

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



**Belfast  
City Council**

**MEETING OF THE STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

Dear Alderman/Councillor,

The above-named Committee will meet both online and in person, in the Lavery Room - City Hall on Friday, 20th March, 2026 at 9.30 am, 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) Area-based Community Planning and Community Wealth Building (Pages 1 - 44)
- (b) Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann (Report to follow)
- (c) Bad Debt Write Off (Pages 45 - 46)
- (d) Belfast Stories Update (Report to follow)

3. **Governance**

- (a) Official Announcements (Report to follow)

4. **Belfast Agenda/Strategic Issues**

- (a) Independently Managed Community Centres (Report to follow)
- (b) Boxing Strategy (Report to follow)
- (c) European City of Sport (Report to follow)
- (d) Planning Information (Pages 47 - 64)
- (e) Review of Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) Fees (Pages 65 - 74)
- (f) Belfast Business Promise - Next Steps (Report to follow)
- (g) Belfast Region City Deal Update (Pages 75 - 80)
- (h) Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (Pages 81 - 116)

5. **Physical Programme and Asset Management**

- (a) Physical Programme Update (Report to follow)
- (b) Asset Management (Report to follow)

6. **Finance, Procurement and Performance**

- (a) Contracts Update (Report to follow)
- (b) Requests for Funding (Pages 117 - 144)
- (c) CIPFA Prudential Code Capital Strategy and Treasury Management Indicators 2026/27 (Pages 145 - 164)

7. **Equality and Good Relations**

- (a) Minutes of Shared City Partnership Meeting (to follow)

8. **Operational Issues**

- (a) Minutes of the Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum (Pages 165 - 170)
- (b) Audit and Risk Panel Report and Minutes of Meeting of 10th March, 2026 (to follow)
- (c) Requests for use of the City Hall and the provision of Hospitality (Report to follow)
- (d) Minutes of Language Strategy Working Group of 30th January, 2026 (Pages 171 - 176)
- (e) Minutes of Disability Working Group of 18th March, 2026 (to follow)



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| <b>Subject:</b>              | Planning Information                                    |
| <b>Date:</b>                 | 20 March 2026   |
| <b>Reporting Officer(s):</b> | Kate Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control |
| <b>Contact Officer(s):</b>   | Ed Baker, Planning Manager (Development Management)     |

|  |   |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |
|--|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------|--------------------------|
| <b>Restricted Reports</b>  |   |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |
| <b>Is this report restricted?</b>  | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |
| <p><b>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b></p> <p>Insert number <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Information relating to any individual</li> <li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li> <li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li> <li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li> <li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li> <li>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</li> <li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li> </ol> |   |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |
| <p><b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b></p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 70%;">After Committee Decision</td> <td style="width: 5%; text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>After Council Decision</td> <td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sometime in the future</td> <td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Never</td> <td style="text-align: center;"><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>  |   | After Committee Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> | After Council Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> | Sometime in the future | <input type="checkbox"/> | Never | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| After Committee Decision   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |
| After Council Decision   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |
| Sometime in the future   | <input type="checkbox"/>  |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |
| Never  | <input type="checkbox"/>  |                          |                          |                        |                          |                        |                          |       |                          |

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| <b>Call-in</b>                               |   |
| <b>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</b> | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> |

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues</b>  |
| 1.1        | To provide an update on Major planning applications and applications that have been determined by the Planning Committee. |

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| <b>2.0</b> | <b>Recommendation</b>   |
| 2.1        | The report is for notation.   |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Main Report</b>  |
|            | <b><u>Background</u></b>  |
| 3.1        | The Committee received an update on Planning Performance at its meeting on the 27 <sup>th</sup> August 2024. At that meeting and previously, the Committee sought a regular update on Major applications and applications that have been determined by the Planning Committee, especially those where a Decision Notice has yet to be issued.   |
| 3.2        | All Major applications must be determined by the Planning Committee. The Key Performance Indicator (given in weeks) is calculated from when an application is considered to be valid to when the Decision Notice (“Green Form”) is issued. This means that any delays either pre- or post- committee will impact on the KPI. The target for determining a Major application is 30 weeks.  |
|            | <b><u>Major applications</u></b>  |
| 3.3        | Appendix 1 sets out the Major applications that are currently with the Council to determine. Details are given on the location, proposal, the validation date and target date for determination (using the 30 week target set out in the Key Performance Indicator) as well as a status update.   |
|            | <b><u>Applications determined by Committee</u></b>  |
| 3.4        | Appendix 2 sets out the applications that have been determined by Committee since February 2022 which are yet to issue. For completeness information is also given on those applications determined by Committee which have had their Decision Notice issued. Details are given on the time taken (in weeks) to bring the applications before Committee and where decisions are yet to be issued, information is given relating to the main reason for the delay. |
| 3.5        | Following further discussion at the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in May 2025, this table has now been amended to include a new non statutory target date and to give more detailed reasons for any delays in determination.   |
|            | <b><u>Conclusion</u></b>  |
| 3.6        | This report will be brought to each Planning Committee and to each Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for information on an ongoing basis.  |
|            | <b>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</b>  |
| 3.7        | There are no financial or resource implications associated with this report.  |
|            | <b>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</b>   |
| 3.8        | There are no equality or good relations / rural needs implications associated with this report.   |
| <b>4.0</b> | <b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>  |

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|  | Appendix 1 – Major planning applications at March 2026 |
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|  | Appendix 2 – Applications determined by Committee at March 2026 |
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**Live Major Applications not previously considered by Committee @ 02.03.26**

| Number  | Application No.   | Category | Location   | Proposal   | Date Valid | Target Date | Status              |
|---------|-------------------|----------|--|--|------------|-------------|---------------------|
| 1       | LA04/2023/3799/F  | Major    | Vacant lands (partial site of the former Wolfhill Flax Spinning Mill) located to the south, of Wolfhill Manor, north of Wolfhill Grove and west of Mill Avenue, Ligoniel Road, Belfast, BT14 8NR   | New single storey 10-class based primary school, separate nursery school accommodation and school meals accommodation to facilitate the relocation of St. Vincent De Paul Primary School and Nursery from existing site on Ligoniel Road, Belfast. Proposal includes new pedestrian and vehicular accesses onto Mill Avenue, car parking, covered cycle storage area and hard play areas. Hard and soft landscaping including wildlife walkway, fencing, retaining walls, underground drainage system to include the reinstatement of underground storm sewer and headwall into adjacent DFI River wayleave. Includes temporary contractors compound and all associated site works.  | 09-Oct-23  | 06-May-24   | Under Consideration |
| 2       | LA04/2023/4181/F  | Major    | Lands comprising the existing Sydenham Wastewater Pumping Station west of Park Avenue, Connswater River and King George V Playing Fields, to the south of the Sydenham By-Pass, east of The Oval football stadium, north and east of Parkgate Gardens and north of Parkgate Crescent, Parkgate Parade and Mersey Street, Belfast | Demolition of existing Wastewater Pumping Station (WwPS) with reinstatement of site as a landscaped area. Construction of a replacement WwPS including associated control building and hardstanding, the raising of site levels, in-channel works, provision of new rising main, other ancillary buildings, the creation of an access road on lands within the King George V Playing Fields to serve the facility, landscaping and other ancillary works. Provision of a temporary working area on lands within the King George V Playing Fields, the creation of a temporary access road from Mersey Street to facilitate construction traffic on lands to the rear of 1-35 Parkgate Gardens, the creation of a temporary footway adjacent to 88 Park Avenue and other ancillary development and landscaping restoration works. | 14-Nov-23  | 11-Jun-24   | Under Consideration |
| Page 87 | LA04/2024/0570/F  | Major    | Stormont Hotel, 587 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast BT4 3LP  | Change of use of an existing hotel, conference centre and offices (sui generis) to a 97-bed care home (Use Class C3(b)) and 1,559sqm diagnostic medical facility (Use Class D1(a)), associated access, car parking, landscaping and open space (amended plans and description to remove reference to demolition of number 39 Summerhill Park).   | 04-Apr-24  | 31-Oct-24   | Under Consideration |
| 4       | LA04/2024/0569/O  | Major    | Stormont Hotel, 587 Upper Newtownards Road BT4 3LP and adjacent properties at Castleview Road (nos. 2, 4, 6, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28 & 30), Summerhill Parade (nos. 18, 20 & 22), and rear of 160 Barnett's Road, Belfast (amended address)   | Outline planning permission with all matter reserved for independent living (Use Class C1) units and up to 62no. assisted living units (Use Class C3), associated internal access roads, communal open space, revised access from Castleview Road, associated car parking, servicing, amenity space and landscaping and demolition of dwellings at Castleview Road (nos. 2, 4, 6, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28 & 30) and Summerhill Parade (nos. 18, 20 & 22) (amended description).   | 04-Apr-24  | 31-Oct-24   | Under Consideration |
| 5       | LA04/2024/0910/F  | Major    | 70 Whitewell Road, Newtownabbey, BT36 7ES Site at Hazelwood Integrated College   | Redevelopment of Hazelwood Integrated College to include demolition of existing building and development of new school campus, new sports pitch, outdoor play areas, car parking, hard and soft landscaping and retention and refurbishment of the Listed Building (Graymount House) and other associated site works including a temporary mobile village during the construction process.   | 23-May-24  | 19-Dec-24   | Under Consideration |
| 6       | LA04/2024/2024/RM | Major    | Royal Ulster Agricultural Society, the Kings Hall, 488-516 Lisburn Road, Belfast, BT9 6GW  | 41no. retirement living apartments at Plot 6, parking and landscaping in accordance with outline planning permission LA04/2020/0845/O, seeking approval of layout, scale, appearance and landscaping details   | 18-Dec-24  | 16-Jul-25   | Under Consideration |

|    |                  |       |  |  |           |           |                     |
|----|------------------|-------|--|--|-----------|-----------|---------------------|
| 7  | LA04/2024/2145/F | Major | Lands at North Foreshore / Giant's Park<br>Dargan Road, Belfast, BT3 9LZ   | Creation of a new Adventure Park comprising a community / visitor hub building including café, creche, flexible exhibition / community space, ancillary office space and maintenance yard. Development includes community gardens, bmx track, crazy golf, dog park, walking/running/cycle paths, outdoor amphitheatre, bio diversity zones, and recreational facilities. Associated landscaping and infrastructure (drainage, lighting, car / coach parking, WC block etc).  | 15-Jan-25 | 13-Aug-25 | Under Consideration |
| 8  | LA04/2025/0012/F | Major | Lands at the Waterworks Park, located off the Cavehill Road; and lands at Alexandra Park, located between Castleton Gardens and Deacon Street; extending along Castleton Gardens and Camberwell Terrace to the road junction approximately 30 metres to the north west of 347 Antrim Road, Belfast, BT15 2HF | <p>Refurbishment and safety work to the Waterworks upper and lower reservoirs, and Alexandra Park Lake reservoir, to be complemented with wider environmental, landscape and connectivity improvements.</p> <p>The reservoir works comprise of a new overflow structure with reinforcement and protection of the return embankment parallel to the by-wash channel at Waterworks Upper reservoir. Repairs to the upstream face of Waterworks Lower reservoir with the addition of wetland planting to reduce the overall capacity of the reservoir. Removal of an existing parapet wall and embankment reinforcement at the Alexandra Park Lake reservoir.</p> <p>Improvements at Waterworks Park comprise the demolition of the existing Waterworks Bothy and replacement with a new building to include public toilets, Changing facilities, multi-purpose community room and kitchenette. Extension to existing Cavehill Road gatehouse building. Entrance improvements, new events space including multipurpose decking; resurfacing of footways; new pedestrian lighting along key routes; a dog park; replacement platforms and viewing area. New 3-on-3 basketball court; replacement surface to existing small sided 3G pitch; and upgrades to existing Queen Mary's playground.</p> <p>Improvements at Alexandra Park include the resurfacing of footways; new pedestrian lighting along key routes; new reinforced grass event space; new lake viewing area; new public toilets and changing places; entrance improvements. 2no existing bridges replaced; new pedestrian entrance; reimagined peace wall; new multi-sport synthetic surface with cover; and upgrades to existing play parks.</p> <p>Streetscape improvements along Camberwell Terrace and Castleton Gardens include resurfacing of footways with new kerbs; resurfaced carriageways and new tactile paving at pedestrian crossings; and all associated works.</p> | 20-Dec-24 | 18-Jul-25 | Under Consideration |
| 9  | LA04/2024/2134/F | Major | Site of the former Dunmurry Cricket Club, Ashley Park, Dunmurry, Belfast BT17 0QQ, located north of 1-10 Ashley Park and south of 1-20 Areema Grove and Areema Drive, Dunmurry.  | Mixed use scheme for new community recreational facilities, including basketball court, parkland and residential development comprising 37no social/affordable housing units with landscaping and associated works.  | 21-Dec-24 | 19-Jul-25 | Under Consideration |
| 10 | LA04/2025/0088/F | Major | Lands adjacent and south west of Monagh By-pass, north west of Nos. 17, 19 and 22 Black Ridge Gardens and c.150 metres south east of Nos. 38 to 70 (evens) Black Ridge View (part of the wider Glenmona mixed-use development), Belfast  | Proposed mixed use development (in lieu of the previously approved employment zone under LA04/2020/0804/F) comprising a three storey building of 36 no. Category 1 (over 55's) social housing apartments and 7 no. single storey Class B1/B2 Business/Light Industrial Units. Development includes 2 no. access points, car parking, landscaping and all associated site works   | 17-Feb-25 | 15-Sep-25 | Under Consideration |

|         |                  |       |   |   |           |           |                     |
|---------|------------------|-------|---|---|-----------|-----------|---------------------|
| 11      | LA04/2025/0184/O | Major | 38-52 Lisburn Road, Malone Lower, Belfast, BT9 6AA  | Seven storey building (39.3m AOD) mixed use development comprising of Use Class B1 (c): Business, Research & Development and Use Class, D1: Community and Cultural Uses, including landscaping, parking, and servicing (Amended Description).   | 10-Feb-25 | 08-Sep-25 | Under Consideration |
| 12      | LA04/2025/0574/F | Major | Surface level car park at lands to east of Lanyon Place Station Mays Meadow, Belfast, BT1 3NR   | Erection of eight storey building comprising seven floors of grade A office accommodation, ground floor retail / business units together with car parking (15 no. spaces), cycle parking and plant areas: and public realm improvements including dedicated drop-off area to front of building  | 17-Apr-25 | 13-Nov-25 | Under Consideration |
| 13      | LA04/2025/0974/F | Major | Site to the south of the former Knockbreda High School. Lands bounded by the A55 Upper Knockbreda Road to the south and south-east, Wynchurch Road to the north-east, Knockbreda Primary School to the north and Knockbreda Park to the west. | Development of a new primary school building for Forge Integrated Primary School. including development of a nursery unit, hard and soft play areas, landscaping, car parking, internal drop-off areas and new access arrangements onto the A55 Knockbreda Road via a new signalised junction; demolition of no. 138a Knockbreda Park and associated site works   | 04-Jun-25 | 31-Dec-25 | Under Consideration |
| 14      | LA04/2025/1272/F | Major | Harberton North Special School 29a Fortwilliam Park, Belfast, BT15 4AP  | Erection of temporary mobile classroom village to facilitate future refurbishment and extension of existing Harberton North Special School, comprising 3 no. 2-storey blocks of temporary classroom accommodation, temporary hard play areas, temporary staff and visitor parking areas, tree removal and landscaping. (Amended Plans)  | 31-Jul-25 | 13-Nov-25 | Under Consideration |
| Page 29 | LA04/2025/2013/F | Major | Netherleigh House, 1 Massey Avenue, Belfast, BT4 2JP  | Change of use of Netherleigh House and existing office block to provide residential and nursing care facilities. Extensions to existing office block including a fourth storey floor, eastern and western gable extension and two front projections from the northern elevation. Erection of 36 no. assisted living apartments over two four storey blocks. Site parking, landscaped amenity areas, woodland trails and all associated site works | 18-Nov-25 | 16-Jun-26 | Under Consideration |
| 16      | LA04/2025/2018/F | Major | Lands at Donegall Quay, Tomb St. to north of Albert Square, Gamble St. to south of Corporation Sq, Little Patrick St. to east of Nelson St. & under the M3 bridge at Donegall Quay and Corporation St., Belfast, BT1 1AA                      | Public realm and road improvements including development of urban recreation space below the M3 flyover at Corporation Street / Tomb Street and new public space below the M3 flyover at Donegall Quay.   | 19-Nov-25 | 17-Jun-26 | Under Consideration |
| 17      | LA04/2025/1991/F | Major | Makro, 97 Kingsway, Belfast, BT17 9NS   | Subdivision of the existing cash and carry building and the change of use of 4,750 sq,m gross floorspace for use as a Class A1 retail; erection of new loading bay in service yard; minor external alterations to building; reconfiguration of car park.  | 03-Dec-25 | 18-Mar-26 | Under Consideration |
| 18      | LA04/2025/2033/F | Major | The Maynard Sinclair Pavilion Stormont Estate, Belfast, BT4 3TA   | Variation of conditions, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 24, 25 and 27 of planning approval LA04/2023/2459/F to allow for phasing of the development.  | 12-Dec-25 | 27-Mar-26 | Under Consideration |
| 19      | LA04/2025/2113/F | Major | St. Marys Christian Brothers Grammar School St Marys Christian Brothers Grammar School 147a Glen Road, Andersonstown, Belfast, BT11 8NR   | The construction of a new Sports Hall, Gymnasium and P.E Facility and footbridge connecting to existing GAA playing field   | 09-Dec-25 | 07-Jul-26 | Under Consideration |

|         |                  |       |  |   |           |           |                     |
|---------|------------------|-------|--|---|-----------|-----------|---------------------|
| 20      | LA04/2026/0007/F | Major | Lands at Belfast YMCA, Knightsbridge Park, Stranmillis, Belfast. To the east of Nos. 15; 17; 19; 25; 27; 29; and 35 Knightsbridge Manor. South of Nos. 26 to 34 (evens) Knightsbridge Manor, Nos. 65; 66; and 68 Vauxhall Park, and Nos. 15 and 17 Marylebone Park. West of Nos. 35 and 38 Sharman Drive, and Nos. 39 and 42 Sharman Park, Belfast | Proposed mixed-use development comprising 3G playing pitch with floodlighting; Children's Play Area; Trim Trail; Car Parking; and 24 No. Dwelling Units including a mix of detached, semi-detached and apartment house types. The development also includes site access, internal roads, landscaping and pumping station and all other associated site and access works.  | 17-Dec-25 | 15-Jul-26 | Under Consideration |
| 21      | LA04/2025/2215/F | Major | Halifax Building, 24 Cromac Place, Building, BT7 2JB   | Proposed change of use from offices to nursing home comprising 156 no. bedrooms, ancillary scanning unit and all associated accommodation including dining/ café areas, day rooms and lounges, hairdressers, cinema rooms, treatment rooms and internal courtyard. The proposal also includes ancillary offices, landscaping, cycle parking, external alterations and all other site and associated works.  | 19-Dec-25 | 17-Jul-26 | Under Consideration |
| Page 30 | LA04/2025/2210/O | Major | Lands to the east of Corporation Street, north of Donegall Quay, west and south of Clarendon Dock, south, east and south west of Pilot Street, and south and south east of Corry Road, Belfast (amended address)   | Hybrid planning permission is being sought for the following development:<br><br>Outline Planning Application (no matters reserved) for Plots A & B to provide 456No. residential units (apartments) and 1,600sqm of ground floor commercial uses including retail (Class A1), Financial and Professional (Class A2), Community and Cultural Uses (Class D1), Assembly and Leisure (Class D2), and café, bar and restaurant uses, landscaping, open space, play equipment, public realm improvements and all associated site and access works including servicing from Corporation Street.<br><br>Outline Planning Application (all matters reserved) for Plots C, D, E and F for a mixed-use development comprising residential (apartments and dwellings), a Hotel/Apart Hotel, ground floor commercial uses including retail (Class A1), Financial and Professional (Class A2), Community and Cultural Uses (Class D1), Assembly and Leisure (Class D2), and café, bar and restaurant uses, the change of use (principle only) to the listed Clarendon Building, Furnace House and Pump House (to include cafe and restaurant uses), re-purposing of Clarendon Dock for leisure uses and all associated site, access and infrastructure works. | 27-Jan-26 | 25-Aug-26 | Under Consideration |
| 23      | LA04/2026/0008/F | Major | 468-472 Castlereagh Road, Belfast, BT5 6RG   | Demolition of existing structures on site and erection of purpose built padel facility comprising 8no. padel courts and ancillary uses to include café, changing facilities and recovery studio and all other associated site and access works.   | 22-Dec-25 | 20-Jul-26 | Under Consideration |
| 24      | LA04/2026/0282/F | Major | 29-33 Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7EJ   | Renewal of application reference LA04/2020/0659/F - Refurbishment of existing four storey terrace including alteration, extension to rear, partial demolition and reinstatement. Part change of use from art galleries to two cafes at ground floor. Retention of offices within existing building at second, third and fourth floor. Erection of new 13 storey aparthotel building to rear and associated works including public realm improvements  | 13-Feb-26 | 11-Sep-26 | Under Consideration |

# Planning Applications Discussed at Committee Between 01 Apr 2019 and 02 Mar 2026

| Decision Description  | Totals    |
|-----------------------|-----------|
|                       | 23        |
| Application Withdrawn |           |
| Consent Granted       |           |
| Consent Refused       |           |
| Permission Granted    | 6         |
| Permission Refused    |           |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>29</b> |

| Application No.                    | Location  | Proposal   | Category | Date Valid | Statutory Target Date | Statutory Target Weeks | Current number of Weeks | Committee Date | Weeks between Valid date and Comm date | Weeks Since Committee | Previous New Non-statutory Target Date | New Non-statutory Target Date | Reason decision not issued  |
|------------------------------------|---|--|----------|------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|--|-----------------------|--|-------------------------------|---|
| LA04/2022/2059/F<br><b>Page 55</b> | Lands south of 56 Highcairn Drive Belfast BT13 3RU<br>Site located at junction between Highcairn Drive and Dunboyne Park Belfast. | Social Housing Development comprising of 12 no. 3p/2b semi-detached dwelling houses with incurtilage parking and associated site works. (amended description and site location plan)   | LOC      | 04-Nov-22  | 17-Feb-23             | 15                     | 174                     | 29/06/2023     | 33                                     | 139                   | 28/02/2026                             | 31/03/2026                    | Awaiting Section 76 Agreement - land ownership issues on the applicant's side   |
| LA04/2024/0483/F                   | 34-44 Bedford Street and 6 Clarence Street, Belfast   | Proposed change of use from Office (B1) and restaurant (Sui Generis) to Hotel comprising of 88 no. bedrooms, two storey rooftop extension, restaurant and bar offerings, gym facilities, including new dormer windows on roof, internal and external refurbishment and alterations, and all associated site works. | MAJ      | 19-Mar-24  | 15-Oct-24             | 30                     | 102                     | 15/10/2024     | 30                                     | 71                    | Unknown                                | 31/03/2026                    | Section 76 Agreement not completed on applicant's side - to be reported to March 2026 Committee with recommendation to secure Employability and Skills by condition instead |

|                    |   |   |     |           |           |    |     |            |    |    |            |            |   |
|--------------------|---|---|-----|-----------|-----------|----|-----|------------|----|----|------------|------------|---|
| LA04/2024/0480/DCA | 34-44 Bedford Street and 6 Clarence Street, Belfast   | Part demolition of existing buildings (stripping back of roof, shopfront and other external alterations to facilitate change of use and extension of buildings to hotel use.  | LOC | 29-Mar-24 | 12-Jul-24 | 15 | 101 | 15/10/2024 | 28 | 71 | Unknown    | 31/03/2026 | See above   |
| LA04/2024/0369/F   | Lands at Former Monarch Laundry site, and Broadway Hall Site, No's 451 - 457 Donegall Road, Belfast, BT12 6HD.  | Proposed Specialist Nursing and Residential Care Facility comprising approximately 158 no. beds, day/dining rooms, treatment rooms, staff rooms, office/store rooms, including car parking provision, cycle parking, refuse storage, landscaping, and associated site and access works. | MAJ | 08-Feb-24 | 05-Sep-24 | 30 | 108 | 12/11/2024 | 39 | 67 | Unknown    | 30/04/2026 | Development commenced without planning permission - applicant required to submit revised contamination information. Contamination issues now resolved. S76 Agreement requires to be revisited due to delays on applicant's side |
| LA04/2023/2557/F   | Lands East of Meadowhill, North of Glencolin Court, North and East of Glencolin Rise, East of Glencolin Grove, North and West of Glen Road Rise, and North of Glen Road Grove. Belfast. | 260 no. dwellings, children's play area and other ancillary and associated works.   | MAJ | 24-Feb-23 | 22-Sep-23 | 30 | 158 | 10/12/2024 | 93 | 63 | 28/02/2026 | 31/03/2026 | S76 Agreement nearly agreed following previous issues.  |

|                             |   |   |     |           |           |    |     |            |    |    |         |         |  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|-----|-----------|-----------|----|-----|------------|----|----|---------|---------|--|
| LA04/2024/1036/F            | Lands to the east of the River Lagan located between Lagan Gateway Phase 1 and Belvoir Park Forest, running adjacent to the west of Belvoir Park Golf Club and approximately 120 metres to the east of Newtownbreda Water Treatment Plant, Galwally Ave, Belfast BT8 7YA. | Lagan Gateway Phase 2 – Proposed greenway connection extending between Lagan Gateway Phase 1 at Annadale Embankment to Belvoir Forest Park. Comprising compacted gravel paths; a new elevated (4-5 meter high) timber boardwalk (approximately 85m long); landscaping works, new cycle stands, bollards, seats and bins; and all associated works | LOC | 10-May-24 | 23-Aug-24 | 15 | 95  | 17/06/2025 | 57 | 36 | Unknown | Unknown | Further information requested from applicant following request from DAERA NIEA |
| Page 52<br>LA04/2023/4543/F | 885 Shore Road, Belfast, BT36 7DH   | Proposed new changing pavilion, enhancing grounds entrances including turnstiles, ancillary facilities and upgrade to existing car park. Proposed 3G surfacing to existing grass pitch with flood lighting.   | LOC | 01-Feb-24 | 16-May-24 | 15 | 109 | 17/06/2025 | 71 | 36 | Unknown | Unknown | Information provided by agent and DAERA: NED reconsulted on 17.02.26           |

|                             |  |  |     |           |           |    |    |            |    |    |            |            |  |
|-----------------------------|--|--|-----|-----------|-----------|----|----|------------|----|----|------------|------------|--|
| LA04/2025/0535/F            | Lands West of Monagh By-Pass South of Upper Springfield Road & 30-34 Upper Springfield Road & West of Aitnamona Crescent & St Theresa's Primary School. North and East of 2-22 Old Brewery Lane, Glanaulin, 137-143a Glen Road & Airfield Heights & St Mary's CBG School Belfast | Variation of conditions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 14, 17, 18, 19, 36, 37 and 41 of approval LA04/2023/2390/F and LA04/2020/0804/F to facilitate removal of 31 previously approved dwellings and retaining structure along northern boundary of site adjacent to Upper Springfield Road. Retention of existing sloping ground levels and landscaping at this location. | MAJ | 27-May-25 | 23-Dec-25 | 30 | 40 | 17/06/2025 | 3  | 36 | 31/01/2026 | 28/02/2026 | Awaiting conclusion of S77 agreement (amendment to S76 agreement). Applicant to address issues raised by DfI Roads                                 |
| Page 58<br>LA04/2024/1865/O | Land between No 22 Squires View and Nos 57 & 59 Squires Hill Road, Belfast.  | 3no. detached dwellings part 2 storey part 3 storey (amended plans)  | LOC | 28-Oct-24 | 10-Feb-25 | 15 | 70 | 12/08/2025 | 41 | 28 | 28/02/2026 | 30/04/2026 | Late objections received. Additional information recently received from applicant regarding land stability issue. To be reported back to Committee |
| LA04/2024/1654/F            | 432 Falls Road, Belfast, BT12 6EN  | Change of use from a 7-bedroom dwelling house (C1) to a 7 bed/ 9 person House of Multiple Occupancy (Sui Generis)  | LOC | 21-Oct-24 | 03-Feb-25 | 15 | 71 | 12/08/2025 | 42 | 28 | 28/02/2026 | 31/03/2026 | Gathered additional information to support refusal reason. Decision to issue shortly   |

|                  |   |  |     |           |           |    |    |            |    |    |            |            |   |
|------------------|---|--|-----|-----------|-----------|----|----|------------|----|----|------------|------------|---|
| LA04/2024/0626/F | 1 Havelock House<br>Havelock Place,<br>Ormeau, Belfast,<br>BT7 1EB .  | Erection of 104no. social rented residential units (comprising a mix of General Social Housing and Category 1 over 55's accommodation) across two detached blocks [ranging between 3 and 5 storeys], landscaping, communal and private amenity space, ancillary cycle and car parking provision, and other associated site works | MAJ | 17-Apr-24 | 13-Nov-24 | 30 | 98 | 11/11/2025 | 81 | 15 | 28/02/2026 | 31/03/2026 | S76 Agreement close to agreement following resolution of issues. Decision expected to be issued soon. |
| LA04/2025/1454/F | The Lockhouse<br>13 River Terrace<br>Belfast BT7 2EN  | New community wellbeing centre and cafe extension to existing lockhouse building   | LOC | 17-Sep-25 | 31-Dec-25 | 15 | 24 | 09/12/2025 | 11 | 11 | 28/02/2026 | 28/02/2026 | Awaiting outstanding consultation responses   |
| LA04/2025/1693/F | Existing soccer pitch at Falls Park (approx. 50m east of No. 47 Norglen Drive), Falls Road, Belfast, BT11 8EL | Spectator fencing around pitch perimeter (1.2m high), 2 no. ballstop systems (20m x 6m high), and spectator hardstanding.  | LOC | 21-Oct-25 | 03-Feb-26 | 15 | 19 | 20/01/2026 | 13 | 5  |            |            | Permission Granted  |
| LA04/2025/1694/F | Woodlands Playing Fields, Finaghy Road North, Belfast   | The installation of 7 x Ballstop Systems @ 30m x 12m high.   | LOC | 07-Jan-26 | 22-Apr-26 | 15 | 8  | 20/01/2026 | 1  | 5  |            |            | Permission Granted  |

|                             |   |   |     |           |           |    |    |            |    |   |  |  |                    |
|-----------------------------|---|---|-----|-----------|-----------|----|----|------------|----|---|--|--|--------------------|
| LA04/2025/1695/F            | Existing soccer pitch at Dixon Playing Fields (approx. 50m north-east of No. 100 Orby Road), Grand Parade, Belfast                  | Extension to existing spectator fencing on site, new ball stop system along with pedestrian and vehicular access gates. New kerb line and drainage along car park boundary.   | LOC | 22-Oct-25 | 04-Feb-26 | 15 | 19 | 20/01/2026 | 12 | 5 |  |  | Permission Granted |
| LA04/2025/1696/F            | Existing soccer pitches at Clarendon Playing Fields (approx. 130m south-west of No. 5 Abbeydale Court), Abbeydale Gardens, Belfast. | Installation of 2 No. ballstop systems @ 30m x 6m (high).   | LOC | 22-Oct-25 | 04-Feb-26 | 15 | 19 | 20/01/2026 | 12 | 5 |  |  | Permission Granted |
| Page 60<br>LA04/2024/2077/F | Adelaide Business Centre<br>2-6 Apollo Road, Belfast, BT12 6HP  | Proposed change of use from office space (B1) and storage or distribution (B4) to Bowling Alley, Restaurant, Indoor Golf, Children's Soft Play, VR Zone & Amusements, Smoking Area, Car Parking and Associated Site Works. Proposal includes changes to elevations. (Amended Plans Received). | MAJ | 29-Jan-25 | 27-Aug-25 | 30 | 57 | 20/01/2026 | 50 | 5 |  |  | Permission Granted |

|                             |  |  |     |           |           |    |    |            |    |   |     |            |   |
|-----------------------------|--|--|-----|-----------|-----------|----|----|------------|----|---|-----|------------|---|
| LA04/2024/1836/F            | Lands between Ballygomartin Road and Upper Whiterock Road and to the west (rear) of Moyard Parade and New Barnsley Crescent, Belfast Co. Antrim BT13 3QZ | Proposed development of new walking trails linking Black Mountain Shared Space Project building (approved under LA04/2022/0853/F) on the Ballygomartin Road with the Upper Whiterock Road and Moyard Parade. Proposal to include gated accesses, stockproof fencing, seated areas, information signage, landscaping and associated site works. | MAJ | 25-Nov-24 | 23-Jun-25 | 30 | 66 | 20/01/2026 | 60 | 5 |     |            | Permission Granted                                  |
| Page 87<br>LA04/2024/1389/F | Newhill Youth and Community Centre, 261 Whiterock Road, Belfast, BT12 7FX  | Community garden and improvements to existing unused space, scheme to include multi-use play-court, allotment area, pizza and BBQ area and pathways.   | LOC | 07-Oct-24 | 20-Jan-25 | 15 | 73 | 17/02/2026 | 71 | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Decision to be issued                               |
| LA04/2025/0605/F            | 341-345 Albertbridge Road, Ballymacarret, Belfast, BT5 4PY   | Erection of a four storey building to create 29no. short-term let accommodation units with ancillary roof-mounted solar panels   | LOC | 09-Apr-25 | 23-Jul-25 | 15 | 47 | 17/02/2026 | 44 | 1 | N/A | TBC        | Application reconsidered at February 2026 Committee |

|                         |   |   |            |                  |                  |           |           |                   |           |          |            |                   |   |
|-------------------------|---|---|------------|------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|----------|------------|-------------------|---|
| <p>LA04/2025/1716/F</p> | <p>Santander House, 1<br/>Mays Meadow,<br/>Belfast, BT1 3PH</p>                     | <p>Proposed change of use from, Use class B1(a) office, to short term Transitional Care Unit, Use Class C3 b) comprising of 73 no. ensuite beds, associated ancillary facilities including café, rehabilitation suites and treatment rooms, laboratory, consulting rooms, 2 no. external terraces and all other ancillary, staff and storage rooms. Development includes ambulance drop off bay, replacement of existing windows, and all other associated site and access works.</p> | <p>MAJ</p> | <p>05-Nov-25</p> | <p>03-Jun-26</p> | <p>30</p> | <p>17</p> | <p>17/02/2026</p> | <p>14</p> | <p>1</p> | <p>N/A</p> | <p>31/03/2026</p> | <p>Decision to be issued</p>                                    |
| <p>LA04/2025/1896/F</p> | <p>Former Belfast Metropolitan College Campus Whiterock Road, Belfast, BT12 7PH</p> | <p>Proposed mixed use development comprising of 77 No. social housing units (mix of 26 dwellings and 51 apartments) and a new children's centre, car parking, landscaping, open space, access and all associated site works including the installation of a new substation.(amendment to planning permission ref: LA04/2024/0122/F).</p>  | <p>MAJ</p> | <p>06-Nov-25</p> | <p>04-Jun-26</p> | <p>30</p> | <p>17</p> | <p>17/02/2026</p> | <p>14</p> | <p>1</p> | <p>N/A</p> | <p>31/03/2026</p> | <p>Awaiting consultation response from Environmental Health</p> |

|                    |   |  |     |           |           |    |    |            |    |   |     |            |   |
|--------------------|---|--|-----|-----------|-----------|----|----|------------|----|---|-----|------------|---|
| LA04/2025/2183/F   | Units 2a and 2b 38 Boucher Road, Belfast, BT12 6HR  | Removal of conditions 14 and 15 from the permission referenced LA04/2024/0714/F (Contamination)  | MAJ | 18-Dec-25 | 16-Jul-26 | 30 | 11 | 17/02/2026 | 8  | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Decision to be issued   |
| LA04/2025/2216/LBC | Ulster Hall, 30 Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7FF  | Installation of Facade Lighting  | LOC | 19-Dec-25 | 03-Apr-26 | 15 | 11 | 17/02/2026 | 8  | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Decision to be issued   |
| LA04/2025/0288/F   | Existing taxi passenger terminal and former retail unit located within 35a King Street, Belfast, BT1 1HU. | Retrospective change of use from ground floor taxi passenger terminal, cafe, office and newsagent to a Homeless Centre, Category D1(B). The centre will provide meals, washing and changing facilities and an internal social amenity area for users. The centre will operate Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday each week from 4:00 pm up until 10:00 pm (Amended Description) | LOC | 11-Mar-25 | 24-Jun-25 | 15 | 51 | 17/02/2026 | 49 | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Deferred for outstanding Environmental Health consultation response |
| LA04/2025/1135/F   | 57 Knock Eden Park, Belfast, BT6 0JG  | Demolition of first floor rear return, first floor rear extension and additional site works  | LOC | 18-Jul-25 | 31-Oct-25 | 15 | 33 | 17/02/2026 | 30 | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Decision to be issued   |

|                  |   |   |     |           |           |    |     |            |     |   |     |            |  |
|------------------|---|---|-----|-----------|-----------|----|-----|------------|-----|---|-----|------------|--|
| LA04/2024/0015/F | Lands at Cabin Hill, Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast BT4  | Erection of 53 residential units (including 43 dwellings and 10 apartments) including creation of access, internal roads, landscaping and associated works (revised information).   | MAJ | 05-Dec-25 | 03-Jul-26 | 30 | 13  | 17/02/2026 | 10  | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Deferred at February 2026 Committee for further information        |
| LA04/2023/2633/F | St Teresa's GAC, 2 Glen Road Heights, Belfast BT11 8ER  | Proposed extension to existing clubhouse to provide indoor sports hall, changing rooms, reception, and fitness suite. Proposed relocation of grass pitch and new 3G training pitch with integrated ball walls. Proposed annex building with club store and matchday shop. Site works including increased parking, fencing, catch nets, floodlighting, dugouts, paths, and other associated amenities. | MAJ | 14-Mar-23 | 10-Oct-23 | 30 | 155 | 17/02/2026 | 153 | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Consultation response from SES awaited. Conditions to be finalised |
| LA04/2022/0809/F | Lands to the south and west of Woodland Grange to the north of Blacks Gate and to the east of Moor Park Mews Belfast. | Amendments to approved schemes ref. Z/2008/0993/F (erection of 53 No. dwellings) & ref. Z/2013/0120/F (erection of 46 No. dwellings); to reduce overall density from 99 No. dwellings to 92 No. dwellings and associated and ancillary works.   | MAJ | 21-Apr-22 | 17-Nov-22 | 30 | 202 | 17/02/2026 | 199 | 1 | N/A | 31/03/2026 | Awaiting execution of S76 Agreement                                |



|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| <b>Subject:</b>              | Review of Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) fees         |
| <b>Date:</b>                 | 20 <sup>th</sup> March 2026                             |
| <b>Reporting Officer(s):</b> | Kate Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control |
| <b>Contact Officer(s):</b>   | Ed Baker, Planning Manager (Development Management)     |

**Restricted Reports**

Is this report restricted? Yes  No

**Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.**

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

**If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?**

|                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| After Committee Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| After Council Decision   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sometime in the future   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Never                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Call-in**

Is the decision eligible for Call-in? Yes  No

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues</b>   |
| 1.1        | This report sets out proposals for a small operational change and inflationary uplift to Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) fees in the short term alongside a proposal for a longer term review of PAD fees in the coming financial year.   |
| 1.2        | The report was noted by the Planning Committee at its meeting on 17 <sup>th</sup> February 2026.   |
| <b>2.0</b> | <b>Recommendation</b>  |
| 2.1        | The Committee is asked to agree the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) the proposed increased PAD fees set out at <b>Appendix 1</b>.</li> <li>(ii) the small operational change set out at paragraph 3.13.</li> <li>(iii) a fundamental review of PAD fees over the next financial year.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Main Report</b>   |
|            | <b><u>Background</u></b>   |
| 3.1        | The Council's Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) service is a discretionary service, which provides opportunity for customers to discuss their planning proposals with the Planning Service before they make a planning application.   |
| 3.2        | As the Committee is aware, the planning application process can be complex. PADs provide opportunity for issues to be identified early, thereby helping to improve the quality of application on submission, in turn leading to better outcomes on the ground as well as more efficient and timely decision-making. PADs also provide applicants with a degree of certainty as to whether their proposals are likely to be acceptable, with the caveat that the process does not bind the Council to a final outcome, with the planning application subject to consultation with the public and technical consultees, and the potential for the decision to be made by the Committee following the democratic process. |
| 3.3        | Customers can use PADs to establish: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• whether their proposal requires planning permission.</li> <li>• the main issues and planning policies relevant to consideration of their proposal.</li> <li>• the Planning Service's initial assessment of the proposal and how the proposal can be improved to increase the chances of planning permission being granted.</li> <li>• the information that they will need to submit with their planning application (in accordance with the Council's published <i>Planning Application Valid Checklist</i>).</li> <li>• the application process and likely timescales for a decision.</li> </ul>  |

### **Best Practice**

3.4 PADs are universally accepted as best practice in the industry, particularly for more complex proposals, and form an important part of the “front-loading” of the planning application process to support timely decision making and secure better outcomes on the ground. PADs are advocated by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) through the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for NI (SPPS) and [Development Management Practice Note 10: Pre-Application Community Consultation \(and Pre-Application Discussions\)](#).

3.5 PADs also form an important part of the Council’s published “10 Operating Principles” that support an efficient and effective Development Management service, and the Planning Service’s aim of *helping customers get a timely planning decision that benefits the city*.

3.6 Operating Principle 7 states:

*‘We provide a Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) service so that issues can be identified at the beginning of the process, before the application is made. This leads to better quality planning applications which should be determined in a more timely manner...’*

### **BCC charging for Pre-Application Discussions**

3.7 Belfast City Council was the first council in Northern Ireland to charge for PADs in 2017. It is understood that some but not all NI councils have since introduced charging for PADs. Endorsed by the Committee, PAD fees were introduced in recognition of the significant level of resources that the Planning Service expends in providing its PAD service and significant demand for the service from customers.

3.8 PAD charging was informed at the time by engagement with applicants, agents, developers and other customers. It also formed part of the business case for employing two additional staff in the Development Management team.

3.9 PAD charging has since become culturally embedded in the planning application process in Belfast. The Planning Service remains acutely aware of the importance of providing high standards of service and advice in delivering a charged PAD service.

3.10 The Council’s PAD fees were originally set in March 2017 and are provided at **Appendix 1**.

3.11 Projected income from current PAD and PPA fees is £100,000 pa. Actual PAD income for previous years is set out in **Table 1**, below.

| Year                  | Actual PAD Income | Number of PADs |
|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 2021/22               | £88,200           | 85             |
| 2022/23               | £82,400           | 76             |
| 2023/24               | £70,200           | 62             |
| 2024/25               | £66,000           | 56             |
| 2025/26<br>(pro rata) | £92,900           | 58             |

**Table 1: PAD income and the number of PADs per year since 2021/22**

**Review of PAD fees**

3.12 it is recommended that the original 2017 fees are subject to an inflationary uplift from 2026/2027, applying the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

3.13 In addition, a small process change is proposed. The current charges including two PAD meetings at no additional cost for all PAD categories other than for Largescale Major proposals which include one meeting. It is proposed that the process for Largescale Major proposals is brought in line with other PAD categories so that they also include two meetings at no additional cost, to simplify the approach and recognising that it is unlikely that the largest category PADs would only ever involve one PAD meeting, due to their scale and complexity. The base fee for a Largescale Major proposal is proposed to be increased to cover the cost of the additional meeting.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| 3.14   | PAD fee <b>exemptions</b> for householder proposals, commercial proposals of less than 200 sqm, community and proposals by non-profit organisations (i.e. fee exempt for planning applications) would remain. There would continue to be no charge for PADs for these proposals.   |
| 3.15   | The general public can continue to avail of the free Duty Planner service which operates daily and provides opportunity to discuss householder and small-scale proposals with a planning officer.  |
| 3.16   | The revised PAD fee proposals are set out at <b>Appendix 1</b> . It is considered that these small changes may make it more likely that the Council will achieve the £100k income target for PADs.   |
| 3.17   | It should be recognised however that the Planning Service has evolved and improved its PAD service over the years. Since early 2024, following feedback from customers and informed by learning from the lean systems redesign experimentation project (2022 to 2024), the PAD process has been streamlined and targeted with the process more tailored to the specific requirements of the applicant and proposal. A new series of PAD principles relating to delivery of the service have been introduced, aimed at providing efficient, proportionate and more timely feedback to customers. These will be published on the Council's website alongside updated customer guidance on the PAD service. |
| 3.18   | A more fundamental review of PAD fees is therefore considered timely given the evolution in the delivery of the PAD service. It is recommended that a more comprehensive review is undertaken during 2026/27, informed by planned feedback from the new Belfast Planning Partnership with planning agents; and further development of internal processes following further roll-out of the learning from the lean-systems redesign project.  |
| 3.19   | A further report on the review and its conclusions will be brought to Committee in late 2026 / early 2027.   |
| 3.20   | The implementation of the proposed new PAD fees at <b>Appendix 1</b> will need to tie in with the annual update of regional planning fees for planning applications in the NI Planning Portal, expected towards the end of April or early May 2026.  |
| <b>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</b> |  |
| 3.21   | The realisation of PAD income remains an important income stream for the Council's Planning Service. Planning application fees are set regionally by DfI and overall income falls  |

|            |   |
|------------|---|
|            | substantially short of the annual cost of delivery of the Planning Service. The proposed new PAD charges will help support the Planning Service's overall costs and service delivery and will help to achieve the income target of £100k per annum. |
|            | <b>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</b>   |
| 3.22       | There are no equality or good relations / rural needs implications associated with this report.   |
| <b>4.0</b> | <b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>  |
|            | Appendix 1 – BCC current and proposed revised PAD fees  |



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## Appendix 1 – BCC current and proposed revised PAD fees

| Category  | Current Cost        | Proposed Cost of Additional meeting | Proposed Cost       | Proposed Cost of Additional meeting |
|---|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Largescale major</b><br>100 residential units or more,<br>10,000sqm or more<br>(2 meetings included <sup>1</sup> ) | <b>£2,000 + VAT</b> | £1,000 +VAT                         | <b>£4,125 + VAT</b> | £1,375 +VAT                         |
| <b>Major scale</b><br>50-99 houses<br>Other major development less<br>than 10,000sqm<br>(2 meetings included)         | <b>£1,500 + VAT</b> | £500 + VAT                          | <b>£2,050 + VAT</b> | £675 + VAT                          |
| <b>Largescale local</b><br>10-49 houses<br>2,000 to 4,999 sqm<br>(2 meetings included)                                | <b>£1,000 + VAT</b> | £500 + VAT                          | <b>£1,375 + VAT</b> | £675 + VAT                          |
| <b>Local scale</b><br>1-9 houses<br>200 to 1,999sqm<br>(2 meetings included)  | <b>£500 + VAT</b>   | £500 + VAT                          | <b>£675 + VAT</b>   | £675 + VAT                          |
| <b>Other</b><br>Floor space < 200sqm<br>Householder, commercial,<br>community or non-profit<br>organisations          | <b>£0</b>           | N/A                                 | <b>£0</b>           | N/A                                 |

<sup>1</sup> Current PAD fee of £2,000 + VAT for Largescale Major PADs only includes 1 meeting

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|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <b>Subject:</b>           | Belfast Region City Deal – update   |
| <b>Date:</b>              | 20 <sup>th</sup> March 2026   |
| <b>Reporting Officer:</b> | John Walsh, Chief Executive   |
| <b>Contact Officer:</b>   | Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Services |

**Is this report restricted?** Yes  No

**Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.**

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

**If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?**

|                                 |                          |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>After Committee Decision</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>After Council Decision</b>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Sometime in the future</b>   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Never</b>                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Call-in**

**Is the decision eligible for Call-in?** Yes  No

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>   |
| 1.1        | This report has been prepared to provide a progress update on activity within the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD). |

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| <b>2.0</b> | <b>Recommendations</b>  |
| 2.1        | <p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the latest progress in respect of the BRCD.</li> <li>• Approve continued participation in the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund at a cost of £11,500 which is within current BRCD budgets.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Background</b>   |
| 3.1        | <p>The Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) is a £1billion programme of investment that was signed in December 2021 and represents a new way of working between central and local government and regional partners to support the delivery of:</p> <p><i>“Inclusive economic growth that delivers more and better jobs, a positive impact on the most deprived communities and a balanced spread of benefits across the region.”</i></p>   |
| 3.2        | <p>This report sets out progress to date across all pillars of investment and an update on a possible extension to the Digital Transformation Flexible Fund.</p>  |
|            | <b>Main report</b>  |
|            | <b>Investment to Date</b>   |
| 3.3        | <p>By the end of Q3, the BRCD PMO had paid out £75.4m for projects across all pillars of the programme with a year-to-date spend of £33.7m.</p>   |
| 3.4        | <p><b>Innovation Pillar – 5 projects progressing.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The £64m <a href="#">iREACH Health</a> project - a world-class integrated clinical research innovation centre led by Queen’s University - is progressing well. The completion of construction phase at 2 buildings on either side of the Lisburn Road close to the City Hospital is expected to complete in December 2026 and March 2027.</li> <li>- Meanwhile, <a href="#">AMIC’s Factory of the Future</a> - a place for companies to discover the latest manufacturing advancements and technologies - is also nearing a significant milestone, with the facility at Global Point Newtownabbey now completing and with staff beginning to move to the facility.</li> <li>- Progress continues at Ulster University’s <a href="#">CDHT</a>- a £42m quality Centre for Digital Healthcare Technology with associated ‘living labs’ in the areas of cardiology, diabetes, respiratory and stroke. Imminent sub-funding and collaboration agreements with BHSCT, will now also enable the Living Labs element of this project to move ahead. Demolition works are ongoing; the Council has also now granted Planning permission and procurement for the main contractor is in progress.</li> <li>- <a href="#">Momentum One Zero</a> - a global innovation centre at Queen’s University - is expanding its facilities to build on its existing Global Research Institutes (Deep Tech, Agri and Health) and house 550+ experts from across many organisations to solve business and societal problems through research and innovation in advanced digital technologies and data. Construction</li> </ul> |

commenced in September and completion is expected by November 2027 - a Memorandum of Understanding with the AI Competency Centre has now also been agreed.

- Meanwhile [Studio Ulster](#) is well into its operational phase and, with the first productions filmed using the facilities already having been shown on BBC during the festive period, including Titanic Sinks Tonight.

3.5 **Digital Pillar - three new OBCs approved, two projects progressing, one project concluded**

- Outline Business Cases (OBCs) have been approved for 5G Research, additional investment into the successful 5G Innovation Regions programme, and the Regional Contracts for Innovation initiative; all projects have begun and are awaiting final funding contracts, and the AI Grants business case is close to submission.
- The [Digital Twin Centre](#) - which creates virtual representations of physical assets to bridge the gap between physical and digital worlds as testbeds to optimise performance, reduce costs, and predict outcomes - has now successfully completed its first Industry Accelerator with strong SME engagement and has launched its first Academic Accelerator call.
- Work on [i4C](#) - a new innovation and clean technology centre for SMEs at St Patrick's Barracks site in Ballymena - is now well advanced, and RIBA Stage 2 almost complete, positioning the project to draw down BRCD funding. An operator has also been appointed for the facility.
- Meanwhile, the c.£1m fund for innovation in immersive technology, [Augment the City](#) has concluded successfully with a final showcase in Belfast City Hall in January, where the final three entrepreneurs presented their prototypes, and provided their insights into the futureproofing of the tourism sector.

3.6 **Tourism and Regeneration Pillar – 5 projects progressing**

- The [Bangor Waterfront](#) programme has been designed to return Bangor to a destination of choice. Concept design and survey work for Ballyholme Yacht Club and Pickie Fun Park has been advancing with RIBA 2 complete for both projects and public consultation, in advance of submission of planning applications, underway. The procurements for the design teams for the Urban Waterfront and Public Realm and Marine projects are ongoing.
- Building on an already popular destination in Hillsborough Castle, [Destination Royal Hillsborough](#), will further enhance the existing offering to create a world class heritage village. An OBC Addendum has been submitted for approval and planning permission for the public realm element of the programme was granted in January 2026, allowing designs to be finalised. Key surveys works and concept designs are being progressed for the other elements of the programme in tandem with Addendum approval.
- In Newry, the Newry regeneration programme aims to increase footfall within Newry City Centre. The contractor for the [Newry Theatre and Conference Centre](#) has been appointed and construction is due to start in June 2026. NMDDC has received a pre-action protocol

letter in relation to the Civic Hub element of the Newry regeneration programme and NMDDC are responding through the appropriate legal channels.

- Both of [Mid and East Antrim Council's](#) tourism projects - Carrickfergus and Gobbins - are progressing through the detailed design stages of project development and works to procure an Operator is ongoing.
- [Belfast Stories](#) achieved a major milestone with DoF approval of its OBC, and work is now focused on finalising the Contract for Funding and completing the subsidy control assessment.

### 3.7 **Infrastructure Pillar – 1 project progressing, 2 projects on hold**

- DoF approval for the [BRT Phase 2](#) has been granted to DfI who have now appointed Atkins to progress design development.
- Procurement of a Contractor for [Lagan Pedestrian and Cycle Bridge](#) is ongoing and DfI are considering the implications of the A5 judgement on all DfI projects.
- Following completion of a public consultation exercise for [Newry Southern Relief Road](#) earlier this year, DfI are awaiting a decision on whether a public inquiry will be required for the project.

### 3.8 **Employability and Skills Pillar – 5 Skills Assessments completed**

Five [cross-deal skills assessments](#) for the BRCD's key investment sectors have now been completed. Following this work we have engaged with project promoters and partners to consider how we might address the challenges with a view to agreeing an action plan. Individual projects across all pillars are also demonstrating good progress towards boosting inclusion, growth and digital futures through their own skills activities. Examples of these are included below:

#### **Skills for Inclusion**

To maximise inclusion, the IREACH Health and Studio Ulster projects are each providing exposure to future career opportunities to students. Meanwhile our own Belfast Stories has introduced pupils from three Belfast schools to the latest design proposals and the design process through Creative Youth workshops.

#### **Skills for Growth**

Skills in high value, high growth sectors are being promoted through both AMIC's IT apprenticeships and the Momentum 1.0 Internship Programme which offers intern opportunities in cutting edge, deep tech innovation projects.

#### **Skills for Digital Futures**

Led by BCC's City Innovation office, a BRCD funded AI Capability Building Workshop programme will aim to increase AI adoption within our six BRCD councils by helping them to identify and prioritise potential AI use cases.

## **Social Value**

At the overall programme level the BRCD also brings additional opportunities such as contributions to social value. Projects across the Programme continue to apply SIB's Buy Social model and to date 16 contracts are committing 14,975 Social Value points, with 8,707 delivered so far. The points include 135 people accessing employment-related opportunities, mainly apprenticeships, work experience, student placements, and trainee roles, alongside careers events, mentoring, training, and site visits.

Environmental benefits are being achieved through training, awareness activities, volunteering, and reuse of surplus materials, while health and wellbeing outcomes are supported through awareness campaigns, training, assessments, and community donations.

The PMO will be considering future workshops in areas such as Benefits, Employability and Skills and other challenges and opportunities facing partners.

## **Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF)**

The Digital Transformation Flexible Fund (DTFF) concept was initially developed in response to the low levels of innovation and digital transformation taking place across the region - particularly among the small business community. Following the development of a business case in September 2022, on behalf of all 11 councils, £6m capital funding was awarded from the City Deal Complementary Fund with a further £1.1m from The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). At that point it was agreed that fund would be administered by Newry Mourne and Down District Council on behalf of Northern Ireland, and a revenue contribution from each council was agreed for the lifetime of the project up to March 2026.

The project is now nearing completion and has experienced a high level of demand and depending on the outcome of the current funding call there is an option to extend to a further call as long as any commitments do not exceed the overall agreed capital budget. This would mean that Newry, Mourne and Down District Council will require a further revenue contribution of £11,500 for the cost of continuing the administration of the fund. This can be accommodated within existing Belfast Region City Deal budgets so there is no additional financial ask. DTFF has been very successful in helping to stimulate Digital Transformation and Innovation in small and micro businesses who generally do not have the capital reserves or resources to start to experiment, prototype and deliver new products or services using new and emerging technologies. Committee is therefore asked to approve continued participation in the programme.

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| 3.9  | <p><b>Next Steps</b></p> <p>Partners are currently preparing to report back formally on their respective Q4 and Year End positions which will inform the BRCD Annual Report – due to be brought back to the Aug/Sept meeting of this Committee. This will offer a more complete overview of progress and achievements to date.</p>  |
| 3.10 | <p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p> <p>All costs associated with the BRCD are within existing budgets.</p>  |
| 3.11 | <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>The approach taken to develop the City Deal has been subject to independent equality screening and rural proofing and states that;</p> <p><i>‘BRCD is inherently inclusive, affording an opportunity for the region to grow in a way that will benefit the economy of Northern Ireland as a whole, thereby enhancing the lives and well-being of its citizens. If during further development of the programme it becomes apparent that there may be an adverse impact on certain groups or communities then the partnership commits to carrying out further Section 75 work and including screening and EQIAs as and when appropriate.’</i></p> |
| 4.0  | <p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>   |
|      | <p>None</p>   |



|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| <b>Subject:</b>           | Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy   |
| <b>Date:</b>              | 20 March 2026  |
| <b>Reporting Officer:</b> | John Tully, Director City and Organisational Strategy  |
| <b>Contact Officers:</b>  | Geoff Dickson, Strategic Planning and Policy Manager<br>Louise O’Kane, Strategic Planning and Policy Officer |

**Restricted Reports**

**Is this report restricted?** Yes  No

**Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.**

Insert number

1. Information relating to any individual
2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual
3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)
4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter
5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained
6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction
7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime

**If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?**

|                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| After Committee Decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| After Council Decision   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sometime in the future   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Never                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Call-in**

**Is the decision eligible for Call-in?** Yes  No

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues</b>   |
| 1.1        | The purpose of this report is to inform members about the public consultation on the <a href="#">Draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy</a> . |

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| <b>2.0</b> | <b>Recommendation</b>   |
| 2.1        | <p>The Committee is requested to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Note that the Department of Education is seeking views on the draft NI Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy (ELC).</li> <li>II. Approve the draft consultation response (Appendix 1) to be submitted by Belfast City Council to the public consultation. Given the deadline for submission of responses is 24 March 2026, SP&amp;R Committee is asked to give delegated authority to officers to submit the agreed response noting that it is subject to full Council ratification on 01 April 2026.</li> </ol>  |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Main Report</b>  |
| 3.1        | <p><b>Background</b></p> <p>The draft ELC Strategy is the Executive’s draft plan for more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare. The strategy is a comprehensive and ambitious framework designed to transform early years provision. It reflects a joined-up approach across departments and communities, recognising the critical role of early years in shaping lifelong outcomes. The draft strategy builds on work already undertaken to enhance early learning and childcare provision across the region and seeks to consolidate and expand on these achievements. The strategy is structured around three core themes which together seek to provide a holistic approach to improving early learning and childcare provision.</p> <p>The PfG 2024-2027 ‘Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most’ includes a commitment to <i>“provide more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare opportunities to support children’s development and ease financial pressures for working families. This must complement existing support available through Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare (TFC). We also need to ensure that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable.”</i></p> <p>The draft strategy is the Executive’s plan for delivering on this commitment. Achieving the objectives set out in the strategy will require input from a range of departments. It will also contribute to a range of policy priorities through increased labour force participation and economic growth, poverty reduction, gender equality and social mobility.</p> |
| 3.2        | <p><b>Notice of Motion</b></p> <p>A Notice of Motion was raised by Cllr Mal O’Hara in 2018 stating “This council agrees to explore options and take practical steps, including through the Belfast Agenda and City Deal, with a view to creating a childcare strategy for the city that will encourage greater maternal employment, redress gender inequalities in the workplace, increase GVA in the city and, most importantly, improve educational and social outcomes for our children.”</p>  |
| 3.3        | <p><b>Belfast Agenda</b></p> <p>The core objectives of the draft ELC Strategy are aligned to the ‘call to action’ outlined in the Belfast Agenda, seeking partners to provide collective leadership to the delivery of a Childcare Strategy which would aim to deliver extended, affordable and high-quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged three to four (Belfast Agenda, p.10).</p>  |
| 3.4        | <p><b>Core Themes and Outcomes</b></p> <p>The strategy is structured around three themes with associated outcomes and objectives which together seek to provide a holistic approach to improving early learning and childcare provision.</p>  |

**Theme 1: Supporting Children in Their Early Years**

This theme focuses on what the strategy will deliver for children. It concentrates on improving ELC experiences through expansion and enhancement of provision, the promotion of high quality ELC environments and targeted support for those facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.

**Outcome**

All children get the developmental support needed in their early years to ensure the best start in life, including those facing disadvantage.

**Objectives**

- 1.1 Provide 22.5 hours pre-school education per week for children in their target preschool year.
- 1.2 Expand services for children facing disadvantage.
- 1.3 Expand developmental provision for children aged 2–3 (in their pre-pre-school year).
- 1.4 Promote high-quality provision across all ELC providers.

**Theme 2: Supporting Families with their Children’s Learning and Childcare Costs**

This theme focuses on what the strategy will do for families and carers. It seeks to make childcare more affordable and ensure better availability and accessibility of support and information, empowering parents to make the best choices for themselves and their family.

**Outcomes**

Families can access more affordable childcare that meets their needs.  
Families are better equipped to understand and support their child’s learning.

**Objectives**

- 2.1 Make childcare more affordable.
- 2.2 Improve the information and support available for families.

**Theme 3: Supporting the Early Years Sector and Workforce**

This theme sets out the vital role of the ELC sector and workforce in delivering change. It focuses on improving sustainability and building capacity, while promoting fair pay and professional recognition.

**Outcomes**

A more stable and sustainable ELC sector with a highly trained and valued workforce.  
More inclusive and accessible early years provision for children with additional needs.

**Objectives**

- 3.1 Build the sustainability and capacity of the ELC sector.
- 3.2 Enhance accessible ELC for children with additional needs.
- 3.3 Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce.

3.5

**Implementation Timeframe and Financial Investment**

85 actions within the draft strategy have been categorised into three groups: those commenced in the past 2 years for which £80m funding has already been provided by the

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|     | <p>Executive (Category 1), those proposed to do next (over the 4-year period April 2026 to March 2030) (Category 2) and those which may take longer to implement (currently scheduled from April 2030 to March 2034) (Category 3). It will require significant additional investment to deliver the proposed actions with an estimated requirement of £500m to deliver those actions programmed for the next four years (April 2026 to March 2030). Costs would be recurring and increase in future years to sustain progress. Additional budget would be required to implement the longer-term proposals.</p> <p>An Implementation Plan for category 2 actions, up to April 2030, will be produced once the consultation on the draft strategy is completed, and a budget has been agreed by the Executive. This will detail the actions which will be taken forward under each objective, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), delivery partners, timescale and estimated costs. A Progress Report will be published by DE and presented to the Executive on an annual basis from the commencement of implementation.</p>  |
| 3.6 | <p><b>New initiatives and commitments</b></p> <p>The strategy aspires to subsidise over 50% of childcare costs for working families by April 2032 as well as provide universal full-time pre-school education, strongly positioning Northern Ireland amongst the leading international models of support. It will also see the introduction of an Early Years Curriculum Framework to promote consistent content and pedagogy across early years and childcare providers and there is a longer-term objective to expand developmental provision to all 2–3-year-olds.</p> <p>Alongside these new initiatives, there are commitments to invest in core services and provide a more stable funding environment for existing early years programmes. There are specific initiatives for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) and a plan to strengthen the childcare workforce, both centre-based provision and home-based childminders.</p>  |
| 3.7 | <p><b>BCC Draft Consultation Response</b></p> <p>The draft response, attached at <b>Appendix 1</b>, welcomes the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and endorses the objectives and actions outlined to deliver more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare.</p> <p><b>Theme 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive of extending funded pre-school places on basis of 22.5 hours per week to support child development outcomes and parental employment. However, the model fails to adequately support parents who work full-time hours, atypical hours, and lone parents and may risk reinforcing gender inequality in the labour market. Furthermore, access to places alone will not ensure uptake; targeted support will be required particularly in disadvantaged communities where families may lack confidence or trust in formal systems.</li> <li>• The action to remove the legislative requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school places is concerning and should be reconsidered. It risks diluting targeted access for those who would benefit from it the most.</li> <li>• Restricting funded provision to one pre-school year misses an opportunity to support labour market participation earlier and maximise the opportunity to keep parents (predominantly women) in work.</li> <li>• Supportive of actions to expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs. The inclusion of child poverty indicators could be considered as part of the assessment of where additional Sure Start provision should be concentrated.</li> </ul> |

- Supportive of actions to extend developmental provision for children aged 2-3 (in their pre-school year) and the prioritisation of children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.
- Supportive of actions to promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers. However, there is a lack of detail on how these proposals will be implemented.
- Consideration should be given to capital funding to enable the physical expansion of Irish Medium and Pre-School infrastructure to meet growing demand of children and families who use Irish as their first language.
- BCC's Irish Medium Employment Academies are ideally placed to meet the rapid growth of the Irish Medium education sector.

## **Theme 2**

- The actions to make childcare more affordable are welcomed however the proposed subsidy scheme could be further enhanced with planned increases introduced earlier.
- Reducing childcare costs is fundamental to inclusive economic growth, particularly for women and lone parents' labour market participation.
- While the proposed policy identifies average daily childcare fees and trends over time, it does not explore regional cost variations and demand levels. The Belfast average monthly childcare cost is 28% higher than the NI median of £225.
- Focus on enhancing information provision to families is to be welcomed. The needs of those who may face additional barriers should be considered when designing systems and digital platforms to ensure inclusion and accessibility.

## **Theme 3**

- Actions to build the sustainability and capacity of the ELC sector are strongly supported and will be critical to delivering the wider ambitions of the strategy. Over the last eight years Belfast City Council have successfully delivered several employment academies and upskilling in relation to childcare including, classroom assistants, SEN, Irish Medium, Deaf people and people with hearing loss and welcome opportunities to further invest in this area.
- Actions to enhance accessible early learning and childcare for children with additional needs are to be welcomed. However, there is no specific reference to deaf children or sign language development. Evidence suggests that a deaf child will benefit from sign language learning from an early age.
- Approved Home Childcare should be promoted more widely particularly to families with children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D) and to those who work atypical hours who find it more challenging to find mainstream settings that meet their children's needs.
- The Draft Sign Language Bill for NI has a clause (Clause no 2.2 (b)) for free sign language classes for deaf children and young people. Public authorities who work with families with deaf children and young people will have a statutory duty to provide sign language support and classes. The ELC Strategy would benefit by including this as an additional action. The Bill is expected to become law later this year.
- The actions listed to ensure the workforce are skilled and valued are strongly supported. Offering better pay, free training and a full career pathway from entry level to level 5 would help incentivise childcare as a viable career path and address systemic recruitment and retention issues. Ensuring all staff employed by ELC providers funded by Government are

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|            | paid the Real Living Wage strongly aligns with Belfast City Council's commitment as an employer and procurer and with our Belfast Business Promise Charter.   |
|            | <b>Financial and Resource Implications</b>  |
| 3.8        | There are no direct implications associated with this report.   |
|            | <b>Equality or Good Relations Implications</b>  |
| 3.9        | <p>The implementation of the draft ELC strategy presents a significant opportunity to further promote equality of opportunity and good relations across many Section 75 grounds, and to tackle some of the evident inequalities that continue to persist. While the EQIA appropriately presents the relevant data and highlights some potential impacts, there is opportunity to enhance its value by drawing out potential adverse impacts associated with some actions – specifically that identified in 1.1: proposal to remove the statutory requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school places. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate the means to disaggregate data (both quantitative and qualitative) by Section 75 considerations during implementation.</p> <p>There are no direct implications associated with this report.</p> |
| 3.10       | <p><b>Rural Needs Assessment</b></p> <p>The Rural Needs Assessment acknowledges that rural areas can face unique challenges in accessing ELC services, including limited availability of registered providers, longer travel distances to existing settings, and fewer subsidised places compared to urban centres. These barriers may result in reduced participation in early education, increased reliance on informal or unregistered care, and constrained employment opportunities for parents—particularly women. The strategy seeks to improve access to early learning and childcare (ELC) services in rural areas by addressing the core barriers of accessibility, affordability, and quality.</p> <p>There are no direct implications associated with this report.</p>  |
| 3.11       | <p><b>Child Rights Impact Assessment</b></p> <p>The ELC Strategy is expected to have a broadly positive impact on children and young people's rights, particularly in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Article 6 (right to life, survival and development),</li> <li>• Article 18 (support for working parents),</li> <li>• Article 23 (children with a disability)</li> <li>• Article 27 (adequate standard of living), and</li> <li>• Article 28 (right to education).</li> <li>• Article 31 (leisure, play and culture)</li> </ul> <p>The strategy aims to reduce inequalities by improving access to affordable, high-quality ELC, with targeted support for disadvantaged groups including children from low-income families, those with SEN/D, and newcomer or minority ethnic communities.</p> <p>There are no direct implications associated with this report.</p>                             |
| <b>4.0</b> | <b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>  |
|            | Appendix 1: Belfast City Council Draft Consultation Response  |



## Consultation on the Draft Northern Ireland Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

### Overview

On 27 February 2025 the Northern Ireland Executive agreed the *Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'*.

The PfG includes a commitment to ***“provide more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare opportunities to support children’s development and ease financial pressures for working families. This must complement existing support available through Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare. We also need to ensure that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable”***.

By the end of this mandate, the aim is to ***“have a comprehensive Executive agreed Early Learning and Childcare Strategy in place, delivering improved outcomes for children and parents”***.

This draft Strategy is the Executive’s plan for delivering on that commitment.

Why your views matter

**We encourage you to complete the online survey.**

- We advise that you read the accompanying consultation documents prior to completing the online survey.
- If you have any accessibility needs, please contact the Early Years and Childcare Team at [elc@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:elc@education-ni.gov.uk).
- Your feedback will play a vital role in shaping the final strategy and ensuring it delivers better outcomes for children and families in the coming years.

**Please note this consultation closes on 24 March 2026**

# THEME 1: Supporting children in their early years



## Outcome:

- All children get the developmental support needed in their early years to achieve their full potential, including those facing disadvantage or with additional needs

## Objective 1.1: Provide 22.5 hours per week through the pre-school education programme for children in their target pre-school year.

|  |
|--|
| <b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By March 2026, approve an additional 4,700 full-time (22.5 hours per week) funded pre-school education places with a free school meal for eligible children, meaning that half of all funded preschool education places in all areas across Northern Ireland will be provided on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis by September 2026.</li><li>• Implement a revised funding model for non-statutory pre-school education provision that includes paid release time for planning, administration, training and Early Years Specialist support, full staffing costs and overheads.</li></ul> |
| <b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In September 2026, consult on legislative changes to remove the current statutory admissions criteria prioritising children from socially disadvantaged circumstances when applying for funded pre-school education places.</li><li>• By September 2029, approve 75% funded pre-school places across Northern Ireland on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.</li></ul>  |
| <b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continue to progress Pre-School standardisation, with the aim to provide a funded full-time pre-school education place for all target aged children whose parents want it.</li><li>• Make legislative changes, subject to consultation, to amend the age range for funded statutory pre-school provision, removing the current requirement to enrol children in their penultimate preschool year</li></ul>   |

## Question 1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.1 and its associated actions?

Please select only one item

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 1.1 and its associated actions?

The expansion of funded pre-school provision on the basis of 22.5 hours per week is positive. This should benefit child development outcomes, enhance inclusion and accessibility, and support parental employment. This can be seen to contribute to inclusive growth and poverty reduction (including in-work poverty) by reducing structural barriers faced by low-income families, and particularly women who are acknowledged as being the predominant providers of unpaid care in society. To ensure uptake of places, particularly in disadvantaged communities, families will need access to support to build confidence and trust in formal systems.

Whilst the expansion is welcome, its current structure limits its potential impact on inclusive growth and poverty reduction. This is because the funded provision only operates during school day hours, is typically term time only and is limited to the year immediately before compulsory schooling. This model could go further to adequately support parents who work full-time hours, atypical hours (shift work, healthcare, retail, hospitality) and lone parents. Additionally, this risks reinforcing gender inequality in the labour market as mothers are more likely to have to reduce hours or exit the labour market and this effect is further exacerbated in the case of larger families. Evidence shows that part-time jobs are taken up to a larger degree by women and that the industry sectors where these jobs are found typically offer more unsociable hours, lower pay, less secure employment contracts and less flexibility to manage caring responsibilities alongside work. School holiday periods remain an area of concern for working parents in terms of providing adequate childcare and additionally, for families eligible for free schools meals, feeding their children.

Working parents on lower incomes should receive the same access to funded places and free school meals which can reduce inequalities in the system and ease financial pressure on household budgets. Financial viability is a major determinant for employment decisions and must be addressed to ensure choosing to be in work is a viable and sustainable choice.

Restricting funded provision to one pre-school year misses an opportunity to support labour market participation earlier and maximise the opportunity to keep parents (predominantly women) in work. Exemplary models from other countries include Sweden who offer an approach which better aligns with inclusive growth and gender equality: by typically developing a provision based on 6.30am to 6pm and sometimes at weekends, offering provision earlier (typically from 1 year onwards), offering it to all who want it using a funding model based on household earnings with a cap of 3% of income and support for larger families through a sliding scale of contribution for each subsequent child. Clearly, this type of model has implications regarding restructuring and an increase in financial commitments. However, it may be worth considering these factors in relation to future models.

The action to remove the legislative requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school places is concerning and should be reconsidered. It risks diluting targeted access for those who could benefit from it the most, even within an expanded model and would undermine other actions within the strategy which are focused at children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence consistently shows that early intervention has positive impacts for

children facing socio-economic disadvantage (currently Belfast has 26.9% of children living in relative poverty and 22.5% in absolute poverty, 2024). Child poverty is a major concern and impacts on educational attainment, health and wellbeing, emotional development and a range of other life outcomes. Socially deprived children are often further behind and require additional support. Therefore, the removal of this criteria seems counterintuitive to supporting our most vulnerable children and wider ambitions to tackle poverty.

The Department of Education's Fair Start Strategy & Action Plan identifies supporting children in their early years as a top priority. This is also reflected within the Belfast Agenda, the city's community plan. Research shows that supporting children in their early years, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, improves educational achievement and employment opportunities, reduces behavioural difficulties, and lowers the likelihood of needing extra support services later in life. All of which boosts the economy, reduces the cost on the public purse and crucially improves the individuals quality of life.

It is surprising that this element of the recommendations has not been highlighted within the accompanying EQIA document – this should be given greater prominence in the document prior to any legislative changes, to identify potential adverse impacts against Section 75 groups. The issue of intersectionality must also be considered.

An overall concern about the targets outlined are that, apart from Category 1 actions (ending March 26), the rest are subject to available resources. Funding should be multi-year to provide assurance of commitment to families and the sector and enable the sector to offer secure, well-paid jobs and continued development and planning structure.

## Objective 1.2: Expand services for children facing disadvantage and children with additional needs.

### Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)

- Provide at least 10% funding boost to enable the Sure Start programme to meet rising demand from over 36,200 eligible children and their families.
- Expand the Sure Start programme to bring within scope an additional 22 most disadvantaged Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland on a permanent basis, increasing access to an additional 2,500 children and their families.
- Further expand Sure Start by introducing a new outreach model, enabling access to around 1,800 additional children and families with evidenced need, regardless of geographical location.
- Fund at least 175 Pathway projects and increase the maximum level of awards from £30,000 to £40,000.
- Introduce a new Pathway funding stream to provide targeted support for over 650 childminders and AHCs.
- Provide enhanced funding to stabilise the Toybox project ensuring that service levels meet the needs of over 150 Traveller and Roma families.
- Undertake a scoping study to identify the needs of newcomer children (0–4 years) in Northern Ireland and how they may be supported within an expanded Toybox project.

### Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)

- Continue the category 1 expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) until March 2030 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision.
- Commission a scoping study to report by March 2027 on options for further expansion of the Sure Start programme.
- Subject to the findings of the scoping study, expand the Sure Start programme to meet identified need.
- By March 2028, expand the Toybox project to include support for Newcomer children (0–4 years) and their families.
- In 2027 conduct a feasibility study of the potential to provide special school pre-school provision on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.
- Continue the Category 1 expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) until March 2030 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision.
- Commission a scoping study to report by March 2027 on options for further expansion of the Sure Start programme.
- Subject to the findings of the scoping study, expand the Sure Start programme to meet identified need.

- By March 2028, expand the Toybox project to include support for Newcomer children (0-4 years) and their families.
- In 2027, conduct a feasibility study of the potential to provide special school nursery provision on a full-time (22.5 hours per week) basis.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Continue the expansions of targeted early learning programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) in Categories 1 & 2 until March 2034 to meet increasing service demands, with the provision of annual inflationary uplifts to consolidate the expanded provision.
- Agree protocol for sharing of information on children’s developmental journeys at key transition points, to support forward planning and ensure better continuity of support.

**Question 2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.2 and its associated actions?**

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 1.2 and its associated actions?

The expansion of the aforementioned programmes (Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox) is strongly supported. Targeted interventions at this early stage are well known to be important in ensuring the best outcomes for children and their families and will enhance inclusion and accessibility particularly children facing disadvantage and additional needs.

Category 2 action proposals to carry out a feasibility study into the opportunity to provide full-time special pre-school nursery provision is very positive. However, more robust action to support pre-school children with special educational needs and disabilities is required.

Consideration should be given to a spending review to assess the growth of Sure Start, the demand for its services and its expansion into new Super Output Areas to ensure that a 10% funding boost is sufficient to meet levels of demand.

Improving social mobility is a key inclusive growth objective for Belfast and focusing on those children and families who face greater disadvantage and barriers from an early stage aligns with this objective by working to provide integrated support to reduce the achievement gap. In particular, the elements of including outreach models should enable more targeted support and help to those who may have otherwise not engaged. In addition, support for newcomer, Traveller and Roma families is welcome as again these families have been found to face additional barriers to accessing services and support across society. Trusted support organisations and those with lived experience with knowledge of the specific developmental needs of these groups should be at the heart of the scoping study.

Inclusive growth requires sustained and co-ordinated investment in families and communities where disadvantage is concentrated and the inclusion of child poverty indicators could be considered as part of the assessment of where additional Sure Start provision should be concentrated. In addition, uptake and outcomes should be monitored by different Section 75 groups by all partners involved in design and delivery.

### Objective 1.3: Extend developmental provision for children aged 2-3 (in their pre-school year)

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| <b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide 1,790 2–3-year-olds with access to the Sure Start Developmental Programme in current and expanded geographical areas and through a new Outreach model.</li></ul>  |
| <b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Progressively extend access to developmental support for children aged 2–3, initially prioritising children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs.</li><li>• Develop a holistic approach to child development through integrated family-cantered services which brings together Allied Health Professionals, Speech and Language Therapists, early years practitioners, family support teams, and others to develop a targeted programme for children with emerging additional needs, including support for parents and families.</li></ul> |
| <b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide access to appropriate developmental provision for all children aged 2–3 (in their pre-pre-school year).</li></ul>   |

### Question 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.3 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 1.3 and its associated actions?

Extending developmental provision at 2-3 years is very welcome as evidence reinforces the positive impact of intervention at this age in relation to speech, language, emotional regulation, trauma impacts and socio-economic development and inclusion. Prioritising children facing disadvantage and those with additional needs is welcome for the reasons outlined earlier. Also, the proposed integrated model of support for children and families reflects best practice in maximising resources and positive outcomes.

An area to consider, where appropriate, would be the involvement of parents in the co-design of aspects of these support models. Meaningful community engagement drawing on lived experience alongside professional input can ensure that the children and families who would benefit the most will have the confidence to access and sustain involvement with these services.

#### **Objective 1.4: Promote high-quality provision across all early learning and childcare providers.**

##### **Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)**

- Increase the financial support for the development of the Irish Medium (IM) Pre-school Support Service.
- Promote the value and benefits of play, providing professional training and development services to support best practice and promote inclusivity.
- Promote speech, language and communication development for children in the early years and develop a series of universally accessible bite size videos.
- Support staff within the Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP) settings to engage more effectively with parents to create, sustain and improve positive and nurturing home learning environments.
- Provide the BookTrust Bookstart Baby programme to all babies in their first year.

##### **Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)**

- By March 2028, in consultation with early years experts, design and introduce an integrated Early Years Framework for children aged 0-6 that provides a single continuum for children below compulsory school age as they transition to formal education. The unified framework will be used in all ELC providers and will align with the Foundation Stage of the reformed statutory curriculum. The framework will set out broad expectations for children's development across key domains.

- Promote stronger parent-practitioner partnerships across all education and ELC providers, building on existing Getting Ready to Learn Programme and other relevant initiatives including support for children who are pre-term.
- Strengthen Irish Medium (IM) early years immersion and pedagogy through the roll-out of an IM Pre-School Immersion Education Course, including supporting stronger parent-practitioner partnerships.
- Provide high-quality support services and professional advice to both non-statutory and statutory Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP) providers to develop good practice and support them to meet the needs of all children.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Introduce a regional approach to ensuring timely and equitable access to speech and language support services in the early years.
- Develop a Play Programme and guidance for inclusive early learning and childcare environments, both physical and learning, informed by professionals across Education and Health.

**Question 4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 1.4 and its associated actions?**

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any comments to make on Objective 1.4 and its associated actions?

We welcome and support actions to promote high-quality provision and to strengthen play and inclusion in early learning. We agree with the general direction and recognise that some improvements can happen quickly, while others will take more time and planning. However, some parts of the proposals lack detail to fully understand how they will work in practice. Without clearer plans, there is a risk that they may not lead to consistent or meaningful change.

We welcome the work already underway to:

- Promote the importance of play in children’s learning and well-being.
- Provide training and professional development to support inclusive practice.

These are positive steps. Ongoing training is essential so that staff feel confident and supported in meeting the needs of all children. It will also be helpful to review this training regularly to ensure it remains useful, inclusive, and up to date. While these actions are positive, it is unclear how widely this training will reach staff or how its impact will be measured. More information is needed on how quality improvement and consistency will be ensured.

Regarding actions that may take longer to implement:

We agree that developing a Play Programme and guidance for inclusive early learning environments will take time, and we support a phased approach to this work. Involving staff and professionals from different sectors will help ensure the programme is practical, realistic, and effective. While this is welcome, the consultation fails to outline how this joint working will be coordinated or resourced. It is also unclear what the Play Programme will include and how it will differ from existing guidance. Overall, we support the proposals and the progress already being made. To strengthen the final approach, we suggest:

- Being clear about what the Play Programme will include.
- Ensuring strong collaboration between education, health and other professionals.
- Setting out clear timescales and practical guidance for implementation.

Consideration should be given to capital funding to enable the physical expansion to Irish Medium and Pre-School infrastructure to meet the growing needs of the sector and to enhance the number of places available in a pre-school setting. There is a lack of Irish Medium Childcare and pre-school settings which is having a negative impact on children and families who use Irish as their first language.

GaelChúrsaí have developed an Irish Medium pre-school education module as part of their delivery. Consideration should be given to using Belfast City Council's Irish Medium Employment Academy or the contractor directly to meet the relevant objectives.

The Irish Medium education sector is rapidly growing and there aren't enough trained and qualified people entering the sector to meet demand. To ensure quality there needs to be a scaling of the number of people who are entering the sector who are trained at the appropriate level and trained in immersive education in an Irish Medium learning environment. The Irish Medium Employment Academies are ideally placed to address this need.

Overall, the actions listed are welcome, in particular their focus on providing an integrated early years framework and support and guidance to those working in statutory and non-statutory provision. This should enable the provision of high quality care and services across the sector and help achieve better outcomes for children and their families.

Working to develop the relationship between parents and providers across the sector to better enable parents to translate this into the home environment is also positive. This will require the involvement of trusted support organisations to ensure that parents have the confidence and sector knowledge to have their voices heard. Consideration should be given to strengthening links with newcomer communities to ensure a level playing field for pre-school children and their families by reducing or removing barriers due to language and culture.

## THEME 2: Supporting families with their children's learning and childcare costs



### Outcomes:

- Families can access more affordable childcare that meets their needs
- Families are better equipped to understand and support their child's learning

### Objective 2.1: Make childcare more affordable.

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|--|
| <b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce a bespoke Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) providing a 15% subsidy on childcare costs for eligible working families. When combined with Tax Free Childcare (TFC) this will reduce bills by up to 32%.</li></ul>   |
| <b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increase the NICSS contribution to 20% for all eligible children from April 2026. Combined with TFC this will reduce bills by up to 36%.</li><li>• Subject to satisfactory real time evaluation of the NICSS expansion and analysis of fees, incrementally increase the subsidy up to 30% by April 2030. Combined with TFC this will provide a deduction on childcare bills up to 44%.</li><li>• Introduce fee publication requirements for those providers operating the NICSS, to produce greater transparency on the costs of childcare across all providers and enable increases to be monitored and reported.</li><li>• Annually increase the cap on the maximum subsidy which can be claimed through the NICSS in line with the associated subsidy percentage and inflation.</li><li>• Raise awareness of the full range of financial support available with the costs of childcare, including through NICSS, TFC, Universal Credit (UC) and targeted initiatives for those undergoing education/training.</li></ul> |
| <b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Subject to satisfactory real time evaluation of the NICSS expansion and analysis of fees, increase the subsidy up to 40% by April 2032. Combined with TFC, this will provide a total deduction on childcare bills of up to 52%.</li></ul>  |

- Extend Digital Economy Act (DEA) powers to Northern Ireland and DE to enable sharing of information from TFC to streamline verification requirements for NICSS users.

## Question 5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 2.1 and its associated actions?

Please select only one item

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 2.1 and its associated actions?

The actions listed to make childcare more affordable are to be welcomed and while they can remove key barriers to employment they could be enhanced further. Proposals will be a great support to individuals who are seeking to re-enter the labour market but are unable to due to childcare availability and costs. They should also enable working parents, who meet the criteria, to reduce their childcare bills. Reducing childcare costs is fundamental to inclusive economic growth, particularly for women's labour market participation. As women are primary caregivers this limits their availability to work, accounting for 40% of the gender pay gap and driving in-work poverty in households, especially among lone parent families, 84% of whom are women (Government Equalities Office, 2019).

According to the 2011 Census, in just over half (50.7%) of lone parent households in NI, the parent is not in employment, in 32%, the parent works part-time; and in 16.3%, the parent works full time. Lone parent households are considered at greater risk of economic disadvantage, and affordable childcare is an important consideration to support women and lone parents' participation in employment (BCC Audit of Inequalities, 2021).

While the proposed policy identifies average daily childcare fees and trends over time, it doesn't explore regional cost variations and demand levels. Regional variations in the cost of childcare means that families in the Belfast City Council area (along with Derry City and Strabane) can face average monthly costs of £288, compared to £136 in Causeway Coast and Glens area. The Belfast average monthly childcare cost is 28% higher than the NI median of £225 (<https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/childcare-survey/>).

In addition, research shows that within the UK, concerns persist around the affordability, access and quality of provision, particularly in low income areas. Whilst an action around ensuring the transparency of fees is provided, further work may be necessary to map out the current provision and identify any areas of concern in terms of not only fees but also availability and also to ensure that the benefits provided by the planned increased subsidies are not minimised by any inflationary uplifts/ increased fees by providers.

## Objective 2.2: Improve the information available on childcare.

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| <b>Actions already underway</b> (April 2024 to March 2026)  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Encourage uptake of financial support with the costs of childcare, through a promotional campaign to raise awareness of all government support available.</li><li>• Conduct and publish Northern Ireland Childcare Survey Official Statistics.</li></ul>  |
| <b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources</b> (April 2026 to March 2030)  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide enhanced information to inform parental decisions in pre-school admissions.</li><li>• Establish regular and ongoing sector wide data collection and monitoring to:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• map supply and demand of childcare provision across all geographical areas; and</li><li>• identify sustainability challenges in specific areas.</li></ul></li><li>• Design and implement a regular data collection programme to monitor trends in childcare requirements and labour market decisions.</li></ul> |
| <b>Actions that may take longer to implement</b> (April 2030 to March 2034)   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop a user-friendly digital platform to improve access to information for parents and providers, taking account of existing FSNI platform and the need to integrate with Make the Call and NI Direct.</li><li>• Establish a parental support programme for parents of children age 0–4 with SEN/D.</li><li>• Provide enhanced information to parents on the capacity of registered childcare providers to provide inclusive and accessible provision for children with SEN/D.</li></ul>                                       |

### Question 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 2.2 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 2.2 and its associated actions?

The focus on enhancing information provision to families and encouraging families to avail of the support that is available is to be welcomed and would enhance inclusion and accessibility. Consideration should be given to prioritising these activities and the inclusion of outreach activities to raise awareness beyond a promotional campaign. Lack of information is a major barrier in accessing services and the needs of those who may face additional barriers should be factored in when designing any new provision. For example, those with lower literacy levels or where English is not their first language. In addition, thought could be given to making sure that information is provided through trusted community based services where families may already go to access support and help.

A digital platform is welcome but may exclude those who face digital poverty and should be complemented by face to face advice to ensure accessibility to different groups ie. those with a disability, those with additional language requirements.

Consideration should also be given to ensuring that the data collected in relation to childcare provision and childcare requirements should be disaggregated by communities of interest and place.

## THEME 3: Supporting the early years sector and workforce



### Outcomes:

- A more stable and sustainable ELC sector with a highly trained and valued workforce
- More inclusive and accessible early years provision for children with additional needs

### Objective 3.1: Build the sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector.

#### Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)

- Increase the non-statutory Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP) funding rate to bring it into line with the statutory sector.
- Provide funding support to over 650 childminders/ AHCs to support training and resource needs through the Pathway Fund.
- Train 150 new childminders through Labour Market Partnerships.
- Uplift the level of core funding providing early years sector support.
- Publication of the DfE research study on Childcare Providers Targeted Business Support.

#### Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)

- Establish a Childcare Business Advisory service: DfE will lead the development and delivery of a childcare business advisory service to:
  - Create a service that suits the needs of individual providers
  - Give all childcare providers access to a professional advisor who is equipped to identify those issues inhibiting the provider
  - Record common issues and opportunities within the Sector so that a holistic picture of the wider issues facing the Sector can be best understood, thereby enabling support to be tailored over time
- Develop a Strategic Childcare Accessibility Fund, informed by mapping of supply and demand initially focused on:
  - Areas of disadvantage
  - Provision for children with additional needs
  - Rural provision
  - Social Enterprise provision
  - Families working atypical hours
  - wraparound care within the schools estate

- Establish a PSEP Strategic Support Fund to address short-term pressures in strategically important non-statutory pre-school education settings.
- Amend the current moratorium on Development Proposals (DPs) to facilitate requests for new or additional statutory pre-school provision to be established on a full-time basis.
- Provide annual inflationary uplifts to core Early Years funding.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Ensure access to inclusive, high-quality early learning and childcare environments through increased capital funding, including for children with SEN.
- Continue annual inflationary uplifts to Core Early Years funding.

## Question 7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 3.1 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 3.1 and its associated actions?

The actions to build the sustainability and capacity of the Early Learning and Childcare sector are strongly supported and will be critical to achieving the wider ambitions of the strategy. Ensuring the sustainability of the sector is key in providing workforce stability and in turn ensuring better outcomes for families and children. In addition, training more childcare providers offers an opportunity for employment and upskilling within the sector and an opportunity to further inclusive growth.

Over the last eight years Belfast City Council have successfully delivered a number of employment academies in relation to childcare and upskilling in this sector e.g. Child Care and Play Work Level 3 and Level 5 and would welcome further conversations around this specific initiative. Council's economic development team may be able to positively contribute to the supply of trained individuals through their employment academies.

There are however, systemic issues with the employment terms and conditions within the sector. The combination of a low salary, long working hours and challenging job role make the sector less desirable. If the goal is a trained, high performing workforce staff will need to be paid a professional wage. Currently, new entrants receive the minimum wage which makes this an unappealing sector for many.

There is also an issue with recruitment, a recent workforce survey undertaken by the early years care education and play employers forum noted that regionally 24 percent of respondents (employers) stated they required full time staff. 3 percent also reported requiring part time staff and 20 percent a combination of both. 11 percent require managerial staff. 62.5 percent of those successful at interview are accepting jobs that are offered. These results evidence a major deficit with recruitment with respondents highlighting that they were 'worried about the future due to having to decrease provision

and the potential risk of closure'. Retention of staff is also a major challenge for the sector and jeopardises future sustainable provision. BCC academies are trying to address this issue but it remains challenging to attract staff to the sector. Offering free training and a full career pathway from entry level to level 5 staff is required.

The development of an accessibility fund focused on the areas identified is welcome and may offer the opportunity to offset some concerns outlined in 1.1 of this consultation response in relation to provision in areas of deprivation, support for those working outside core business hours and the gap in provision in relation to term time.

There is an urgent need for Special Educational Needs tailored provision which should be prioritised due to the increasing number of children who are presenting with these issues and require early and sustained support. BCC have delivered Level 3 OCN SEN- Behaviours known to challenge. As the number of children with statements increase, skills and knowledge need to increase with it.

While the proposals are welcome, how do we ensure every child with an additional need will benefit from these services. For example, there is no reference to deaf children or sign language development. Evidence suggests that a deaf child will benefit from sign language learning from an early age. (Deaf children's early sign language access: a guiding values brief, The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Oxford Academic).

The Draft Sign Language Bill for NI has a clause (Clause no 2.2 (b)) for free sign language classes for deaf children and young people. Public authorities who work with families with deaf children and young people will have a statutory duty to provide sign language support and classes. The ELC Strategy would benefit by including this as an additional action. The Bill is expected to become law later this year.

## Objective 3.2: Enhance accessible Early Learning and Childcare for children with additional needs.

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|---|
| <b>Actions already underway (April 2024 to March 2026)</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Extend the reach of the Department of Health (DoH) Fair Play Grant Scheme to approximately 80 settings, supporting nearly 400 children.</li><li>• Launch a pilot scheme for recruitment of Approved Home Childcarers (AHCs).</li><li>• Establish Pre-school Inclusion Fund to support pre-school children with Special Educational Needs/Disability (SEN/D).</li><li>• Fund 72 special schools and early years specialist provisions to purchase resources, training or equipment for the benefit of children in pre-school, Primary 1 and Primary 2 in their settings.</li></ul>   |
| <b>Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Further roll-out of the Pre-School Inclusion Fund to support children who have/may have SEN/D.</li><li>• Combine and enhance the DoH Fair Play Grant Scheme and Bright Start Holiday Grant Scheme for Children with a Disability (to ensure a continuum of support across term time and non-term time for all registered childcare providers, including childminders).</li><li>• Test and trial school-based childcare/after-school provision for children in special schools and specialist provision.</li><li>• Build on the AHC pilot to increase the number and training provided to AHCs, including facilitating a matching service between families and AHCs.</li></ul> |
| <b>Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In conjunction with the review of DoH Minimum Standards, consider the upper age limit which young people with SEN/D can access registered childcare provision.</li></ul>  |

### Question 8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 3.2 and its associated actions?

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 3.2 and its associated actions?

Actions to enhance accessible early learning and childcare for children with additional needs are essential and strongly supported. This is an area that has been lacking for a considerable time, despite growing demand and is central to ensuring inclusion and equality. In particular, providing childcare provision throughout the year and the extension of the Approved Home Childcarers pilot are welcome as they offer a greater degree of choice and flexibility to parents.

Key findings of the report 'Understanding the Childcare Needs of Families with Children who have Disabilities or Additional Needs' (Webb, 2025) found:

- the majority of parents surveyed (90.4 percent) indicated it is not easy for families with children who have disabilities or additional needs to find childcare.
- staff expertise was important to them, with 72 percent of parents ranking staff skills and knowledge as their top priority when considering childcare.
- overall, parents' top three childcare priorities were staff skills and knowledge, cost, and flexibility.
- however, they disagreed that staff have the required specialist knowledge and understanding (66.7 per cent); that childcare was affordable (71.9 percent) and that they can access childcare with flexible hours (71 percent).
- there was a lack of awareness about Approved Home Childcare, however most parents indicated 'yes' (38.1 percent) or 'maybe' (48.2 percent) they would be interested in using it.
- several benefits of the model were identified including flexibility and convenience.

Approved Home Childcare is provision where a registered and trained childcare worker goes to the home of the child. The above study (Webb, 2025) showed that a high percentage of parents interviewed were unaware this was an option. Only 12 percent would not avail of it. This is a preferable option to parents of children with disabilities and SEN because often the barrier is removing the child from the home environment to the childcare placement. Also, this is a very useful option for shift workers whose working hours fall outside mainstream provision.

When considering AHC, parents identified a number of key benefits. Many thought it would suit families who were struggling to find mainstream settings that could meet their children's needs. It could be particularly helpful for children with complex sensory needs, challenging behaviour and anxiety who may feel safer and more relaxed in their home environment. Children's equipment is also at home, for example sensory toys, which is advantageous as they may not be provided by childminders due to expense. Other benefits included parents being able to go straight home from work or other appointments, without having to travel to and from childcare providers.

While the proposals are welcome, as previously noted, how do we ensure every child with an additional need will benefit from these services. For example, there is no reference to deaf children or sign language development. Evidence suggests that a deaf child will benefit from sign language learning from an early age (Deaf children's early sign language access: a guiding values brief, The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Oxford Academic).

The Draft Sign Language Bill for NI has a clause (Clause no 2.2 (b)) for free sign language classes for deaf children and young people. Public authorities who work with families with deaf children and young people will have a statutory duty to provide sign language support and classes. This ELC Strategy would benefit by including this as an additional action. The Bill is expected to become law later this year.

### **Objective 3.3: Enhance the early years infrastructure through a skilled and valued workforce.**

**Actions already underway** (April 2024 to March 2026)

- Provide funding to the Department of Health (DoH) for an additional 900 funded training places, including continued professional development.
- Provide funding to Department for the Economy (DfE) for:
  - development programme for the provision of on-line accredited micro courses by the Further Education Colleges to provide flexible learning opportunities for the childcare sector; and
  - a qualification mapping exercise to identify gaps in terms of management qualifications.

**Actions that will be prioritised next subject to available resources (April 2026 to March 2030)**

- Develop a comprehensive ELC Workforce Plan to support the development of the current workforce and incentivise early learning and childcare as a valued career choice.
- Establish a comprehensive ELC qualification and career framework with pathways for continuing professional development (CPD), including a review of existing qualifications, an accredited ELC programme and enhanced support for staff to move to leadership roles.
- Develop a specific SEN/D CPD framework for education settings and childcare providers.
- Monitor the workforce needs of the ELC sector to ensure opportunities are provided for upskilling and reskilling, removing barriers to training opportunities, including support for sub cover.
- Promote the establishment of a sectoral representative body to support the professionalisation of the childcare sector.
- Require all ELC providers funded by Government, to pay their staff at least the Real Living Wage.
- In conjunction with the ‘Good Jobs’ priority in DfE’s Economic Vision, promote the Real Living Wage with ELC employing organisations.

**Actions that may take longer to implement (April 2030 to March 2034)**

- Strengthen regulation and inspection through collaboration between The Education and Training Expectorate (ETI) and Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs).
- In conjunction with DoH, ensure information gathered through Registration and Inspection within HSC Trusts is accessible through appropriate Data Sharing agreements to support longer term policy developments and operational implementation.
- Consult on proposals for placing ELC provision on a legislative basis.
- Review the staff: child ratio in statutory pre-school provision, considering the impact of other related actions to be introduced by this strategy and SEN/D reform.

**Question 9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Objective 3.3 and its associated actions?**

*Please select only one item*

- Strongly Agree



- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Do you have any other comments to make on Objective 3.3 and its associated actions?

Additional comments

The actions listed to ensure the workforce are skilled and valued are strongly supported. Ensuring all staff employed by ELC providers funded by Government are paid the Real Living Wage strongly aligns with Belfast City Council's commitment as an employer and procurer and with our Belfast Business Promise Charter, encouraging other employers to commit to offering good work and adopting inclusive business practices that support inclusive growth ambitions. We would be keen to identify areas for collaboration.

Belfast currently has 23% of residents paid below the Real Living Wage. However, 40.5% of those in part-time work, of which we know the majority are women, are paid below the RLW. Given that this sector is a large employer for women this commitment is welcome in seeking to narrow the gender pay gap. Also, the opportunity for flexible learning and progression is key to continued skills development, particularly for those with caring responsibilities.

Establishing a ELC qualification and career framework with pathways for continual professional development may support the professionalisation of the sector and staff retention. It is important that any employment and/or training opportunities are considered within ambitions to achieve an inclusive and sustainable economy. Targeted employment pathways and support to minimise barriers should be considered for those who are furthest removed from the labour market.

Better pay conditions and supporting staff within the sector to engage in the CPD process (by affording time off to complete studies) would help to reform the sector, incentivise more people to consider childcare as a viable career path and support staff retention. Quality training is also important, especially to meet the needs of children with disabilities and SEN. The report cited above (Webb, 2025) highlighted that parents would like access to more childminders with the skills and availability to care for children with disabilities or additional needs.

Again, as highlighted earlier, data should be disaggregated by equality considerations both by people and place.

**Question 10 If you have any additional comments relating to the draft strategy, please enter them in the box below:**

**Belfast City Council has been proactively encouraging new entrants to move into the childcare sector for the past 8 years by delivering entry level academies to people wishing to work in the sector. Thereafter, offering a Level 3 and a Level 5 upskilling qualification to promote career progression and retention – further details are provided below.**

**BCC in 2021 developed Classroom Assistant programmes, which support pre-school children and Childminding and Approved Home Childminders Employment Academies in 2024.**

**The Classroom Assistant programmes (for pre-school, primary and secondary/grammar education) include:**

**Entry level, five-day Classroom Assistant Employment Academies (2021) in response to the Covid-19 crisis whereby children were unable to attend school due to the lack of classroom assistant support. This issue was having a detrimental impact on the most vulnerable children with the most complex of needs. Children in Special Education Schools were unable to attend school unless they had the support of a classroom assistant. This staff shortage was not only impacting the disabled children’s education but also their speech and language therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy and much more. These services were delivered on-site during school hours and as children were unable to attend they were further disadvantaged by the staffing crisis. BCC responded to this crisis by developing a basic model that consisted of a five-day, entry-level employment academy for people interested in working as a Classroom Assistant. This pilot supported 15 participants and focused on an introduction to working with children and the education environment. The academy was successful with all 15 participants moving into paid employment within the education sector.**

**Building on this, BCC developed a Level 3 upskilling provision for Classroom Assistants, with the explicit aim of supporting residents into better jobs with improved terms and conditions, enhanced skills, and access to permanent roles.**

**Once established, BCC partnered with Gaelchursaí to deliver both the entry-level and Level 3 provision through Irish Medium, ensuring accessibility for families with Irish as a first language.**

**Working in collaboration with the Educational Inequalities Group and Stranmillis University, BCC developed a Level 3 qualification to upskill the**

permanent classroom assistants. This created a clear progression route for experienced staff and helped strengthen staff retention.

To address the unmet need of children who are Deaf or have a hearing-loss and through engagement with Jordanstown School (the Northern Ireland school for Deaf and Blind pupils), we identified a significant gap in provision. Classroom assistants who were Deaf or had hearing loss were unable to complete the standard Level 3 qualification, as assessment via British Sign Language/Irish Sign Language was not supported due to cost and quality-assurance concerns. In response, BCC designed a bespoke Classroom Assistant Employment and Upskilling Academy for Deaf people and people with hearing loss, delivered through BSL and ISL. Key features include: A five-day employment academy; Completion of the Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (QCF 5329-31) over approximately 12 months; and One-to-one mentoring throughout. Eligibility criteria includes: Fluent in BSL or ISL; Resident in Belfast; and Unemployed or underemployed.

This programme is due to end in June 2026, with 10 participants expected to complete. This is the first programme of its kind in Northern Ireland. BCC also aim to train up to two participants to become Deaf assessors, enabling sustainability and future progression pathways. The cost is approximately £4,000 per participant, a significant investment, but one that has delivered high impact for both participants and pupils, while helping address critical workforce shortages within the Deaf community.

BCC developed a Level 3 OCN qualification in Special Educational Needs for those reluctant to commit initially to the full Level 3 qualification. This six-week course significantly improved confidence and progression, with most participants subsequently moving on to the Level 3 CACHE qualification.

BCC also introduced a sector-specific ESOL bolt-on for newcomers, supporting development of education-specific language. This has markedly improved interview outcomes and successful entry into employment.

In 2025, BCC responded to new EA standards. With the Education Authority's requirement that all classroom assistants hold a minimum Level 3 qualification by June 2026, our original five-day academies are no longer sufficient as standalone provision. A Classroom Assistant Employment and Upskilling Academy has been designed to professionalise both new entrants and the existing workforce.

This enhanced academy includes: Two weeks of online training (via Zoom); Accredited Level 2 Safeguarding; OCN Level 3 SEN qualification; QCF Level 3

**Teaching and Supporting Learning; Training in child development, learning styles, play in education, and classroom management; One-to-one mentoring; Employability support (CVs, interviews, job search); Sector insight; and a minimum of 300 hours of classroom practice.**

**While this model is resource-intensive, BCC believes it offers a sustainable solution that supports a more secure and skilled workforce for schools; creates pathways to better jobs for residents; and improves outcomes and quality of support for children, particularly those with additional needs.**

**The Self-Employment Childminding Academy is a training initiative that aims to provide support and mentoring for people who would like to become a Childminder or an Approved Home Child Carer.**

**The academy will include: an awareness workshop to develop understanding of the Childminding and Approved Home Childcare sector; free mandatory and certified training (Paediatric First Aid, Safeguarding and Health and Safety); one year membership with Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA); support with the childminding registration process; and one-to-one mentoring and business support.**

**Eligibility Criteria includes: over 18; live in Belfast; be able to communicate in English; be unemployed or working fewer than 16 hours per week; and have the right to work in the UK.**

**BCC also offers additional support for people whose first language is: Arabic; Bengali; Ukrainian; Irish; and people who are Deaf or have hearing loss. This additional support includes the provision of all policies and procedures in the participant's native language and the use of an interpreter during the training to make sure that participants fully understand all aspects of the course.**

# Impact Assessments

## Question 11. Do you agree or disagree with the draft Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)?

*Please select only one item*

- Agree
- Disagree

Please add any additional comments in the box below

While the EQIA appropriately presents the relevant data and highlights some potential impacts, there is opportunity to enhance its value by drawing out potential adverse impacts associated with some actions – specifically that identified in 1.1: proposal to remove the statutory requirement to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds when applying for funded pre-school places- this is concerning and should be reconsidered.

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should incorporate the means to disaggregate data (both quantitative and qualitative) by Section 75 considerations during implementation.

## Question 12. Do you agree or disagree with the draft Rural Needs Impact Assessment?

*Please select only one item*

- Agree
- Disagree

Please add any additional comments in the box below

The assessment does recognise geographical access to provision and considers the additional barriers rural families face in accessing early learning and childcare services, including transport, limited provider choice and support options.

**Question 13. Do you agree or disagree with the draft Child Rights Impact Assessment?**

*Please select only one item*

- Agree
- Disagree

Please add any additional comments in the box below

While the Child Rights Impact Assessment recognises the importance of early development and access to services it could more fully consider how these rights are impacted and linked to their families' ability to access and engage with support and the barriers they may face due to poverty, additional needs or trauma.

**Question 14. Are you responding to this consultation as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?** *(Required)*

*Please select only one item*

- Individual  (Go to question 15)
- Organisation  (Go to question 16)

## Respondent details

**Question 15. If you are responding as an individual?**

Name *(Required)*

Click or tap here to enter text.

Email *(Required)*

Click or tap here to enter text.

Are you?

*Please select all that apply*

- A Parent or Guardian
- A Grandparent
- An Early Learning Childcare Practitioner
- Other (please specify):

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Question 16. If you are responding as an individual?**

**Contact Details**

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Organisation name**

Belfast City Council

**Your name**

John Tully

**Your position**

Director City and Organisational Strategy

**Email address**

communityplanning@belfastcity.gov.uk

**Phone number**

028 9032 0202

**Question 17. Which of the following best describes your organisation's sector?** *This will assist us in monitoring the range of users the consultation has reached.*

*Please select only one item*

- Central government
- Local government
- Statutory body (e.g., health, education, transport, housing, etc.)
- Private/Independent sector
- Social/ Academic research
- Charity/ Community/ Voluntary
- Press/ media
- Other

Other please state

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Question 18. If your organisation is a childcare provider, which of the following best describes your provider type?**

*Please select only one item*

- SureStart
- Childminder
- Day Nursery
- Parent & Toddler
- Statutory Nursery School/Unit
- Approved Home Childcare
- Crèche
- Out of School
- Pre-School Playgroup
- Summer Scheme
- Primary School
- Other

Other please state

Click or tap here to enter text.

**Question 19. We may need to clarify some aspects of your response. May we contact you to discuss your response to this consultation?**

*(Required)*

*Please select only one item*

- Yes
- No

**Question 20. Consent**

To support transparency in our decision-making process, all responses to this consultation will be made public (subject to our [Moderation Policy](#) ). This will include the name of the responding organisation (if applicable). However, names of individuals will only be published if you give consent below. Please note that we will not publish your contact details. *(Required)*

*Please select only one item*

- Yes, I consent to my name being published with my response
- No, please remove my name before publishing my response

All responses will be treated in line with the [Department of Education NI Privacy Notice](#). Please be aware that any information provided in response to this consultation could be made publicly available if requested under a Freedom of Information request.



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| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>   |
| 1.1        | To ask the committee to consider a number of requests for funding that have been received.   |
| <b>2.0</b> | <b>Recommendations</b>   |
| 2.1        | <p>The council has received 8 requests for funding, and the Committee is asked to consider the recommendations below for each request:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Glentoran Under 16-Girls travel to USA Cup £x – No Current funding stream so therefore eligible under this fund</li> <li>2) Clarawood Tenants Hall Renovation £122,720 – Not Eligible as falls under separate funding stream</li> <li>3) Whiterock Children’s Centre – additional £50k – Eligible under this fund</li> <li>4) Glór na Móna - £200k for Croí na Carraige – Not Eligible as falls under separate funding stream</li> <li>5) Mid Falls Alleyway Regeneration – £70k - Not Eligible as falls under separate funding stream</li> <li>6) Request from MLA re an individual in relation to representing Team Ireland in international Ice Hockey tournament – Not Eligible as deemed a request from an individual and falls under separate funding stream</li> <li>7) Ligoniel Rec Football Club cost of travel - £2k - No Current funding stream so therefore eligible under this fund</li> <li>8) An Droichead short-term stabilising support £100k - £150k – No Current funding stream so therefore eligible under this fund</li> </ol> |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Main Report</b>   |
| 3.1        | The Chief Executive/Director of Finance has received a number of requests for funding.   |
| 3.2        | Members are reminded that there is no established budget for these requests however, an amount of £315,600 is available in the Discretionary Funding Reserve for this year. The total of the requests is in the region of £550k to £600k.  |
| 3.3        | <p>Members are reminded that the relevant eligibility criteria for the fund is as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the application for the discretionary payment links to one or more of the council’s corporate priorities.</li> <li>2. That there is direct benefit to be obtained to the council or its district or inhabitants.</li> </ol>  |

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|     | <p>3. That the activity or initiative in respect of assistance being sought is being promoted by a person or organisation living or operating or otherwise having a direct connection with the City.</p> <p>4. That the request for a discretionary payment does not relate to an event or initiative which falls within a funding stream established through the remit and statutory power of any other committee of the council (in which case it should be so referred).</p> <p>5. That the request relates to a specific event, activity or initiative as distinct from a request for a contribution to general funds or organisational running costs.</p> <p>6. That the benefit to be obtained will be commensurate with the payment to be made.</p> |
| 3.4 | <p><b>Glentoran Under-16s girls' team</b> are traveling to the USA Cup in Minesota, with the tournament taking place 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> July. This is one of the most prestigious youth competitions in the world, attracting elite teams from across the globe. It is unsure at this stage of the financial ask. Further details of the request are included within Appendix 1</p>  |
| 3.5 | <p>As there is no current funding steam to deal with this request it is eligible to be considered under the Discretionary Fund, however, members will also be aware that £100k was allocated a part of the rates setting process for a new funding stream that would consider this type of request. Due to the timing of this event this could be deferred and referred to that fund as the trip is in the 2026/27 financial year.</p>   |
| 3.6 | <p><b>Clarawood Residents Association</b> are seeking funding of £122,720 to fully refurbish and relaunch Clarawood Tenants Hall as a sustainable, multi-purpose community hub, serving over 500 residents in the Clarawood area. Further details of the request are included within Appendix 2.</p>   |
| 3.7 | <p>Members may be aware that within the East Area Working Group minutes on the agenda today is a request to provide £40k of LIF funding to this project. On that basis, this project falls within the remit of another funding stream established by the council and should be so referred.</p>  |
| 3.8 | <p>Members may recall at is meeting of 21<sup>st</sup> February 2025, the committee agree to provide Discretionary Funding of £500k to <b>Whiterock Child and Family Centre</b> for towards the cost of establishing a modern, purpose-built facility. They are now seeking and additional £50k due to the increase in construction costs. Further details of the request are included in Appendix 3. As this refers to a scheme previously approved under this fund, then members are asked to consider the provision of additional funding.</p>  |

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| 3.9  | <p><b>Glór na Móna</b> are seeking funding of £200k towards the cost of a new Irish Medium youth and community facility, Croí na Carrige. Further details of the request are included in Appendix 4. This project is currently in receipt of £500k under the Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund. On that basis, this project falls within the remit of another funding stream established by the council and should be so referred.</p>   |
| 3.10 | <p><b>St James's Forum</b> are seeking funding of £70k to undertake a major initiative of alley regeneration to transform them into safe and clead additional space throughout the Mid Falls area in collaboration with SEM Children and New Coming families. Further details of the request are included within Appendix 5. Members will be aware the council has been awarded \$1m for alleyway transformation from Bloomberg Philanthropies. On that basis, this project falls within the remit of another funding stream established by the council and should be so referred.</p> |
| 3.11 | <p>A request for funding has been received from the <b>Office of Timothy Gaston MLA</b> seeking support for an individual who is representing Team Ireland in and International Ice Hocket Tournament in Nova Scotia on 26<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026. The original request was sent on 9<sup>th</sup> January, but to an email address that was no longer valid and was only received on 20<sup>th</sup> February. Further details of the request are included in Appendix 6.</p>   |
| 3.12 | <p>The request indicates that the request falls outside of the eligibility [period for funding under the relevant Council grant scheme. On that basis, this project falls within the remit of another funding stream established by the council and should be so referred. Further, within the guidance for discretionary funding, it also indicates that we will not fund requests from individuals, so this request would not be eligible.</p>   |
| 3.13 | <p><b>Ligoniel Rec Football Club</b> are travelling to Barcelona on 7<sup>th</sup> April to take part in the Tarragona Cup 2026 alongside other teams from Ireland, UK and the rest of Europe and are seeking funding of £2k to assist with transport costs to and from Dublin Airport. Further details of the request are included within Appendix 7.</p>   |
| 3.14 | <p>As there is no current funding steam to deal with this request it is eligible to be considered under the Discretionary Fund, however, members will also be aware that £100k was allocated a part of the rates setting process for a new funding stream that would consider this type of request. However, due to the timing of this event it would be more appropriate to deal with the request under the discretionary fund.</p>   |

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| 3.15   | <p><b>An Droichead</b> has requested funding of £100k to £150k is seeking short-term stabilising support of approximately £100,000–£150,000 to bridge a temporary cashflow gap and allow the organisation to implement its financial recovery plan. This request represents a short-term stabilising intervention rather than ongoing support. Further details of the request are included within Appendix 8a and 8b. As there is no current funding steam to deal with this request it is eligible to be considered under the Discretionary Fund.</p> |
| 3.16   | <p>The Committee is asked to consider the requests and recommendations as set out above. If accepted funding would only be provided on the basis that appropriate due diligence is carried out.</p>  |
| <p><b>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</b></p>  |  |
| 3.17   | <p><b><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></b></p> <p>The requests fall under the Council’s discretionary expenditure policy and would be funded from the existing reserve.</p>  |
| <p><b>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</b></p>   |  |
| <p>None.</p>   |  |
| <b>4.0</b>   | <p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>  |
| <p>Appendix 1 – Glentoran Womens U16s<br/> Appendix 2 – Clarawood Tenants Hall<br/> Appendix 3 – Whiterock Childrens Centre<br/> Appendix 4 – Glór na Móna<br/> Appendix 5 – Mid Falls Alleyway Regeneration<br/> Appendix 6 – Ice Hockey Tournament<br/> Appendix 7 – Ligoniel Rec<br/> Appendix 8a and 8b – An Droichead</p> |  |

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| <b>Subject:</b>           | CIPFA Prudential Code Capital Strategy and Treasury Management Indicators 2026/27 |
| <b>Date:</b>              | 20 March 2026   |
| <b>Reporting Officer:</b> | Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance   |
| <b>Contact Officer:</b>   | Helen Lyons, Corporate Finance Manager  |

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| <b>Restricted Reports</b>  |  |
| <b>Is this report restricted?</b>  | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>  |
| <p><b>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b></p> <p>Insert number <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Information relating to any individual</li> <li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li> <li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li> <li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li> <li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li> <li>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</li> <li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li> </ol> |  |
| <b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b>   |  |
| <b>After Committee Decision</b><br><b>After Council Decision</b><br><b>Sometime in the future</b><br><b>Never</b>  | <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="checkbox"/><br><input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="checkbox"/><br><input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="checkbox"/><br><input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="checkbox"/> |

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| <b>Call-in</b>                               |   |
| <b>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</b> | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> |

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| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report</b>   |
| 1.1        | The Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 and the supporting Prudential and Treasury Codes produced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), require the Council to consider the affordability and sustainability of capital expenditure decisions through the reporting of prudential and treasury management indicators.   |
| 1.2        | The Prudential Code requires the Council to produce a Capital Strategy for 2026/27. This report provides information for Members on the Capital Strategy, incorporating the prudential indicators for Belfast City Council for the period 2026/27 to 2028/29, and the Council's Treasury Management Strategy for 2026/27.  |
| <b>2.0</b> | <b>Recommendations</b>   |
| 2.1        | <p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>note the contents of this report and the prudential and treasury management indicators included within the appendices to the report.</li> </ul> <p>And agree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Authorised Borrowing Limit for the Council of £128m for 2026/27.</li> <li>The Treasury Management Strategy for 2026/27, which has been included as Appendix B to this report.</li> </ul> |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Main report</b>   |
| 3.1        | The Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 requires the Council to adopt the CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities. In doing so, the Council is required to agree a minimum revenue provision policy annually and to set and monitor a series of Prudential Indicators, the key objectives of which are to ensure that, within a clear framework, the capital investment plans of the council are affordable, prudent and sustainable.                |
| 3.2        | A Treasury Management Strategy is presented to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on an annual basis and that is supported by quarterly and year end treasury management reports.  |
| 3.3        | The Capital Strategy, incorporating the prudential indicators, is included as Appendix A, while the Treasury Management Strategy and treasury management indicators have been included as Appendix B.  |
| 3.4        | The comparison of "Gross Debt" to "Capital Financing Requirement (CFR) is the main indicator of prudence when considering the proposed capital investment plans of the Council. Estimated gross debt should not exceed the CFR for the current year plus two years. The  |

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|            | <p>Council's estimated gross debt position, illustrated in Table 6, Appendix A, is comfortably within the CFR in the medium term. The Director of Finance therefore considers the estimated levels of gross debt as being prudent.</p>   |
| 3.5        | <p>Table 10 (Appendix A) shows the estimated financing costs for capital expenditure as a percentage of the estimated net revenue stream for the Council, based on the medium term. These illustrate that in the medium term, capital financing costs will represent an average of 5.19% of the Council's net running costs. On this basis the Director of Finance is satisfied that the level of capital expenditure is affordable.</p> |
| 3.6        | <p>The Finance Act requires the Council to set an affordable borrowing limit, relating to gross debt. The Prudential Code defines the affordable limit as the "Authorised Borrowing Limit" and gross borrowing must not exceed this limit. Table 8 (Appendix A) sets out the recommended "Authorised Borrowing Limit" for the Council as being £128m for 2026/27.</p>  |
|            | <p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p>  |
| 3.7        | <p>As detailed in the report</p>   |
|            | <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications</u></p>  |
| 3.8        | <p>None</p>  |
| <b>4.0</b> | <p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>  |
|            | <p>Appendix A – Capital Strategy Report 2026/27</p> <p>Appendix B – Annual Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27</p>  |

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# Capital Strategy Report 2026/27

## 1. Introduction

This capital strategy report gives a high-level overview of how capital expenditure, capital financing and treasury management activity contribute to the provision of local public services along with an overview of how associated risk is managed and the implications for future financial sustainability.

## 2. Capital Expenditure and Financing

Capital expenditure is where the Council spends money on assets, such as property or vehicles, which will be used for more than one year. In local government this includes spending on assets owned by other bodies, and loans and grants to other bodies enabling them to buy assets.

In 2026/27, the Council is planning capital expenditure of £52m as summarised below:

*Table 1: Prudential Indicator: Estimates of Capital Expenditure in £thousands*

|                       | <b>2025/26<br/>forecast</b> | <b>2026/27<br/>budget</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>budget</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>budget</b> |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| General Fund services | 25,852                      | 52,478                    | 42,516                    | 36,176                    |

The capital expenditure forecast for 2026/27 continues to be monitored and reviewed, in terms of both project delivery and affordability. The Council is currently working on a long term capital expenditure forecast and will update the above table when this becomes available.

**Governance** – The Council’s Capital Programme is agreed by the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee in its role as the Council’s investment decision maker. All capital projects must go through a 3-stage approval process and decisions on which projects are added to the Capital Programme and which projects progress are also taken by SP&R Committee. This provides assurance as to the level of financial control and allows Members to properly consider the opportunity costs of approving capital projects. The Property & Projects Department and Financial Services calculate the financing cost of all proposals, including emerging proposals. As part of the final investment decision it must be confirmed that any project is within the affordability limits of the Council.

All capital expenditure must be financed, either from external sources (government grants and other contributions), the Council’s own resources (revenue, reserves and capital receipts) or debt (borrowing and leasing). The planned financing of the above expenditure is as follows:

Table 2: Capital financing in £thousands

|                  | <b>2025/26<br/>forecast</b> | <b>2026/27<br/>budget</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>budget</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>budget</b> |
|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| External sources | 0                           | 0                         | 0                         | 0                         |
| Own resources    | 21,031                      | 29,082                    | 18,050                    | 15,128                    |
| Debt             | 4,821                       | 23,396                    | 24,466                    | 21,048                    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>     | <b>25,852</b>               | <b>52,478</b>             | <b>42,516</b>             | <b>36,176</b>             |

Debt is only a temporary source of finance, since loans and leases must be repaid, usually from revenue which is known as minimum revenue provision (MRP). Alternatively, proceeds from selling capital assets (known as capital receipts) may be used to replace debt finance. Planned MRP is as follows:

Table 3: Repayment of debt finance in £thousands (MRP)

|               | <b>2025/26<br/>forecast</b> | <b>2026/27<br/>budget</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>budget</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>budget</b> |
|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Own resources | 9,306                       | 9,280                     | 10,387                    | 11,078                    |

The Council's cumulative outstanding amount of debt finance is measured by the capital financing requirement (CFR). This increases with new debt-financed capital expenditure and reduces with MRP and capital receipts used to repay debt. The CFR is expected to increase by £14.1m during 2026/27. Based on the above figures for expenditure and financing, the Council's estimated CFR is as follows:

Table 4: Prudential Indicator: Estimates of Capital Financing Requirement in £thousands

|                       | <b>31.3.2026<br/>forecast</b> | <b>31.3.2027<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2028<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2029<br/>budget</b> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| General Fund services | 114,028                       | 128,144                     | 142,222                     | 152,192                     |

**Asset Management** – The Council is committed to ensuring that all Capital projects contribute to the strategic direction of the city and continue to be of long term use. The Council is currently in the process of looking at its Asset Management Strategy and is implementing a new Asset Management System to support the strategic objectives of better financial management, information management, planning and performance and asset management

**Asset disposals:** When a capital asset is no longer needed, it may be sold so that the proceeds, known as capital receipts, can be spent on new assets or to repay debt. Repayments of capital grants, loans and investments also generate capital receipts. The Council plans to receive £0.6m of capital receipts in the coming financial year as follows:

Table 5: Capital receipts in £thousands

|              | <b>2025/26<br/>forecast</b> | <b>2026/27<br/>budget</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>budget</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>budget</b> |
|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Asset sales  | £91                         | £620                      | £4,300                    | £1,900                    |
| Loans repaid | 0                           | 0                         | 0                         | 0                         |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>£91</b>                  | <b>£620</b>               | <b>£4,300</b>             | <b>£1,900</b>             |

### 3. Treasury Management

Treasury management is concerned with keeping sufficient but not excessive cash available to meet the Council's spending needs, while managing the risks involved. Surplus cash is invested until required, while a shortage of cash will be met by borrowing, to avoid excessive credit balances or overdrafts in the bank current account. The Council is typically cash rich in the short-term as revenue income is received before it is spent, but cash poor in the long-term as capital expenditure is incurred before being financed. The revenue cash surpluses are offset against capital cash shortfalls to reduce overall borrowing.

The Council currently has £28m borrowing, the weighted average interest rate of these loans is 2.19%. The council is projecting a £49m treasury investment balance at 31 March 2026, at current average rate of 3.7%. The investments balance is high due to timing of monies being paid to the Council and this monies being paid out again.

**Borrowing strategy:** The Council's main objectives when borrowing are to achieve a low but certain cost of finance while retaining flexibility should plans change in future. These objectives are often conflicting, and the Council therefore seeks to strike a balance between short-term loans (currently available at around 4.96%) and long-term fixed rate loans where the future cost is known (currently over 5.69%).

Projected levels of the Council's total outstanding debt (which comprises borrowing, leases and transfers from local government reorganisation) are shown below, compared with the capital financing requirement (see above).

Table 6: Prudential Indicator: Gross Debt and the Capital Financing Requirement in £thousands

|                               | <b>31.3.2026<br/>forecast</b> | <b>31.3.2027<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2028<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2029<br/>budget</b> |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Debt (incl. PFI & leases)     | 28,633                        | 24,035                      | 34,097                      | 48,069                      |
| Capital Financing Requirement | 114,028                       | 128,144                     | 142,222                     | 152,192                     |

Statutory guidance is that debt should remain below the capital financing requirement, as can be seen from table 6.

**Liability benchmark:** To compare the Council's actual borrowing against an alternative strategy, a liability benchmark has been calculated showing the lowest risk level of borrowing. This assumes that cash and investment balances are kept to a minimum level of £10m at each year-end. This benchmark is currently £10m and is forecast to rise to £47m over the next three years.

*Table 7: Prudential Indicator: Borrowing and the liability benchmark £thousands*

|                     | <b>31.3.2026<br/>forecast</b> | <b>31.3.2027<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2028<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2029<br/>budget</b> |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Forecast borrowing  | 28,633                        | 24,035                      | 34,097                      | 48,069                      |
| Liability Benchmark | 10,028                        | 20,144                      | 34,222                      | 47,192                      |

The table shows that the Council's borrowing is currently above its liability benchmark. The Council is projecting to borrow over the next few years to meet capital expenditure requirements. This external borrowing is currently projected to be in line with the estimated liability benchmark over the next three years, based on current forecasts. Work is progressing on the long term capital expenditure forecasts and when finalised the budget figures in the above table will be reviewed and amended accordingly.

**Affordable borrowing limit:** The Council is legally obliged to set an affordable borrowing limit (also termed the authorised limit for external debt) each year and to keep it under review. In line with statutory guidance, a lower "operational boundary" is also set as a warning level should debt approach the limit.

*Table 8: Prudential Indicators: Authorised limit and operational boundary for external debt in £thousands*

|  | <b>2026/27<br/>limit</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>limit</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>limit</b> |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Authorised limit – borrowing               | 128,144                  | 142,222                  | 152,192                  |
| Authorised limit – PFI and leases          | 0                        | 0                        | 0                        |
| Authorised limit – total external debt     | 128,144                  | 142,222                  | 152,192                  |
| Operational boundary – borrowing           | 112,144                  | 126,222                  | 136,192                  |
| Operational boundary – PFI and leases      | 0                        | 0                        | 0                        |
| Operational boundary – total external debt | 112,144                  | 126,222                  | 136,192                  |

**Investment strategy:** Treasury investments arise from receiving cash before it is paid out again. Investments made for service reasons or for pure financial gain are not generally considered to be part of treasury management.

The Council's policy on treasury investments is to prioritise security and liquidity over yield, that is to focus on minimising risk rather than maximising returns. Cash that is likely to be spent in the near term is invested securely, for example with the government, other local authorities or selected high-quality banks, to minimise the risk of loss. Both near-term and longer-term investments may be held in pooled funds, where an external fund manager makes decisions on which particular investments to buy and the Council may request its money back at short notice.

*Table 9: Treasury management investments in £thousands*

|                         | <b>31.3.2026<br/>forecast</b> | <b>31.3.2027<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2028<br/>budget</b> | <b>31.3.2029<br/>budget</b> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Near-term investments   | 29,000*                       | 14,000                      | 10,000                      | 11,000                      |
| Longer-term investments | 0                             | 0                           | 0                           | 0                           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>            | <b>29,000</b>                 | <b>14,000</b>               | <b>10,000</b>               | <b>11,000</b>               |

\*This balance excludes monies that the Council has received and is due to be paid out again in the short term

**Governance:** Decisions on treasury management investment and borrowing are made daily and are therefore delegated to the Director of Finance and staff, who must act in line with the treasury management strategy approved by Strategic Policy and Resources Committee (SP&R). Quarterly reports on treasury management activity may be presented to SP&R, where this committee is responsible for scrutinising treasury management decisions.

### **Liabilities**

In addition to debt of £28m detailed above, the Council is making payments to cover its pension fund liability. It has also set aside over £5m to cover risks of insurance claims and Landfill Closure. The Council is also at risk of having to pay for its share of the ARC 21 Joint Committee contingent liability but has not put aside any money.

**Governance:** Decisions on incurring new discretionary liabilities are taken by departmental Chief Officers in consultation with the Director of Finance. The risk of liabilities crystallising and requiring payment is monitored by central finance and reported quarterly to the Director of Finance. New liabilities exceeding £1m are reported to Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for approval/notification as appropriate.

## **4. Revenue Budget Implications**

Although capital expenditure is not charged directly to the revenue budget, interest payable on loans and MRP are charged to revenue. The net annual charge is known

as financing costs; this is compared to the net revenue stream i.e. the amount funded from the District Rate and general government grants.

*Table 10: Prudential Indicator: Proportion of financing costs to net revenue stream*

|                                  | <b>2025/26<br/>forecast</b> | <b>2026/27<br/>budget</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>budget</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>budget</b> |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Financing costs (£'000)          | 10,004                      | 9,978                     | 11,929                    | 13,742                    |
| Proportion of net revenue stream | 4.55%                       | 4.53%                     | 5.42%                     | 6.24%                     |

**Sustainability:** Due to the very long-term nature of capital expenditure and financing, the revenue budget implications of expenditure incurred in the next few years may extend for up to 50 years into the future. The Director of Finance is satisfied that the proposed capital programme is prudent, affordable and sustainable due to the processes in place to scrutinise any plans coming forward and are designed to highlight not only the ongoing financing costs but also the recurring running costs to ensure they remain within the affordability limits identified and agreed by the Council.

## **5. Knowledge and Skills**

The Council employs professionally qualified and experienced staff in senior positions with responsibility for making capital expenditure, borrowing and investment decisions. For example, the Director of Finance is a qualified accountant with over 25 years' experience. The Council pays for junior staff to study towards relevant professional qualifications including CIPFA, ACT (treasury), ACCA, etc.

Where Council staff do not have the knowledge and skills required, use is made of external advisers and consultants that are specialists in their field. The Council currently employs Arlingclose Limited as treasury management advisers. This approach is more cost effective than employing such staff directly, and ensures that the Council has access to knowledge and skills commensurate with its risk appetite.

# Annual Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27

## 1. Introduction

Treasury management is the management of the Council's cash flows, borrowing and investments, and the associated risks. The Council has borrowed and invested substantial sums of money and is therefore exposed to financial risks including the loss of invested funds and the revenue effect of changing interest rates. The successful identification, monitoring and control of financial risk are therefore central to the Council's prudent financial management.

Treasury risk management at the Council is conducted within the framework of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's *Treasury Management in the Public Services: Code of Practice 2021 Edition* (the CIPFA Code) which requires the Council to approve a treasury management strategy before the start of each financial year. In addition, the former Department of the Environment (DoE) issued Guidance on Local Authority Investments in October 2011 that requires the Council to approve an investment strategy before the start of each financial year. This report fulfils the Council's legal obligation under the *Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011* to have regard to both the CIPFA Code and the DoE Guidance.

This strategy covers the following issues in respect of 2026/27:

- Outlook for interest rates
- Capital Financing Plans
- Establishing the Borrowing Requirement
- Borrowing strategy
- Debt rescheduling
- Investments
- Treasury Management Indicators

## 2. Outlook for Interest Rates

The most significant impacts on the Council's treasury management strategy for 2026/27 are expected to include: the influence of the government's 2025 Autumn Budget, lower short-term interest rates alongside higher medium- and longer-term rates, slower economic growth, together with ongoing uncertainties around the global economy, stock market sentiment, and geopolitical issues in the Middle East. The recent US strikes on Iran have prompted an immediate repricing across energy markets and a modest risk adjustment in UK financial assets as economists continue to assess what the outlook could be for UK monetary policy

The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) cut the Bank Rate to 3.75% in December 2025, as expected. This rate was maintained by MPC on 4 February 2026. The financial market response indicates that further reductions in Bank Rate are still considered likely, but the extent of cuts has been broadly reduced from two to one and this has been pushed later into 2026.

### 3. Capital Financing Plans

It is essential that the level of borrowing is considered within the context of the Council's capital expenditure and plans, as is required by the CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Finance.

The Council holds £28m of borrowing and is projected to hold £49m of treasury investments. The investments balance is high due to timing of monies being paid to Council and this monies being paid out again.

Forecast changes in these sums are shown in the balance sheet analysis in table 1, with the Council planning to increase borrowings over the next three years.

*Table 1: Balance sheet summary and forecast*

|                                      | <b>2025/26<br/>£'000<br/>Estimate</b> | <b>2026/27<br/>£'000<br/>Forecast</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>£'000<br/>Forecast</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>£'000<br/>Forecast</b> |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Capital financing requirement (CFR)  | 114,028                               | 128,144                               | 142,222                               | 152,192                               |
| Less: External Borrowing             | 28,633                                | 24,035                                | 34,097                                | 48,069                                |
| Internal Borrowing                   | 85,395                                | 104,109                               | 108,125                               | 104,123                               |
| Less: Balance Sheet Resources        | 114,000                               | 118,000                               | 118,000                               | 115,000                               |
| Treasury Investments (new borrowing) | 28,605                                | 13,891                                | 9,875                                 | 10,877                                |

The underlying need to borrow for capital purposes is measured by the Capital Financing Requirement (CFR), while usable reserves and working capital are the underlying resources available for investment. The Council's current strategy is to maintain borrowing and investments below their underlying levels, sometimes known as internal borrowing.

The Council has an increasing CFR and given current investments levels, the borrowing requirement is under review. The Council's long term capital expenditure forecasts are currently being developed which may change the above forecasts.

CIPFA's *Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities* recommends that the Council's total debt should be lower than its highest forecast CFR over the next three years. Table 1 shows that the Council expects to comply with this recommendation during 2026/27.

Liability benchmark: To compare the Council's actual borrowing against an alternative strategy, a liability benchmark has been calculated showing the lowest risk level of borrowing. This assumes the same forecasts as table 1 above, but that cash and investment balances are kept to a minimum level of £10m at each year-end to maintain sufficient liquidity but minimise credit risk.

Table 2: Liability Benchmark

|                                     | <b>2025/26<br/>£'000<br/>Estimate</b> | <b>2026/27<br/>£'000<br/>Forecast</b> | <b>2027/28<br/>£'000<br/>Forecast</b> | <b>2028/29<br/>£'000<br/>Forecast</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Capital financing requirement (CFR) | 114,028                               | 128,144                               | 142,222                               | 152,192                               |
| Less: Balance Sheet Resources       | 114,000                               | 118,000                               | 118,000                               | 115,000                               |
| Net loans requirement               | 28                                    | 10,144                                | 24,222                                | 37,192                                |
| Plus: Liquidity allowance           | 10,000                                | 10,000                                | 10,000                                | 10,000                                |
| Liability Benchmark                 | 10,028                                | 20,144                                | 34,222                                | 47,192                                |

The Liability Benchmark is effectively the Net Borrowing Requirement of a Council plus a liquidity allowance.

CIPFA recommends that the optimum position for external borrowing should be at the level of the Liability Benchmark (i.e., all balance sheet resources should be used to maximise internal borrowing). If the outputs show future periods where external loans are less than the Liability Benchmark, then this indicates a borrowing requirement thus identifying where the Council is exposed to interest rate, liquidity and refinancing risks. Conversely where external loans exceed the Liability Benchmark then this will highlight an overborrowed position which will result in excess cash in the organisation requiring investment thus exposing the Council to credit and reinvestment risks and a potential cost of carry. The Council's external debt is currently higher than the liability benchmark, however this will change over the coming years as the Council incurs borrowing to finance longer term capital forecasts.

#### **4. Establishing the Borrowing Requirement**

The starting point for ascertaining the appropriate level of borrowing is the Capital Financing Requirement (CFR). The CFR is derived from the Balance Sheet and represents the Council's underlying need to borrow for a capital purpose, as it takes account of all capital expenditure incurred which is resourced from borrowing.

However, in addition to the debt position created by historic capital expenditure met from borrowing, the Council also has significant values of reserves, provisions and balances supported by cash, which reduce the net indebtedness of the Council. These positive cash flows allow the Council to consider utilising this cash to support capital expenditure in lieu of external borrowing.

If external borrowing is higher than the CFR, this indicates borrowing in advance of immediate need (permitted within the Prudential Code) and borrowing below CFR would indicate internal borrowing (i.e. the level of cash used in lieu of external borrowing)

The relatively high levels of reserves and balances on the Council's balance sheet have therefore enabled the Council to benefit from not having to borrow externally to

the full extent of the underlying need. However, this position cannot continue into perpetuity and long term capital forecasts will determine need to borrow.

The Council currently holds £28 million of loans, a decrease of £5 million on the previous year. The balance sheet forecast in table 1 shows that the Council does not expect to have any additional borrowing in 2026/27.

## **5. Borrowing Strategy**

In terms of meeting the external borrowing requirement identified above, one of the most important considerations is the timing, in terms of the potential to save significant interest costs and it is key that this position is proactively managed using all information available to inform decisions. It is essential therefore that the considerations of timing of borrowing form a key element of the borrowing strategy.

It is of course not possible for all borrowing to be undertaken at the lowest rates of interest available, as unforeseen events can significantly alter the path of rates. It is therefore essential that the risks to adverse movements are fully understood and actively managed. One of the key borrowing objectives is to strike an appropriately low risk balance between securing low interest costs and achieving certainty of those costs over the period for which funds are required.

Given the significant cuts to public expenditure and in particular to local government funding, the Council's borrowing strategy continues to address the key issue of affordability without compromising the longer-term stability of the debt portfolio. Short-term interest rates may fall in the near term and it is therefore likely to be more cost effective over the medium-term to either use internal resources, or to borrow short-term loans instead. The risks of this approach will be managed by keeping the Council's interest rate exposure within the limit set in the treasury management prudential indicators, see below.

By doing so, the Council is able to reduce net borrowing costs (despite foregone investment income) and reduce overall treasury risk. The benefits of internal / short-term borrowing will be monitored regularly against the potential for incurring additional costs by deferring borrowing into future years when long-term borrowing rates are forecast to rise modestly. Arlingclose will assist the Council with this 'cost of carry' and breakeven analysis. Its output may determine whether the Council borrows additional sums at long-term fixed rates in 2027/28 with a view to keeping future interest costs low, even if this causes additional cost in the short-term.

It is recognised that whilst the capital expenditure and financing plans will be a driver of borrowing costs, the management of risk is the prime objective of the borrowing strategy and reduction of interest rate risk and refinancing risk within the portfolio is essential.

The Council has previously raised the majority of its long-term borrowing from the Government Loans Fund via Department of Finance. The Council may look to borrow any long-term loans from other sources such as banks, pensions and local authorities and may utilise money market brokers to facilitate borrowing from other local authorities for short to medium term borrowing.

## 6. Debt Rescheduling

The prime objective of any restructuring is to reduce risk in the portfolio, whether that be interest rate or refinancing risk. Any savings that may be created as a result will be considered in the context of the overall risk profile.

Debt restructuring opportunities will be kept under constant review.

## 7. Investments

### Annual Investment Strategy

The Council has regard to the CIPFA Code and Guidance for Local Government Investments for District Councils in Northern Ireland (the Guidance) as cited under Section 25(1) of the Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the Act) when setting the Investment Strategy. The Department recommends that each local authority produce and publish an Annual Investment Strategy, approved by the Council and revised in year as required. This sets out the Council's policies for managing investments and for giving priority to the security and liquidity of those investments. This investment strategy states which instruments the Council may use for investment purposes, making a distinction between specified and non-specified investments. This strategy also determines limits in respect of their overall levels.

The prime objective of the Council's investment strategy is to ensure prudent investment of surplus funds. The Council's investment priorities are the security of capital, liquidity of investments and, within those objectives, to secure optimum performance.

All investments will be made in accordance with the Council's investment policies and prevailing legislation and regulations.

### 7.1 Specified Investments

An investment is a **specified investment** if:

- The investment is denominated in Sterling and all payments or repayments are payable only in Sterling,
- The investment is not a long term investment (i.e. due to be repaid within 12 months of the date in which it was made or one which the Council may require to be repaid within that period),
- The making of the investment is not defined as capital expenditure by virtue of regulation 12 of the Local Government (Capital Finance and Accounting) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2011; and
- The investment is made with a body which has been awarded a high credit rating, or is made with one of the following:
  - a) The United Kingdom Government;
  - b) A District Council;
  - c) A Local Authority in England and Wales or a similar body in Scotland;

The following categories of investments may be used under the definition of specified investments:

- Short term cash deposits
- Call accounts
- Certificates of Deposit (with maturity dates < 1 year)
- UK Government Gilts
- Treasury Bills
- Money Market Funds

The Council considers a high credit rating for money market funds to be those with a long term Fitch Rating of AAA (or the equivalent highest rating from Standard and Poors or Moodys).

The Council will have regard to all 3 rating agencies and considers a high credit rating for other investments to be as follows:

| <b>Fitch Credit Rating</b> | <b>Minimum level</b> |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Short Term Rating          | F1                   |
| Long Term Rating           | A                    |

Fitch defines these ratings as follows:

**A: High credit quality.**

'A' ratings denote expectations of low default risk. The capacity for payment of financial commitments is considered strong. This capacity may, nevertheless, be more vulnerable to adverse business or economic conditions than is the case for higher ratings.

**F1: Highest short-term credit quality.**

Indicates the strongest intrinsic capacity for timely payment of financial commitments

## 7.2 **Non-specified Investments**

In respect of **non-specified investments**. The following instruments have been identified by the Council.

| <b>Category of Non-specified investment</b>                                   |
|---|
| Sterling denominated Foreign Government Securities                            |
| Sterling medium term Deposits or Certificates of Deposit                      |
| Floating rate Certificates of Deposit   |
| Highly rated Corporate Bonds (including investments in a Corporate Bond Fund) |
| Sterling Reserve Funds  |
| Index-linked structured deposits  |
| Collateralised deposits   |
| Foreign Currency denominated investments                                      |
| Deposits with non-rated Building Societies                                    |

The Council do not intend on making any investments in the 2026/27 year which meet the definition of non-specified investments and therefore there is no limit set on this within the Investment Strategy.

The CIPFA Code of Practice recommends that the Investment Strategy sets out the maximum period over which investments will be made.

The Director of Finance recommends that a maximum duration of 2 years should be set, although it is only expected that investments over 12 months will be made only in exceptional circumstances.

Regulation 12(1) (d) of the Local Government (Capital Finance and Accounting) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 states that some categories of investment are defined as Capital Expenditure. This relates to the acquisition of share or loan capital in any body corporate. However, in the event that this expenditure is made as an investment for the prudent management of the Council's financial affairs, it shall not be treated as capital expenditure.

The impact of investing in instruments of this nature are such that, unlike other investment instruments, either capital or revenue resources would have to be applied to this expenditure, and once the investment was sold or matured, the income would be a capital receipt.

The Council will monitor any proposals for such investments and will assess a suitable limit within the Investment Strategy.

### **7.3 Investment Risk**

The prime consideration of risk within investments is the loss of capital invested. Therefore investments will only be made with bodies with a high credit rating defined above. Credit ratings will form the primary driver for assessing credit quality, although it is recognised that this is not the only means of assessing credit quality.

Caution will be exercised in determining the creditworthiness of investment counterparties, even if they meet the minimum criteria above.

In the event that any institutions are at the minimum criteria and are on negative rating watch, monies will not be placed with that organisation until such time that the negative outlook is revised.

Geographical limits will be considered to ensure an appropriate spread of risk. Sovereign ratings will be taken account of when placing funds with institutions outside of the UK.

Credit ratings for existing investment counterparties will be monitored on a monthly basis, as well as immediately before new deposits are placed.

Market intelligence will also be considered before entering into any investments with proposed counterparties meeting the minimum criteria.

### **7.4 Treasury Management Advisers**

The Council currently utilise the services of external advisers, Arlingclose, when determining the credit quality of its investment counterparties. The Council recognise that responsibility for the decision to invest with a counterparty rests with the Council as the principle undertaking the transaction.

Credit ratings will be obtained directly from the rating agencies' websites, and officers will regularly read the financial press for information relevant to the credit-worthiness of counterparties.

## **7.5 Investment Training**

The Council recognises that investments, as well as wider treasury management issues require a high level of specialist knowledge. Officers undertaking the decisions are all qualified accountants with many years of experience. However, the Council recognises the need for officers to be kept up to date with developments and through the annual appraisal system will identify any training needs to further enhance the current skills base.

In the event of new Officers joining the function, they will be provided with significant on the job training as well as being provided with the opportunity to attend relevant external training courses.

The Council recognises that although there may be costs involved with sending officers to training courses, when these costs are considered in the context of the size of the portfolios being managed, and the amount of the Council's money at risk, investment in training is a worthwhile area of expenditure.

In addition to the training of officers, in order for elected members to provide effective scrutiny of the strategy and to have the knowledge to make informed decisions regarding the strategy, it is also important that training is provided to Members of the Council.

## **7.6 Other Investment Considerations**

The level of investment balances is not specifically targeted in the strategy; it will be a consequence of the net spending plans of the Council, and the level of external borrowing to be undertaken. To date, balances have remained relatively stable over recent years. However, the introduction of the Prudential Code, and the self regulation of borrowing limits and capital financing strategies, may result in higher or lower levels of balances going forwards as the level of external borrowing is given active consideration.

It should also be noted that the investments are largely as a result of the level of reserves and provisions that the Council has at any one point in time. In addition, there is an amount of working capital (excess of creditors over debtors) as well as being a factor of the extent to which investment balances have been used in lieu of external borrowing.

Investment balances are currently higher than in prior years, however they are expected to decrease as long term capital expenditure forecasts are finalised and further investment balances are used in lieu of external borrowing.

The remaining cash balances that will not be used in lieu of external borrowing will primarily exist to manage cash flow volatility within the Council. It is therefore not expected that investments of a long term nature will be made, however this will be kept under review depending on the level of investment balances.

The Council recognises that a consequence of short dated investments is that it exposes the portfolio to interest rate risk, which would otherwise be reduced if investments were made of a long term nature. The budget for investment income takes a prudent approach to expected returns from investments.

## 8. Treasury Management Indicators

The CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice requires various indicators to be set within the strategy. This section of the report sets these out in the format required by the Code. Whilst they are required to provide boundaries within which the treasury management operations will be managed, it is also important that there is sufficient flexibility to enable officers to react to unforeseen favourable movements in the financial markets which may present beneficial opportunities to the Council.

### 8.21 Interest Rate Exposures

The Council is required to set upper limits for both fixed and variable exposures for the forthcoming years. The purpose of this indicator is to contain the Council's exposure to unfavourable movements in interest rates. The indicators are expressed as Fixed Rate Borrowing less Fixed Rate Investments and Variable Rate Borrowing less Variable Rate Investments. The Council defines variable rate investments as including those instruments maturing within each year, as the replacement of those instruments will be subject to prevailing rates of interest. The following table shows the upper limit of fixed rate exposure and the upper limit of variable rate exposure for the forthcoming three years.

|                                       | Estimate<br>2026/27<br>£'000 | Estimate<br>2027/28<br>£'000 | Estimate<br>2028/29<br>£'000 |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Upper limit of fixed rate exposure    | 112,144                      | 126,222                      | 136,192                      |
| Upper limit of variable rate exposure | 3,364                        | 3,787                        | 4,086                        |

### 8.2 Maturity Structure of Fixed Rate Borrowing

The Council is required to set upper and lower limits of fixed rate borrowing maturing within certain periods, in order to contain the exposure to re-financing risk which may arise if significant proportions of borrowing were maturing within a short period of time. The Council has set the following limits for the forthcoming financial year.

|                       | Lower<br>Limit | Upper<br>Limit |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Under 12 months       | 0.00%          | 35.00%         |
| 12 months – 24 months | 0.00%          | 35.00%         |
| 24 months – 5 years   | 0.00%          | 50.00%         |
| 5 years – 10 years    | 0.00%          | 75.00%         |
| 10 years and above    | 0.00%          | 75.00%         |

### 8.3 Total Principal Sums Invested for periods longer than 364 days

The purpose of this indicator is to contain exposure to the possibility of loss that may arise as a result of the Council having to seek early repayment of sums invested.

The Council would not, through its normal course of investment activities, expect to make investments beyond 12 months. However, there may be exceptional circumstances which may result in investments being made up to 2 years in duration, as is referred to within the Annual Investment Strategy.

## APPENDIX B

|   | Estimate<br>2026/27 | Estimate<br>2027/28 | Estimate<br>2028/29 |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Total principal sums invested for<br>longer than 364 days | £2m                 | £2m                 | £2m                 |

## Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2026

### Attendance

Members:

Councillor Michael Long  
Councillor Sarah Bunting  
Councillor Áine Groogan  
Councillor Séamas de Faoite  
Councillor Natasha Brennan

**Apologies:** Alderman Sonia Copeland, Councillor Ciaran Beattie

### Officers:

Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services  
Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance  
Nora Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services  
David Sales, Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services  
Sinead Grimes, Director of Property & Projects  
John Tully, Director of City & Organisational Strategy  
Keith Forster, Director Economic Development  
Wendy Langham, Programme Director, Belfast Stories  
Jim Girvan Director of Neighbourhood Services (*for Item 3*)  
Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty (*for Item 3*)  
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

### 1. Public Health Agency

The Deputy Chief Executive welcomed Dr Joanne McClean and colleagues from the Public Health Agency (PHA). Members were presented with an overview on vulnerability and homelessness in Belfast including an overview of the support and engagement work that the PHA lead on in collaboration with partners in promoting health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities. Members also discussed the key priorities and many challenges currently being faced in Belfast specifically in relation to homelessness, complex lives and the co-location of services in a city centre location. There were a number of queries raised by Members for which the PHA provided clarity, and it was noted that given the legislative constraints discussed consideration is given to a letter of support from the Council for consideration of co-location of services in a city centre location. The Director of City & Organisational Strategy to further explore and an update to be brought back.

Some queries were also raised in relation to substance use and testing measures particularly at festivals and concerts and the current process for reporting concerns was outlined with contact details provided.

All agreed continuing to work closely with PHA colleagues and noted the importance of a multi agency approach to provide holistic support for the issues discussed mindful that no single agency can progress in isolation. The importance of ongoing collaboration on emerging initiatives and communication was also highlighted.

It was agreed a copy of the presentation would be circulated following the meeting and Members noted that they can contact the PHA directly with any further queries or for any points of clarification on the information presented.

## **2. Finance Update**

The Director of Finance referred to the current issues impacting the clawback from Land and Property Services (LPS) and the financial pressures for the organisation in the coming year. Members noted the current financial position and year end forecast.

The Director also provided an update in relation to the criteria previously agreed by Members for the management of discretionary payment requests. He outlined for Members the detail of current requests received including the request deferred at February SP&R Committee and subsequent applications received. Members discussed alternative funding streams for some of the applications outlined and noted that recommendations will be included in the report to March SP&R Committee for consideration.

## **3. Area based community planning**

The Director of City & Organisational Strategy presented for Members the background to the area-based community planning programme funding allocation via two interrelated programmes. Members previously agreed the two strands of funding namely the Local Community Ownership Fund to support the acquisition of community assets or existing derelict sites for viable and sustainable community use and the Area-based community planning fund supporting a community led inclusive process for area-based community plans.

The Director of Property and Projects presented the proposed purpose, outcomes and eligibility for the Local Community Ownership Fund programme along with an outline of the assessment pathway for applications. The Director advised that the fund will be an open call for applications via an expression of interest and it is anticipated this will go live end of April 2026 subject to Council approval. Some queries were raised in relation to the boundaries used for the funding allocations for which the Director provided clarity and noted that the points

raised will be considered for area based funding allocations for future programmes going forward.

The Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty then outlined the proposal for a community led approach for the Area Based Community Planning programme including the proposal for an administrative and convening lead partner role to bring forward the area-based planning process. He outlined the role the convening lead partner could help facilitate and Members noted the rationale for the approach outlined and the proposals for whom the convening lead partners would be. Members also noted the design principles, scope and eligibility of the fund. In relation to a point raised by a Member around specific wards in the South and East of the city, the Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty to consider in the next stages of the programme.

It was noted a report to be submitted to March SP&R Committee for consideration outlining the proposals and pathways discussed and it was agreed that the presentation is circulated to Members following the meeting.

#### **4. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026**

The Director Economic Development presented a summary update in relation to the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann work programme and outlined the work underway across a number of core workstreams including campsites, licencing, business engagement and procurement requirements in order to ensure the effective hosting of the event in 2026

The Director of Finance outlined the emerging budgeting and resources challenges in relation to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 and the income strands that would contribute to offsetting some of these challenges.

Members reiterated previous points raised in relation to late night bus services and other city wide operational issues to ensure the effective hosting of the event. The Director of Economic Development advised that discussions were ongoing with Translink and the relevant Government Departments.

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services referred to the additional options for the waste management workstream recently considered at February SP&R Committee. The Director advised that following further exploration of the alternative options suggested by Members engagement with other Councils had suggested that this would not a feasible option.

Following consultation with Trade Unions the tender will now be issued in order to deliver this essential part of Fleadh operations in a timely manner.

## **5. Belfast Stories**

The Programme Director Belfast Stories provided an update for Members in relation to key programme milestones including the submission of the planning application, the next steps in relation to the addendum to the Outline Business Case and the implications of decision changes. Members also noted the process outlined for expressions of interest following March Council.

Members discussed the financial implications of design changes, the usage and operating models. In relation to queries raised by Members the Director and Deputy Chief Executive provided clarity.

It was noted a site visit and design update is to be organised, and it was agreed that the invitation would include both the Members of the Belfast Stories Working Group and Party Group Leaders. The visit to take place in advance of the planning application submission in April.

## **6. Planning Update**

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on a number of planning matters which were currently live.

## **7. AOB**

### **Parks/Open Space Improvement Programme**

The Director of Property and Projects provided a briefing on the proposed parks/open space improvement programme for this year and next financial year. Members noted the proposed projects and the works to be undertaken. A copy of the list of projects to be circulated to Members following the meeting.

### **Official Announcements**

The City Solicitor provided a briefing in relation to the order of business for Council meetings and outlined proposals to amend the parameters around requests for official announcements.

The City Solicitor noted the feedback provided from Members and will further consider in advance of a report being brought to SP&R Committee.

### **Illuminate Requests**

The City Solicitor outlined for Members a number of illuminate requests received. Members noted the following requests would be agreed under the City Solicitors delegated authority.

- **World Down Syndrome Day 2026** – 21 March 2026
- **74<sup>TH</sup> Belfast Scouts Centenary** – 28 March 2026
- **Italian National Day** – 2 June 2026

Members also noted King Charles Birthday is on the same date as the scheduled Christmas lights switch-on event this year and therefore there will be no illumination.

### **Pitches Strategy**

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services referred to the Pitches Strategy and highlighted that it was anticipated that this report would be considered at March SP&R Committee alongside the Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy report. However given the delays in securing dates for party group briefings in relation to the Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy it was proposed that the two reports be presented to April SP&R Committee for consideration together. This will also allow the reports to be considered alongside planned updates to April SP&R Committee on Boucher Road Playing Fields and Lower Botanic Gardens. Members to further consider and to contact the Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services if any issues with the approach outlined.

### **Andy Haldane Visit**

The Deputy Chief Executive advised that Andy Haldane was visiting Belfast and outlined the timeline for the visit and the proposed itinerary which includes engagement with Members and key stakeholders in the city. Members noted details to follow.

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## Language Strategy Working Group

Friday, 30th January, 2026

### MEETING OF THE LANGUAGE STRATEGY WORKING GROUP

Members present: Councillor Walsh (Chairperson); and  
Councillors R. Brooks, Groogan, Long and Whyte.

In attendance: Ms. N. Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and  
Civic Services;  
Mr. R. Connolly, Policy, Research And Compliance Officer;  
Mr. M. Johnston, Language Officer;  
Mr. C. McGuigan, Irish Language Officer;  
Ms. M-T McGivern, Client Manager (Physical Programme);  
Mr. B. Flynn, Committee Services Officer.

#### **Election of Chairperson**

Moved by Councillor Long,  
Seconded by Councillor Whyte, and

Resolved – that Councillor Walsh be elected to serve as Chairperson to  
the Language Strategy Working Group until the date of the Annual Meeting  
in 2026.

(Councillor Walsh in the Chair).

#### **Apologies**

An apology was reported on behalf of Alderman Rodgers.

#### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 18th October, 2024, were taken as read and signed  
as correct.

#### **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **Update on Draft Irish Language Policy Public Consultation and Engagement Process**

The Working Group considered the undernoted report:

**1.0 Purpose of report or summary of main issues**

**1.1** The purpose of this report is to update the working group on the progress made by officers in implementing the Language Strategy Action plan.

**2.0 Recommendations**

**2.1** The Working Group is asked to note the contents of this report and provide feedback as necessary.

**3.0 Main report**

**3.1 Background**

**3.1** Belfast City Council agreed a Language Strategy Action Plan in June 2024 (attached at Appendix 1). This Action Plan contained agreed actions to continue the implementation of the Council's Language Strategy from 2024 – 2027. Progress against these actions is detailed in the right-hand column in the table.

**3.2** Since the agreement of the Action Plan, actions have been carried out in relation to all strands of the Language Strategy. There has, however, been some delay in relation to actions within the action plan and there may, therefore, be some slippage in timescales.

**3.3** There has been notable progress in relation to a number of actions.

**Irish Language Policy**

Council approved the draft Irish Language Policy in October 2025. The decision to approve the policy was subsequently 'called-in' and this process is ongoing.

**Email address**

[Gaeilge@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:Gaeilge@belfastcity.gov.uk) email address has been created and is now in use. Additional steps are planned to promote its existence to the public further.

**Events**

There have been a wide range of diverse events held in 2025 and there are further language-related events planned for 2026. (See supporting report on events).

### **Draft Ulster Scots Policy**

A draft Ulster-Scots Policy has been co-designed with the Ulster-Scots stakeholder forum. The aim of the Policy is to set out how the Council will promote and protect the use of Ulster-Scots within its own work and throughout the wider Council area

### **Use of languages other than English on Council's social media**

Languages other than English have been used on the Council's social media channels. Requests for this are dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

### **Sign Video**

The Sign Video service is now available at all Council leisure centres, allowing Deaf and Sign Language-using customers better access to Council services here.

### **Communication Boards**

Communication boards for residents with disabilities and sensory issues have been installed in some play parks. The council plans to roll this out to all play parks across the city.

#### **3.4 Next steps**

Members are asked to note the contents of this report and provide feedback as necessary.

#### **4.0 Monitoring and Reporting**

4.1 The working group will be provided with a further update on progress at its next meeting.

#### **5.0 Financial and Resource Implications**

None associated with this report.

#### **6.0 Equality, good relations or rural needs implications**

The Language Strategy Action Plan was the subject of a Section 75 Equality Screening and a Rural Needs Impact Assessment and these were made available during the public consultation.

The City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services outlined the principal aspects of the report and provided an update on the progress which had been achieved since the adoption of the Irish Language Policy.

A Member sought an update on the work the Council was undertaking in providing services to the deaf and disabled communities. This related particularly to the provision of

Makaton and sign language training for both staff and Elected Members, together with an overview of the Council's obligations associated with the implementation of the Sign Language Bill in February 2025. In response, the Language Officer undertook to provide an update to the Member in this regard.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided.

### **Ulster-Scots Policy**

The Working Group considered the undernoted report:

#### **1.0 Purpose of report or summary of main issues**

**1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the working group on the progress made by officers in drafting the Ulster-Scots Policy.**

#### **2.0 Recommendations**

**2.1 The Working Group is asked to note the contents of this report and provide feedback as necessary.**

#### **3.0 Main report**

##### **Background**

**3.1 Officers have been working with the Ulster-Scots Stakeholders Forum to co-design a draft Ulster-Scots Policy. The aim of the Policy is to set out how the Council will promote and protect the use of Ulster-Scots within its own work and throughout the wider Council area.**

**The draft Policy will be focussed on the four guiding principles of respect, recognition, resources and representation. It sets out a proposed approach across a number of key areas including:**

- Communications and visibility**
- Placenames and Signs**
- Cultural Celebrations and Events**
- Partnerships and Collaboration**
- Education and Awareness**

**Ulster Scots is recognised by the UK under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages as a Part 2 language. This provides broad cultural and identity-based protection but does not create the detailed statutory obligations associated with Part 3, which applies to Irish. Part 2 focuses on promoting respect, visibility, cultural expression, and understanding, rather than mandating service provision or formal education structures.**

**3.2 Given its current Part 2 status, the policy approach for Ulster-Scots necessarily differs from that for Irish, with a focus on:**

- **Supporting heritage, culture, arts, and community traditions**
- **Encouraging linguistic development and learning opportunities**
- **Promoting public understanding of Ulster-Scots identity and expression**
- **Strengthening institutional visibility in line with the 2022 Act**

**A developmental focus on culture, heritage, and linguistic capacity will help create the conditions necessary should there be a future ambition to progress toward Part 3 recognition under the Charter.**

**Officers are working with stakeholders such as the Ulster Scots Agency and the Ulster Scots Community Network to identify opportunities to support and develop Ulster Scots in accordance with the Language Strategy and its associated Action Plan.**

**3.3 Next steps**

**A final draft of the Ulster-Scots Policy will be presented to the Ulster-Scots stakeholder forum in March 2026 for consideration.**

**Members are asked to agree to representatives from the Ulster-Scots Stakeholders Forum attending the next meeting of the Working Group.**

**4.0 Monitoring and Reporting**

**4.1 The working group will be provided with a further update on progress at its next meeting.**

**5.0 Financial and Resource Implications**

**None associated with this report.**

**6.0 Equality, good relations or rural needs implications**

**A Section 75 Equality Screening and a Rural Needs Impact Assessment will be completed after the draft Ulster-Scots Policy has been finalised.**

The Working Group noted the information provided within the report and it was agreed that an invitation be extended to the Ulster-Scots Commissioner, Mr. Lee Reynolds, to attend the group's next meeting to provide an overview of his role and remit.

**Next Meeting**

The Working Group agreed that it would meet on Friday 17th April at 12:30 pm.

Chairperson