiar to support neighbourhood tourism delivery, coordination, and capacity building across the city.

Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann Update

The Committee was provided with an update on a range of operational matters, including programming and engagement, for the delivery of the 2026 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

During discussion, Council officers answered a range of Members' questions in relation to resourcing for street cleansing across the city, parking, accommodation, signposting and street dressing, and the development of the citywide fringe programme to ensure activity would extend beyond the city centre into neighbourhoods and communities.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Lyons, and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees that a report be submitted to a future meeting which would explore the potential to expand participatory budgeting in respect of community arts and culture events.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the progress to date on the development of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann; and
- ii. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting which would explore the potential to expand participatory budgeting in respect of community arts and culture events.

Request to Present

Belfast City and Region Place Partnership

The Committee acceded to a request for representatives of the Belfast City and Region Place Partnership (BCRPP) to present at its meeting in June, 2026.

Growing Business and the Economy

External Markets Approval

The Committee considered a report which sought approval for a market licence to be granted to Urban Events to hold a Titanic Quarter Night Market Evening on 6th and 7th August, and a Titanic Quarter Food Festival on 8th and 9th August, 2026, as part of a programme of complementary activity during the 2026 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, and to hold a series of Sunday markets in Writers' Square from 28th June to 30th October, 2026.

The Committee approved:

- i. an external market within the Titanic Quarter as part of the 2026 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann; and
- ii. a series of Sunday markets at Writers' Square.

Enterprise and Business Growth Support Update

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues

The purpose of this report is to advise members of a range of activity undertaken in 2025/26 to support the development of new and existing businesses across the City. The report sets out key priority areas of work for the 2026/27 financial year, seeking approval of activity to support the delivery of the targets under the 'Our Economy' pillar of the Belfast Agenda.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the work undertaken and outputs delivered in the financial year to date
- Agree the priority work areas presented for the 2026/27 financial year and approve the allocations from the existing 2026/2027 Enterprise and Business Growth budget as set out in sections 3.4-3.10
- Note and endorse the financial contribution to support the ongoing development of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (work to be coordinated through Newry, Mourne and Down District Council) up to a maximum of £45,000
- Note and endorse the contribution to support the ongoing delivery of the Northern Ireland Entrepreneurship Support Service (Go Succeed) and the achievement of the Council's statutory target up to a maximum of £317,415.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 2025/26 Update

Members will be aware that within the 2026/27 period, the Enterprise and Business Growth team has been working to develop and deliver a range of activity to support the growth and development of new and existing businesses across the city, aligned with the 'Our Economy' pillar of the Belfast Agenda.

3.2 Since April 2025, the team has been working with partners to develop and deliver interventions that address the City's challenges in relation to low levels of business start-up, innovation, competitiveness, and productivity. Some of the key achievements in 2025/26 include:

- **Enterprise awareness activity:** engaged 1258 individuals through community outreach activity targeting under-represented groups including people with disabilities, individuals who are economically inactive, females and young people providing them with tools to overcome barriers to take positive steps to starting a business. We also enabled test trading opportunities for 48 new businesses through our dedicated start up space at St George's Market and many of those are seeking to trade at the market on a more regular basis or are exploring alternative retail outlets for their products.
- **Start a business activity:** 900 individuals recruited onto the 'Start' stage of Go Succeed availing of nearly 5,000 hours of 1-1 mentoring support focused on business plan development and business fundamentals.
- **Support for Social Enterprises and Co-Operatives:** 54 organisations were supported with one-to-one mentoring, advice, and guidance. We again delivered the Social Economy Incentive Fund in late 2025, with an available pot of almost £90,000 to support social economy businesses to bring forward their business growth plans. There were 49 eligible applications for the SEIF, with 22 applicants invited to pitch for funding, 17 applicants were successful with just under £90,000 awarded to support growth goals.
- **Growing a business:** 435 existing Belfast businesses supported on the 'Growth' and 'Scaling' stages of the Go Succeed service availing of nearly 5,500 hours of 1-1 mentoring support tailored to support business growth aspirations. Through the service we have also

successfully awarded and administered grants to businesses to remove barriers to growth, with 127 Belfast businesses receiving Go Succeed grants in the 26/27 year to a value of £285,220.57.

- **Innovation Factory:** overall performance against targets at the centre improved significantly in the 2026/27 year. Centre occupancy is now at 94% occupancy (with a final average occupancy for the year at 72%) against a 90% target. Throughout the year we have been working through a reprioritisation change in the contract enabling performance targets to be amended to streamline reporting and to be more reflective of the current market.

3.3 2026/27 Business Plan

Building on these achievements, the proposed work programme for the next financial year will include a number of new work areas including:

- 3.4 **Starting a Business:** Key to meeting the Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) Order of 2015 is the continued delivery of the Go Succeed service. The service aims to foster a culture of entrepreneurship, attract more people into the 'pipeline' and to help more high-growth potential start-ups to get the help they need to grow and scale. The ability to attract more people into the 'pipeline' will require innovative approaches, particularly where there is a need for cultural change amongst under-represented groups. It is expected that this will support the creation of 271 new businesses and 209 new jobs. To support delivery of the numbers highlighted above, Belfast City Council will make a payment of £317,415 in match funding towards service delivery.

Community Outreach: Crucial to the success of our business support interventions is the fostering of an entrepreneurial mindset and creation of a pipeline of entrepreneurs in Belfast. This activity involves actively targeting under-represented groups including people with disabilities, individuals who are economically inactive, females and young people providing them with tools to overcome barriers to take positive steps to starting a business. A budget of £80,000 is allocated to this area of work; activity will include delivery of our young entrepreneurs to watch initiative, our fearless event targeting people with a disability, as well as a range of female focussed interventions and Community partnerships. We will also continue with our test trading offering at St George's Market.

Social Enterprise and Cooperative Development: In the next financial year, we will refine our social economy action plan based on research conducted in the 25/26 year and engagement with appropriate sector partners. A continued area of focus is the administration of the Social Economy Incentive Fund (SEIF) with a budget of £90,000 however we will also be working with a co-design group to develop a roadmap for the SEIF to progress against the strategic goals in the Belfast Agenda action plans. In addition to the SEIF, a budget of £90,000 has been set aside for dedicated social enterprise and co-operative support. This will cover a range of support interventions including mentoring, workshops, and events via our Go Social delivery. Go Social delivery is complementary to Go Succeed, encouraging a pipeline of social entrepreneurs progressing into Go Succeed support.

- 3.5 **Growing a Business:** The Go Succeed Service has proven successful over the past two years in providing flexible, tailored growth support for existing businesses. It is expected that through the service we will engage with 323 businesses and directly lead to the creation of 102 new jobs. We will also work to deliver a series of workshops and events on issues such as financial planning and forecasting, E-commerce essentials, Sales and Marketing, accessing finance, Writing a Winning bid, Strategy and Business Planning and Employee legal considerations. Go Succeed grants will continue to support this stream of work with the target for 2026/27 to be confirmed.

Whilst our main area of support for established businesses is Go Succeed, we also ensure we are responsive to the needs of our business community. Work is currently under way on a range of new development projects including support for high growth sectors, place-based activity where there is demand and a focus on the Fleadh Cheoil opportunities to businesses. Alongside our colleagues in Culture and Tourism, we are leading on the business engagement aspect of the Fleadh Cheoil. This includes ensuring businesses are fully informed on the opportunities available to them through the Fleadh but also of the aspects which may impact them including licensing and road closures. Activity to date has included information sessions disseminating relevant information to businesses in the City Centre and beyond as well as gathering information from the businesses on what they need to get 'Fleadh ready'. An overall budget for these additional 'Growing a Business' support activities is set at £282,614. Where new interventions require specific approval, additional details will be brought back to the Committee for approval if required.

3.6 Supporting events: The Enterprise and Business Growth Team is regularly asked to sponsor/financially support events and conferences in areas that – to a greater or lesser extent – are associated with the unit’s priorities, as set out above. While these events can often act as a useful promotional vehicle for Council interventions and can help secure referrals to programme activity, many of these tend to be last-minute requests for relatively small amounts of money and provide little measurable return. In order to assess the impact of the requests, officers have developed a process to measure and score these requests based on their alignment to the ‘Our Economy’ pillar of the Belfast Agenda, the contribution to the work of the team as set out in this report and the potential to profile the Council activities and generate interest and demand for the services. The total budget to support contributions to events and conferences in this financial year is £73,000 and it is proposed that each application for support will be capped at a maximum of £10,000. Objectives and outputs will be agreed through a funding agreement with the event organisers. This approach has been effective in the past and has helped ensure that our resources are focused on areas of maximum return. Any events that will have wider corporate impact will be brought back to the relevant Committee for consideration and endorsement.

3.7 Scaling Support and Innovation: The ‘Our Economy’ pillar of the Belfast Agenda identifies the need to focus on educational inequalities, jobs and skills and sustainable and inclusive economic growth. A key part of sustainable economic growth is the focus on key growth sectors and emerging technologies; these include Creative and Digital (Virtual Production, Immersive), Fintech and AI.

This year we will continue to build upon our work with the City Innovation and Culture and Arts team, working to build capacity among local businesses. Work will include supporting businesses to grow and scale, provide knowledge and connections within SMEs to access export opportunities, challenge funds and alternative funding sources, including those coming from the Belfast Region City Deal. We will also continue to work with key partners including Digital Catapult, Ulster University, Queen’s University and Invest NI to increase the number of innovation driven enterprises and businesses with scaling potential.

This work also directly aligns with the DfE funded Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) within which proposed outcomes include higher productivity, wages and employment rates. Members agreed a series of activities to

be take forward using LEP funding at the 11 March Committee meeting. Numbers of businesses in highest productivity sectors (aligned with those identified above with a focus on Studio Ulster), number of businesses who export and percentage employment in Invest NI supported companies will all be metrics used to monitor progress. A budget of £100,000 has been allocated to this area of work.

- 3.8 **Innovation Factory**: Members will be aware that the Innovation Factory is the council-owned innovation centre located in Forthriver Business Park on Springfield Road. The Enterprise and Business Growth Team is responsible for the contract management of the Innovation Factory. This role includes management and monitoring of the performance of the Service Provider in operating the Innovation Factory in accordance with the performance regime of the Contract. On occasion this area of work requires guidance from subject matter experts on both contractual and commercial matters. A budget of £15,800 is allocated to this within the current estimates.
- 3.9 **Research and development**: The programme of work set out in this report is informed by an ongoing series of research and insights work, undertaken in collaboration with our Business Research and Development team. This ensures that our programmes are receptive and responsive to the changing needs of the local economy and helps track the impact and outcomes against high level strategic commitments. This will include continued research of the key growth areas, gaps in existing provision and challenges in the local economy as well as a continued subscription to the Beauhurst platform ensuring informed intelligence. A budget of £50,000 is allocated to this area of work and individual research and services will be commissioned appropriately as part of this overall budget allocation.
- 3.10 **Belfast Business Promise**: The inclusive growth city charter is a key commitment in the Council's Inclusive Growth strategy and the Belfast Agenda. Co-created with businesses, it was designed to provide an assessment framework to enable employers to look at their current practices and identify where they could make changes which would have a beneficial impact on inclusive growth in the city. Driven by the Council's Social Policy Working Group (SPWG), the charter has been operationalised as the Belfast Business Promise (BBP) since April 2023 and delivered by a cross-council team, led by the Strategy, Programmes and Partnership and Economic Development teams, with support from Corporate HR, CPS and Climate teams.

A report to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in March outlined a series of operational and structural changes to the service and these were endorsed as a way forward for the coming year. In order to support delivery, a budget of £50,000 is allocated to Belfast Business Promise and this year will focus on further development/refinement of the business promise, with potential development of a CRM which will enable greater potential to scale and manage the programme.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

4.1 The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2026/27 budget for the Enterprise & Business growth section of the Place and Economy departmental budget that was approved as part of the 2026/27 estimates process.

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

5.1 Each of the proposed projects referenced in this report is informed by statistical research, stakeholder engagement and complementary policies and strategies. Considerations given to equality and good relations impacts at the initial stages of project development and monitored throughout delivery. Officers will work closely with the Equality and Good Relations Team on this activity.”

The Committee:

- i. noted the work undertaken and the outputs delivered in the financial year to date;
- ii. agreed the priority work areas for 2026/27 as set out within the report
- iii. approved the allocations from the existing 2026/27 Enterprise and Business Growth budget as set out within the report;
- iv. approved a financial contribution, up to a maximum of £45,000, to support the ongoing development of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (work to be coordinated through Newry, Mourne and Down District Council); and

- v. approved a financial contribution, up to a maximum of £317,415, to support the ongoing delivery of the Northern Ireland Entrepreneurship Support Service (Go Succeed) and the achievement of the Council's statutory target.

Chairperson