

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



**Belfast
City Council**

4th September, 2026

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, 9th September, 2026 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) Vacant to Vibrant Programme Update (report to follow)
- (b) Artist Studio Organisational Grants 2026/27 (Pages 1 - 12)
- (c) Belfast Zoo Q1 2026/27 Performance Update (Pages 13 - 20)
- (d) Belfast Bikes Q1 2026/27 Performance Update (Pages 21 - 36)
- (e) Markets Quarterly Update (report to follow)

3. Growing Businesses and the Economy

- (a) International Relations Quarterly Update (Pages 37 - 50)

4. **Strategic and Operational Issues**

- (a) Notices of Motion Quarterly Update (report to follow)
- (b) Translink Consultation on Fare and Services Changes - Council Response (report to follow)

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Subject:	International Relations quarterly update
Date:	9 September 2026
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
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 provide a quarterly progress update on delivery as part of the council's new International Relations Framework 2025-2028, as agreed at the November 2025 Committee meeting, and to seek approval to progress imminent and planned activity in the second part of the year.
2.0	Recommendations
	Members are asked to: • Note the progress of the last five months delivery of the International Relations Framework (April 2026 – August 2026); • Note proposed activity for September 2026 to March 2027, as set out in Appendix 1, including opportunities for Member engagement; • Approve the participation of an officer and the Chair or Deputy Chair of Committee to attend the EuroCities Gothenberg conference with costs fully covered by EuroCities • Approve the participation of the Lord Mayor and two officers in a civic and business visit to Boston and Chicago in Spring 2027, at an estimated cost of up to £12,000 • Approve an EU & International Events & Conference financial contributions budget with a maximum budget of £40,000 for the financial year 2026/2027 • Approve a £5,000 contribution to the annual Belfast International Homecoming in October 2026 as a part of this Conference support scheme.
3.0	Main report
3.1	At the November 2025 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members approved the International Relations Framework 2025 – 2028, along with an action plan for 2026/27 activity.
3.2	The three-year Framework document is intended to be a supporting document to other key strategies and plans such as the Belfast Agenda and the Corporate Plan – setting out how priority objectives and ambitions in those documents can be achieved 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.

3.3	Members agreed that there would be quarterly reports back to the Committee outlining progress and key activities, as well as a look ahead to the coming quarter, including opportunities for Member engagement.
3.4	<u>Progress highlights April to August 2026</u> Since approval of the new framework, a range of international relations activities has been undertaken by council teams and their partner organisations. Under the themes of the framework, key activities include: <u>Trade and Investment</u> • Participation in the June 2026 New York New Belfast annual Business and Investment conference and programme in partnership with Invest NI, Belfast Chamber and the NI Bureau in North America. The Belfast delegation met with key individuals including Comptroller di Napoli who has invested \$110million to date in NI scale up companies and is committed to a further investment. Meetings also took place with a company currently considering Belfast as an investment location, as well as with Bloomberg Philanthropies • The former Lord Mayor undertook a brief visit to Nashville ahead of the North American Comhaltas Convention in Chicago. The Nashville programme focused on neighbourhood development, tourism product development, youth employment and skills and educational collaboration. This work has shaped the inward Nashville Sister Cities Belfast Visit planned for 18-22 October 2026 • Ahead of the early October 2026 Nashville life and health sciences business mission, the council and its partners hosted a planning visit in March 2026. Attendees included nine key Nashville economic partners in the field of life and health sciences. Local partners engaged in the programme development work included the Global Health Connector NI, Catalyst, HIRANI, both universities, Invest NI, Department of Health and City Deal projects such as Centre for Digital Healthcare Technology (CDHT) and Momentum 1.0. The early October visit will include targeted businesses, innovators and investors from the Greater Nashville area who are seeking to develop collaborations with local companies or explore trade and export opportunities • The International Team provided key connections for the visit to Nashville by the former Health Minister Mike Nesbitt MLA in March 2026. Minister Nesbitt's visit focused on exploring good practice in connected health innovations and he met with potential investors and collaborators in this field • Participation at UKREiIF - the UK's leading built environment showcase event in May 2026 in Leeds as part of the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership. The Belfast delegation attended a series of key meetings and engagements with senior UK

Government Ministers, institutional investors and developers, other cities and city regions. This is part of a wider programme of engagement to attract external capital investment into the city and the wider city region

- Ongoing support for Belfast-based partners seeking connections and introductions through our Sister City and other networks. Over the course of the last five months, the international team coordinated seventeen inward visits ranging from civic-based dignitaries, international students, exploratory business fact finding visits and potential future investors. Significant visits included the New York company mentioned above, who have already created twenty jobs in the city ahead of officially launching this year, and the US Teamsters' Union and Massport who have made introductions to high profile investors
- The team has also made introductions on behalf of twenty-eight organisations in this five month period ranging from inclusion of international artists into the Fleadh programme, to Belfast musicians connecting into key contacts in Nashville; as well as connecting two high growth Belfast companies with US-based investors and NI investment diaspora, and introductions leading to 5G investment in the Northern Ireland health estate.

Innovation & Knowledge Exchange

- The Council's Climate team continues to participate in an EU Horizon-funded project, "Pathways to Resilience", launched in Budapest earlier this year. This is a €200,000-funded programme to support the development of a Climate Resilience Baseline report, a Climate Resilience Strategy, Action Plan and Investment Plan
- In April, Belfast joined several Learning Cities from across Europe and North America in the UNESCO Learning City of Cork to exchange ideas, build momentum and accelerate the journey toward a European and North American Learning Cities network.

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

- The Council's Culture team continues to engage in the EuroCities Culture Forum as Vice Chair of the "Culture for Inclusive Cities" Working Group looking at Older People's participation in culture
- The culture team participated in Spancirfest, Varazdin, Croatia, in August 2026 with an opportunity to host Belfast musicians at an inaugural Belfast Music stage at future iterations of the festival

	• The council also took its first steps to re-engage with Europe through attendance at the EuroCities annual conference in June and also attended the inaugural “Liverpool Welcomes Europe” Summit in June. Topics covered included some of the biggest opportunities and challenges facing cities today – AI, Innovation, place-based leadership and city centre growth. Belfast was one of four Core Cities asked to present at a private Cities Roundtable • The Council participated in the inaugural UK-China Cities Alliance, led by Bristol, to begin to look at best practice engagement with China. The NI Executive Office is also looking at how to encourage and develop China-NI relations into tangible outcomes, and Belfast City Council will follow this work closely • The International Unit engaged with TG4 with respect to Nashville Sister City music links, resulting in Nashville artists performing as a central component to the TG4 opening concert on their live stage at the Fleadh on 6 August • City Hall was the venue for PRONI’s launch of its publication “Ulster American Treasures: The Migration Story”. City Hall was also illuminated in USA national colours on 4 July.
3.5	<u>Looking forward – outline plan for rest of financial year</u> The draft action plan for the coming year is attached in Appendix 1. Priority actions that members may wish to note include: <u>Trade and Investment</u> • Planned inward economic and innovation mission led by the Greater Nashville Chamber and Global Health Connector US bringing twenty Nashville businesses, investors and economic development leads from 5-7 October 2026 to connect with city anchor institutions • Participation in the annual Belfast International Homecoming programme 7-9 October. The council will support visit programmes for key delegates as appropriate. Outcomes of the Homecoming 2025 include plans for Belfast Harbour and net zero tenant companies to collaborate with New York State’s Red Hook terminals on green hydrogen, and potential future US investment in NI scaling companies. Members are asked to agree a financial contribution of £5,000 towards the event delivery through the unit’s Conference and Events support budget • Development of new promotional materials and revamp of Invest in Belfast website by year end, to ensure consistent messaging across FDI investment and capital

investment materials as well as development of new innovation-focused investment prospectus

- Undertaking a new programme of work for the Belfast City and Region Place Partnership, with re-focused planning for attendance at MIPIM in March 2027 and UKREiiF May 2027
- Exploratory and planning work on a potential business mission to Boston and Chicago in Spring 2027. The Boston programme will focus on profiling trade and investment opportunities in key growth sectors, particularly life and health sciences while the Chicago visit will build on connections established in the course of last year's participation in last year's North American Comhaltas Convention, particularly focusing on cultural and tourism linkages, and capitalising on the impact of this year's Fleadh. While initial engagements with local partner organisations and key contacts in both host cities has helped shape an outline itinerary, further scoping of additional engagements and opportunities will be undertaken subject to Committee approval of this proposal. Updates on progress will be shared as part of the next quarterly update.

Innovation and Knowledge Exchange

- Visit to Belfast by Head of Mayors' Challenge programme at Bloomberg Philanthropies on 22-23 October to meet with Chief Executive and Lord Mayor
- Participation in significant global innovation events 2026, including Mobile World Congress and Smart City World Congress in partnership with Global Health Connector, pending Council approval (separate approval process)
- City Innovation Team will attend the UK-France Local Government event in Bordeaux in November to promote the City Council's work in AI and innovation programmes
- Chief Executive participation in the Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Initiative with thirty other European Mayors and Chief Executives.

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

- Reviewing and planning for VIP support delivery for Fleadh 2027, including early engagement at UK, ROI and NI government level for VIP participation, working with interested international artists to integrate into the programming, and also targeted sponsorship activity, including live interest from international partners
- Hosting a Nashville Sister City delegation with a cohort of fifteen politicians, diplomats, University representatives, music and cultural leads 18-22 October. The

	focus of the engagement will be to explore collaboration in culture, music, academia via teacher and student exchange, and political peer to peer cooperation • Ongoing engagement and collaboration as part of UNESCO city of music network with a September 2026 sub-network meeting planned in Sanliurfa, Turkey to plan UNESCO Music partnerships for the year ahead • Sixteen Irish traditional artists will be supported to take part in the Oulu Irish Festival in September 2026, with a strong Fleadh promotion planned • UNESCO Creative City of Film, Galway will host a Belfast artist/band at their own sub network of film meeting in September 2026 • Participation as speaker and Vice-Chair of Working Group, Culture for Inclusive Cities at EuroCities Culture Forum in Gothenburg 30th Sept – 2 Oct 2026. Opportunity for one officer and Chair or nominee to attend. Special ‘Political Track’ events on 1 October • Facilitation of the all-party delegation to Brussels to participate in the annual EU Week of Cities and Regions in October 2026 to re-engage with EU peers, explore relevant funding and policy opportunity and develop connections with other UK and Irish cities active in EU activity, including exploring potential for engagement opportunities as part of Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU (from July- December 2026). Culture Unit to present a paper on heritage collaboration at the event • Participation in the annual commemoration for the Founding of the Chinese People’s Republic, September 2026, and the inaugural celebration of India’s National Day in January 2027 • Participation in the 15-16 October meeting of the European and North American Learning Network in the Learning City of Lausanne, Switzerland. Purpose of the meeting is to define how the network will operate with opportunity to explore city to city exchange and joint projects/funding bids • The World Monuments Fund are organising a delegation of their donors to Belfast for an event known as “Escapades”. As part of their programme there is a planned reception in City Hall on Thursday 17 September.
3.6	<u>Measuring EU & International Activity impact</u> As previously noted as part of the November 2025 report to Committee, it can be challenging to track outcomes of much of the international relations activity. This is because progress can often come from an initial introduction that we made, but that takes a while to develop. In order to track the impact of our work more effectively, a new CRM system is now

	operational. This should allow more effective tracking of our impact, as well as facilitating data collection.
3.7	<u>Supporting EU & International Conferences and Events</u> The EU and International 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 position Belfast internationally, some of can be last-minute requests for relatively small amounts of money and/or provide little measurable return or opportunity for promotion of the council’s investment. 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 International Relations Framework. The total budget to support contributions to events and conferences in this financial year is £40,000 and it is proposed that each application for support will be capped at a maximum of £5,000. Objectives and outputs will be agreed through a funding agreement with the event organisers and this will be signed off by the Director under delegated authority. This approach will help ensure that our resources are focused on areas of maximum return and will provide an objective rationale for assessing the relative merits of individual applications. Any events that will have wider corporate impact will be brought back to the Committee for consideration and endorsement.
4.0	Finance & Resource Implications
	• Establishment of an International Unit Conference and Events fund of £40,000 for the 2026/2027 financial year • Annual sponsorship and participation in the Belfast International Homecoming at a maximum cost of £5,000 • A maximum of £12,000 to deliver a business and tourism mission to Boston and Chicago in Spring 2027. The EU and International Relations budget was approved as part of the 2026-27 estimates setting process. The amounts indicated above were included within those estimates. Budgets for individual activities (apart from those set out above) 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: International Relations Delivery Plan September 2026-March 2027

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Appendix 1 - International Relations Delivery Plan: September 2026-March 2027 key activities

Trade and Investment						
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority Outputs and Benefits	Opportunities for Member Engagement
Nashville Life and Health Sciences business mission	Inbound trade mission involving Nashville/Tennessee businesses in life and health sciences, exploring trade and FDI opportunities	EUIRT	Invest NI; Global Health Connector; HIRANI	5-7 October 2026	Exploring FDI opportunities in key med tech sector; expanding business base in Belfast for key growth sectors	LM will host full delegation in parlour. Opportunity for all CGR members to meet delegation on 6 October
Belfast International Homecoming 2026	Business conference promoting Belfast to diaspora communities, particularly US based	EUIRT	Event organisers	7-9 October 2026	Tailored messaging and engagement to focus on capital investment. Delegation includes Massachusetts Commissioner, NY Red Hook Port Terminals and NY Construction Co Association, seeking collaborations with Belfast	LM plays key role across programme. Opportunity for Chair/Deputy/ nominees to attend event and /or dinner
EU-based trade connections	Exploratory work with NI Executive Office in Brussels and Invest NI to scope opportunities for additional engagement in EU/Brussels-based activities, with a focus on increasing business engagement in new markets	EBG - linked to LEP opportunities in exploring new business markets	NI Executive Office Brussels; other Brussels-based partners	Link to all party delegation to Brussels for EU Week of Regions and Cities, 12-14 October 2026	Potential new market development opportunities for Belfast businesses - increased trade	All party delegation confirmed to attend
Nashville civic mission	Sister City civic, cultural and education focused mission	EUIRT	US stakeholder group partners	18-22 October 2026	Bringing new sectoral contacts to explore new collaborations with Belfast stakeholders in culture, music, tourism, academia, civic learning.	Opportunity for all CGR members to meet delegation
Belfast City and Region Place Partnership	Continuation of rolling plan of work, focusing on collaborative presence at key events including MIPIM and UK REiF. Also development of promotional collateral focusing on capital development opportunities	City Regeneration and Development Team	Belfast City and Region Place Partnership - range of public and private partners	Rolling programme of work focused on key showcase events	Leads generated in support of investment attracted and developments supported	Elected member engagement as part of key showcase events
Messaging and comms	Develop and maintain updated Belfast's city proposition messaging and new products	Ongoing work to review and revamp investment info and develop new materials. Focus on both capital and business/innovation narratives as part of the "pitch"	Invest NI; universities; BMC; ICB; key sector bodies	Review current: Q2 2026 ; produce revised products: Q4	More coherent and professional narrative; improved focus on key markets; sectors; investment leads to maximise RoI	All materials to be made available to members
Inward delegations	Facilitating requests for presentations on Belfast's Economic and Innovation propositions. Note: we are developing a "qualification" process to identify projects with potential for positive impact – too many requests with no return	EUIR; EBG, City Innovation and ICB teams	Dependent on area of interest	Ongoing - new triage process under trial and reviewing requests on case-by-case basis	Requests for support tested against international priorities and corporate/city priorities	Member engagement on case-by-case basis, as appropriate
US business mission - Boston and Chicago	Five day programme conducted in conjunction with partner organisations to promote business, tourism and cultural opportunities with both cities and wider east coast USA	EUIRT, ICB, TCHA	Partners tbc but likely to include TIL, Invest NI, NI Bureau, CDHT, GHC, Catalyst	early Spring 2027 (dates to be finalised)	Promoting trade and investment opportunities in key city growth sectors; promoting cultural and tourism opportunities in city, with focus on Fleadh and major events and cultural activities	LM to lead delegation (or CGR Chair if not possible)

Innovation and Knowledge Exchange						
Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority Outputs and Benefits	Opportunities for Member Engagement
EU Week of Regions and Cities	Participation in largest programme of urban specific workshops, seminars and briefings with additional side programme developed with strategic partners. Presentation on Belfast's role in Millennium 2027 – Heritage & Culture for Competitiveness	EUIRT; Culture Team	NI Executive Office in Brussels; Irish Regions EU Office; Committee of the Regions	12-14 October 2026	Informing Belfast-EU work plan; identification of key European partners; profiling Belfast	All party delegation in attendance
European Capital of Innovation bid 2026	Belfast City Council submitted bid to European Innovation Council for the annual award	City Innovation Office	Innovation City Belfast and other innovation partners	Outcome of stage one application expected September 2026	Profiling Belfast as a "city of innovation"	Members will feature in engagement in the development of the bid – and in any shortlisting process
Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors Challenge	Alongside 23 other cities, this is two year programme harnessing digital and innovation. In Belfast the focus is on supporting an alleyway transformation programme	City Innovation Office /City & Neighbourhood Services	Bloomberg and the other 23 cities	February 2026 to March 2028. BCC to host Bloomberg senior team 22-23 October 2026	Sustainable, scalable alleyways transformation programme. Plus supporting council leadership on innovation	Members are/will be involved in the local programme design
Bloomberg Philanthropies CityLab	An international network of city mayors sharing practice and opportunities on city innovation	City Innovation Office/Deputy Chief Executive	Extensive global network	Engagement ongoing	Support for Deputy CX in shaping transformation in Council by harnessing CityLab opportunities	CX and Lord Mayor have been invited to engage
Smart City World Congress	Promotion of city messaging, focusing on opportunities for partnership, investment, research and trade in relation to digital innovation	ICB	ICB partners	November 2026 – Attendance TBC	Leads in relation to partnerships, investment, research and funding opportunities	No member engagement at this point
Support education partners international activity (focus on sister city)	Use civic linkages to enhance international collaborations in innovation, research and attraction of international talent (links)	EUIRT; City Innovation Office; ICB	Third level education partners	Ongoing inward visits from international colleges	Education partners secure research income; attract international students	Member engagement on case-by-case basis
DBEC	Ongoing support for civic/business engagement work, including developing lobbying approach on key infrastructure investments. Focus on collaboration with new Industry Advisory Group	EBG	DBEC Partners	Current research focus on potential economic impact of major infrastructure investments (esp. transport). Recent confirmation of successful funding bid to SEUPB with DBEC as associate partner. Project is C-CASE (Cross-Border Collaboration to Activate the Skills Ecosystem) project. Project will launch in November - council to house staff member (tbc)	Wider programme of collaboration and engagement on key north-south issues, focusing on economic growth	Member representation through Political Advisory Group

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

Project/Initiative	Brief Overview	Council Lead	Partners	Timeframe	Priority Outputs and Benefits	Opportunities for Member Engagement
77th Year of Founding of Chinese People's Republic	Annual celebration led by the Chinese Consulate and involving all	EUIRT, LM Office	Consulate, CWA, Confucius	22 September 2026	Civic, diplomatic support from BCC to Chinese community	LM/DLM and DCX will attend along with other invited councillors.
UNESCO City of Music	Ongoing network engagement. Support for Belfast-based musician	Culture Team	UNESCO network; Oulu Irish Festival	Event takes place 23-27 September 2026	Professional development for musicians, opportunity to showcase	Member engagement opportunities on a case by case basis, depending
Eurocities Culture Forum	Ongoing learning and partnership opportunities with Eurocities member cities. Member of Eurocities Culture Forum steering group and vice chair role within working group Culture for Inclusive Cities	Culture Team	EUIRT; Eurocities network	Next meeting 20 September to 2 October in Gothenburg	Sharing Belfast's story via presentation, shared learning and opportunities for international engagement and partnership with council and cultural sector	Chair of CGR invited to members' panel
Irish Presidency of EU activities	Working with local and Brussels-based partners to explore opportunities for civic engagement in Irish Presidency activities via Committee of the Regions UK Contact Group. The council will host Committee of the Regions delegation in City Hall on 20/10	EUIRT	NILGA; CoR UK Contact Group	Delegation to visit on 20 October	Opportunities to showcase Belfast and explore opportunities for wider civic and cultural partnerships	LM will greet COR delegation and Members will be invited to the lunch on 20 October
Friendship Four Tournaments	US College Ice Hockey Tournaments linked to Boston Sister	LM Office	Odyssey Trust, NI Connections, DfC, Tourism NI	November 26 (men's tournament) and January 27 (women's)	Economic impact on city: bed nights; TV coverage	LM is usually invited for puck drop
Inaugural Celebration of India National Day	Annual celebration event	EUIRT, LM Office	Indian Consulate	26 January 2027	Supports engagement with Indian community in Belfast - civic relations	Details to be confirmed
Celebrate Chinese New Year	Participation in partner events to celebrate lunar new year	LM Office; EUIRT	Good Relations Team; Chinese partners locally	Early February 2027	Enhanced civic relations	Details tbc
Your Roots Are Showing	Folk music conference and trade fair	Culture Team	Visit Belfast; ICC Belfast (host)	23-28 February 2027	Improved city positioning (focusing on music/culture)	No member engagement at this point
Supporting strategic tourism stakeholders	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	Fleadh team; Tourism, Culture & Events Team	Visit Belfast; Tourism Ireland; Tourism NI; Comhaltas	Ongoing research, engagement, evaluation, partnership development and comms	International positioning and profiling opportunities; increasing visitor numbers	Members involved in wider plans for Fleadh and other major events

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