

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 6th December, 2023

HYBRID MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Nic Bhranair (Chairperson);
Alderman Lawlor;
Councillors Bunting, Canavan, Douglas,
Duffy, Flynn, Garrett, Gormley, Lyons,
Maskey, F. McAteer, McCabe, McCormick,
McDowell, I. McLaughlin, McMullan, Murray
and Walsh.

In attendance: Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor McDonough-Brown.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the 8th and 22nd November were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 4th December.

Declarations of Interest

In relation to items 6.c) Vibrant Business Destinations Update and 6.d) Employability and Skills - Bridges to Progression Update, Councillor Duffy declared an interest, in that he worked for an organisation that was associated with the schemes and left the room whilst the items were being considered.

Restricted Item

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

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

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Belfast Zoo Quarterly Update

The Committee noted the Zoo performance update report for the period July to September 2023 and agreed to write a letter of thanks to the animal care team in relation to the care they have provided for Delilah the gorilla, since her arrival at the Zoo in 1992.

Vacant to Vibrant Scheme Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and an overview of the recommendations from the Vacant to Vibrant assessment panel following the recent receipt and assessment of applications.

The Committee:

- Noted the update in relation to the city centre Vacant to Vibrant Programme; and
- Agreed to the recommended grant awards as outlined within Section 3.15 of the report.

Quarter 2 Finance Update

The Quarter 2 financial position for the City Growth and Regeneration Committee was presented to Members, including a forecast of the year end outturn, a summary of the financial indicators and an executive summary.

The Committee noted the report and the associated financial reporting pack.

Markets Quarterly Update

The Director of Economic Development provided an update on city markets activity, including work being undertaken at St George's Market, as set out in the business plan.

During discussion, one Member questioned if a single use plastic policy at St. George's Market and the Christmas Market had been explored. The Director of Economic Development advised that this could be investigated.

In response to a Member's suggestion to celebrate the success of St. George's Market and its number of visitors, the Director of Economic Development advised that this could be discussed with the Communications Team.

The Committee noted the update on city markets and noted the progress against target on the St George's Market business plan that was previously agreed by this Committee in June 2023.

The Committee noted that the potential for a single use plastic policy at St. George's Market and the Christmas Market would be investigated and the findings submitted to a future Committee for consideration.

Matters referred back from Council/Motions

Motion - Regional Jobs and Investment Bill

The Committee was advised that the Standards and Business Committee, at its meeting on 28th November, had referred the following motion which had been proposed by Councillor Doherty and seconded by Councillor Whyte to the Committee for consideration:

“Belfast City Council:

Expresses grave concern at the significant geographic disparities in the economy of Northern Ireland between those areas which have experienced economic prosperity and those areas which have been left behind.

Recognises that of the ten of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, six can be found in the Belfast City Council district.

Welcomes the publication of an action plan by Invest Northern Ireland (NI) to implement the recommendations of the recent review which revealed the scale of failure of Invest NI to work as a partner on a sub-regional basis.

Welcomes the proposal for legislation to address these regional economic imbalances through a Regional Jobs and Investment Bill.

Resolves to take all possible measures to alleviate regional economic imbalances in order to give every citizen equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of geography.

Commits to responding to the consultation on this legislation which is currently open.”

The Committee agreed that a report on how this would be facilitated, resourced and managed would be submitted to a future meeting.

Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

Response to Department for Infrastructure Consultations

It was reported that the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) had issued a number of letters to the Council regarding various scheme designs or changes to legislation in relation to waiting restrictions on a number of streets following correspondence from Members. The Director of City Regeneration and Development advised that DfI had requested comment from Members prior to bringing these schemes forward and the notices had been shared on the Members portal on receipt.

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During discussion, several Members welcomed the changes to the schemes and suggested additional comments to the consultation responses.

In relation to Montgomery Road, one Member questioned if the Cycle Lane covered the full length of the Road and if it was included in the Cycle Network Activity Plan. The Director of City Regeneration and Development advised this information would be confirmed.

After discussion, the Committee:

- Noted the correspondence received from DfI as included within the Appendices A – E, in relation to Montgomery Road, Belmont Church Road, Dunville St, Sorella St, and Suffolk Road.
- Agreed the draft responses to the consultation letter in relation to the Montgomery Road Two Way Cycle Lane as included within Appendix A;
- Agreed the draft responses to the consultation letter in relation to the Belmont Church Road proposed imposition of waiting restrictions as included within Appendix B, with the additional request for waiting restrictions to also be imposed at the other end of the Belmont Road;
- Agreed the draft responses to the consultation letter in relation to the Dunville Street proposed imposition of waiting restrictions as included within Appendix C, with the additional request for resident's car parking schemes to be implemented;
- Agreed the draft responses to the consultation letter in relation to the Sorella St proposed imposition of waiting restrictions as included within Appendix D, with the additional request for resident's car parking schemes to be implemented; and
- Agreed the draft responses to the consultation letter in relation to the Suffolk Road proposed imposition of waiting restrictions as included within Appendix E.

Proposed Study Visits

The Director of City Regeneration and Development informed the Committee that approval was sought to in relation to extending the scope of previously approved study visit with a focus on regeneration projects, including city centre living and public private partnership approach to delivery.

She reminded the Committee that, in December 2021 following an invitation from Newcastle City Council to facilitate shared learnings around regeneration projects and good practice in city centre living, the Committee had agreed to a proposed study visit which was subject to restrictions at the time around travel and Covid – 19. Due to advice regarding the implementation of Covid restrictions at the time the study visit had to be postponed.

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She advised that officers had continued to engage with representatives from Newcastle and other Irish and UK cities, through existing fora such as UKReeIF / MIPIM, Urban Land Institute, and the Belfast City and Region Place Partnership. In addition to the planned visit to Newcastle, there had been ongoing contact with Greater Manchester and Leeds City Council. It was proposed to extend the scope of the previously approved study visit to include Greater Manchester and Leeds.

She highlighted that these visits would provide an opportunity to examine examples of housing led regeneration, institutional investor partnership approaches that these local authorities had taken to deliver regeneration as well as public private partnership approaches that support city centre living.

The Director of City Regeneration and Development pointed out that the proposed extended visit was considered timely given the commencement of the procurement process to seek a Private Sector Partner to deliver residential led, mixed use developments in the support of the growth ambitions as set out in the Belfast Agenda. While the core focus would be on city centre living and the institutional investor partnership / public private partnership approach to delivery of regeneration projects, it would also provide an opportunity to discuss other regeneration projects including City Deal, Innovation Districts and funding mechanisms available to support regeneration.

She advised that it was proposed that the visit would take place at the end of January / early February 2024, over 2 days (one overnight) for Party Group Leaders or their nominees and accompanying officers. She informed the Committee that it was estimated that a budget of up to £600 per person would be required for the proposed extended visit which would be met from existing budget.

The Committee:

- Agreed to extend the scope of a previously approved study visit to Newcastle to include other cities including Greater Manchester and Leeds which would focus on regeneration projects including city centre living and public private partnership approach to delivery; and
- Approved the attendance of Party Group Leaders or their nominees, accompanied by officers.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

A City Imagining - Cultural Strategy workplan – mid-year update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise members of a range of activity undertaken in since April 2023 to deliver on objectives of the ten-year cultural strategy, *A City Imagining*.**

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the work undertaken in the financial year to date
- Approve the allocation of £28,000 towards the Output Conference
- Agree to participate in Culture Commons, an open policy development programme that will run in partnership with UK based partners.
- Agree to the pilot micro-grant programme in collaboration with the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival (CQAF).

3.0 Main Report

3.1 In April 2023, members agreed the key actions in 2023/24 aligned to the implementation of year 4 of the Cultural strategy. Year 4 of the strategy has sought to combine cultural recovery with renewal in line with the commitments and priorities set out in A City Imagining.

3.2 Investing in the cultural sector

Similar to the Belfast Agenda, the investment model for culture includes a partnership approach to supporting the cultural sector, with the aim of sustaining and developing accessible cultural activity and infrastructure across Belfast. This investment is central to creating positive cultural, social and economic impacts for the city, delivering on our overall targets for the period, positioning Belfast as a regional driver, and creating the conditions for long-term transformation. The aims of the cultural investment model are to:

- support the cultural life of the city by enabling citizens to be active, dynamic and creative agents of change.
- invest in the cultural and creative sectors skills development and capacity for production and innovation.
- position Belfast as an international testing ground for new approaches to cultural engagement, development and placemaking.
- establish Belfast as a cultural destination.

3.3 The Culture Team manages a range of grant programmes and investment schemes for organisations and artists, totalling £3.04m funding through 117 awards. These schemes include:

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<u>Programme</u>	<u>Value</u>	<u>Number of awards/organisations supported</u>	<u>Status</u>
Cultural Multi-Annual Grant (CMAG)	£2.43million	36 Arts/ Heritage organisations 20 Festivals and Events organisations	Scoring and Moderation for 2024-28
Pathfinder Awards	£79,000	Four organisations	Scored, awarded and contracts issued
Community Festivals Fund	69,000 + match funding from DFC	20 Community Festivals	Scored, awarded and contracts issued
Arts and Heritage Grant	£133,244	17 Arts and Heritage Projects	Scored, awarded and contracts issued
Access and Inclusion grants	Funding provided by Department for Communities	Two organisations supported	Scored, awarded and contracts issued
Artist Studios and Maker Spaces Organisational Grants	£100,000	10 Artist Studios	Scored, awarded and contracts issued
Creative Bursary Scheme for Individual Artists	£160,000	16 artists	Scored, awarded and contracts issued
Music Heritage Programme	£80,000	4-5 organisations	Launched October 2023

- 3.4 At the mid-way point in the year, work is complete with applications scored, moderated awarded and contracts issued to all core grant and investment schemes for 2023/24. The Music Heritage scheme will launch in October 2023. The next round of Cultural Multi-Annual Grants (CMAG), which will run from 2024 to 2028, received a total of 80 applications and officers are currently working to score and moderate this extensive programme. A report on recommendations for funding will be presented to members in January 2024.**

3.5 Strategic Partnerships

In addition to funding, Belfast City Council fulfils an important role in leading and supporting sectoral development initiatives. In 2023/24, this has included a range of strategic partnerships including:

- Arts and Business to support Blueprint for the Future, a financial resilience programme which supports a network of arts and cultural organisations to encourage income growth and long-term financial stability.
- A partnership with Theatre and Dance NI, including funding for 7 recipients, across various disciplines of the theatre and dance sector, as part of the first ever INVEST programme.
- Partnership with Craft NI to develop Craft NI Gallery including a programme of 8 craft exhibitions and 19 Belfast events for Craft Month.
- A partnership with Thrive NI to continue the Audience Panel, representing 200 members, and provide tailored advice to embedding people-led approaches within cultural organisations.
- A partnership with Ulster Architectural Heritage Society to deliver Open Heritage Belfast and other events, advocacy, advice & support.
- Funding for the Black Box to continue the Gig Buddies scheme which aims to increase participation and representation at cultural events by disabled people.
- A partnership with University of Atypical to promote accessibility in cultural spaces and support training for disability champions within the cultural sector.

3.6 Culture Commons

Belfast City Council has been invited to participate in Culture Commons, an open policy development programme that will run in partnership with UK based partners. This 12-month project will see a coalition of organisations from across local government, sector representative bodies, universities, arm's length bodies, and grant giving organisations coming together in a first-of-its-kind research and policy development programme. A collaborative, structured dialogue will explore how increased local decision making might affect the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem and shape a suite of policy positions that could support a more equitable and sustainable cultural sector.

- 3.7 To ensure that the programme is drawing on the widest possible body of evidence, Culture Commons has invited Belfast City Council to contribute to the programme in partnership with the Department for Communities. Council officials will communicate good practice and involve other arts managers across NI (using established existing and new contacts and networks) in discussions related to the Culture Commons participation. This would ensure regional benefit and voice of other local councils across the province in this important new movement which promotes co-design, civic participation, and inclusive growth.
- 3.8 The cost for participation and benefits is £15,000 for one year (October 2023 – September 2024), with the Department for Communities contributing £10,000 and Belfast City Council (as lead) contributing £5,000. These costs will be met from the Belfast 2024 evaluation fund. This investment from BCC would be to build towards the legacy of the Belfast 2024 programme and support a more sustainable sector as we emerge from Belfast 2024.
- 3.9 Heritage
- As part of investment in heritage, officials continued its partnership with Ulster Architectural and Heritage Society on the delivery of Open Heritage Belfast. Taking place on 9th September, events included the Doorways Tell Stories project which explored the history and architecture that lies with the doorways of Belfast.
- 3.10 With a view to developing a heritage plan, members agreed to conduct a Heritage Audit and Roadmap for Development. The requirement of this contract will be to deliver part one of what is currently anticipated as a two-part project. Part one is defined as an audit of the heritage sector in Belfast and the design of a roadmap for development. The purpose of the development programme will be to set out a roadmap for Council to bring forward a more sustainable approach to supporting heritage in the city and the different strands of a work programme that should be taken forward including opportunities for co-design. Following delivery of these outputs it is envisaged that Council will progress with part two of the project which will be the development and delivery of the roadmap including designing action plans through a co-design process. This work is underway and is scheduled to be completed by March 2024.

3.11 Belfast Canvass and City Animation

Now in its fourth phase, officials are working on the delivery of the City Animation '*Belfast Canvas*' project. This phase will continue to expand into arterial routes across the city. The delivery of this phase is currently underway, and artists have been commissioned to transform over 20 spaces featuring local and international artists and many emerging artists. The public response to the finished boxes has been overwhelmingly positive. Work is due to be completed by November 2023.

3.12 Artist Studio and Creative Workspaces

In August 2023, members received an update on the completion of the 'Artist Studios and Maker Spaces Organisational Grants 2023/24' programme. Through this scheme, 10 organisations received financial support to develop and sustain their respective studio spaces.

3.13 In addition to the funding for artist studios, members agreed a strategic review of artist studios and maker-spaces in Belfast. This research study, which explores the current and future requirements of artist workspaces in Belfast, is led by Turley Communications and has involved extensive consultation with the sector, benchmarking and policy recommendations. To ensure alignment with other statutory partners, council officials have been working closely with the Arts Council NI in the development of this review. Officials are in receipt of the draft report and are currently working with the authors to refine the recommendations and actions arising from the data collected. The final report and recommendations will be brought to Committee in early 2024.

3.14 Sectoral Forums

Through its sector support programme, Council operates a number of sectoral Forums, namely Belfast Festivals Forum and Belfast Visual Arts Forum. The Festivals Forum is a proactive and voluntary collective of festival organisers and agencies. It is developing a coordinated approach to festivals by sharing ideas, skills training, marketing incentives and grants, and coordinating a festival events calendar. Meeting 8 times a year, the forum has welcomed peers and experts from international festivals.

The Belfast Visual Arts Forum promotes and celebrates Belfast as 'a city where visual arts can be embraced and

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enjoyed by all'. There are currently over 60 members and key stakeholders. The forum has been going through significant transformation, welcoming two new Co-Chairs and renewing its aims and objectives whilst creating opportunities for those within the sector to contribute.

Priority 15 of *A City Imagining* has an emphasis on encouraging environmental responsibility and the role of culture in changing behaviours. To help build towards this goal, foster greater collaboration, and encourage best practice in the sector, a Green Arts Forum was established in August 2023 in partnership with other statutory and community stakeholders. This forum will meet on bi-monthly basis to promote and develop sustainability practice in the cultural sector.

3.15 Music Strategy

At a meeting of City Growth and Regeneration Committee in December 2022, members agreed the music strategy, 'Music Matters: A Roadmap for Belfast' including its corresponding priorities.

Members received updates and approved allocations of spend against various initiatives in April, June, August and September 2023. These commitments are now progressing at pace and include:

<u>Programme/Action</u>	<u>Status</u>
Recruitment and selection of the Belfast Region Music Board	Completed in April 2023
Expansion of the Output Conference, Ireland's biggest one-day music conference and live music showcase	Completed in June 2023
Continuation of Gradam Ceoil bursaries	Launched in March 2023 and continuing to March 2024
The Pipeline Investment Fund for music venues through a partnership with Music Venue Trust	Completed in September 2023 with 5 Grassroots Music Venues in receipt of funding to upgrade equipment
Belfast Music marketing channels	New supplier appointed July 2023
Implementation of Access Riders to improve disability access	November to March 2023
The NI Music Prize	Taking place 15th November 2023

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Creation of a digital music support service developed in collaboration with Music Connections	Launching in January 2024
Music Industry Mentoring Programme for 2023/24	Launching in January 2024
Programme to develop the production skills of women, female-identifying and non-binary music creators in a safe and trusted studio environment.	Launching in January 2024 until May 2024
Health and Wellbeing sessions for musicians and the industry	Launching in February 2023
'Go Green' toolkit with tangible recommendations and measures for implementation	Launching March 2023

3.16 Internship Programme

In August 2023, Members agreed to allocate £45,000 to the Music Matters Internship Programme, supporting 7 internships across the music industry in collaboration with CC Skills. This programme was developed and due to launch in November 2023. However, officials have been made aware that due to the loss of Arts Council England funding, CC Skills is winding down as an organisation across the UK. Officials are now exploring alternative routes and partners to deliver this important element of the music strategy.

3.17 International collaborations

As part of Belfast's application and status as a City of Music, member cities are committed to '*work internationally with the UNESCO Cities Network to deliver shared music, skills and learning opportunities.*'. Officials have focused on collaboration with two cities, namely Hannover in Germany (UNESCO City of Music since 2014) and London, Ontario (UNESCO City of Music since 2021).

3.18 In July 2023, the first stage of our UNESCO City of Music partnership with fellow UCoM city London, Ontario, took place. Belfast artists Ciara O'Neill and Niall McDowell, selected by London Music Office and festival lead Darin Addison, travelled to Canada for a week of experiences that will have a lasting impact upon their career and has cemented a strong relationship between our cities. In October 2023, artists from London, Ontario performed in the theatre at The Mac for Country Roads : An Evening of New Country Music at newly commissioned BCC UNESCO event with the Belfast International Arts Festival. This collaboration and event was featured on a range of media broadcasts including BBC Radio 4.

3.19 As part of the exchange with Hannover, Germany, Belfast based jazz artists Steve Davis and Scott Flanigan will travelled to Hannover to perform at Jazzwoche Festival on Saturday 14th October, facilitated by Moving On Music and Belfast City Council. Both musicians collaborated with musicians from the experimental orchestra, Tonhallenorchester, in advance of their performance.

3.20 **City of Music Industry Sessions**

Theme one of the Music Strategy focuses on the development of musicians, including action point 2.4 which seeks to 'provide opportunities via events and programmes to provide regular access to professional associations in music to deepen existing relationships and create new ones'.

To build towards this wider goal of increasing networking and knowledge of the local sector, officials have developed the City of Music Industry Sessions, a series of free monthly information sessions for the local music community. Hosted in 2 Royal Avenue, this series features panel discussions and advice from experts across a range of disciplines, preceded by networking opportunities and advice clinics hosted by the Culture Team. Each event offers learning opportunities for both the music creators and music industry personnel to ensure development of both in tandem. Events have included:

- **Getting Tracks Played on the Radio - Rory McConnell (Senior Content Producer at BBC), Gemma Bradley (Host of Radio 1's BBC Introducing Show) Siobhan Brown (Former host of the Siobhan Brown Soul Show on Radio Ulster, Founder of Soultrane Festival)**
- **Content Creation and Audience Building with Fiona McAuley (Head of Audience at Atlantic Records) and Saul Duffin (Founder of Yeo Magazine)**
- **Can Live Music Pay The Bills?' Featuring Matt Hanner (Runway Artists) Alexandra Ampofo (Metropolis Music & Women Connect) Ciaran Lavery (Artist / Songwriter) Paula McColl (Moving on Music)**
- **Learning from Hannover, UNESCO City of Music**
- **Paul Charles - Music industry expert, booking agent (Tom Waits & more)**
- **Amazon Global #1 Bestseller Emily White on How to Build a Sustainable Music Career (And Collect All Revenue Streams. This event is featured as part of the Sound of Belfast programme.**

3.21 **Micro Grants**

In April 2023, members agreed an allocation of £20,000 towards a micro-grant programme, available to individual

musicians, to assist with costs incurred within their artform. In a similar manner to the partnership with Music Venue Trust, where Council has collaborated with an industry expert to augment a pre-existing support scheme, it is proposed to pilot this first micro-grant programme in collaboration with the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival (CQAF).

3.22 The CQAF Bursary scheme is a hugely popular initiative which supports and encourages new work by visual artists, comedians, musicians and theatre practitioners. It is often dominated by applications from musicians, and it is proposed to add an extra music specific micro-grant to enhance this programme. It is proposed to launch this pilot in December 2023 with musicians receiving up to £1000 towards elements such as:

- Session musician fees
- Recording (studio hire, engineering, mixing, mastering)
- Content creation (video, audio, promotional photography, artwork, design, etc)
- Manufacture and distribution
- Merchandise (design and production)
- PR & Marketing

3.23 Output Conference Update

Established in 2016, Output Belfast has earned its reputation over the last 7 years as Ireland's biggest one-day music conference and live music showcase. Delivered as a key event within the City of Music programme, the conference features a full programme of panels, workshops and conferences, followed by an evening showcase of live music for free to the public. Activity includes music and creative digital showcasing and networking events, business development panels and workshops and meetings and networking with key international creative digital companies,

As part of our commitment to priority 2.5 within the music strategy, which reads 'Develop regular music business touchpoints throughout the year using existing conferences to offer more regular but bitesize opportunities for micro learning'. In line with previous years, it is proposed to allocate £28,000 to Score Draw Music to continue the delivery of the Output Conference in April 2024. This investment will be enhanced through support from Arts Council NI and is met with existing budgets allocated to music development.

3.24 Finance and Resource Implications

There are no new financial implications. The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2023/24 budget for the Culture and Tourism section of the Economic Development division of the Place and Economy Departmental budget in line with existing approvals.

3.25 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

The cultural strategy, *A City Imagining* has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and a Rural Needs Assessment (RNA). Specific initiatives as required will be subject to a further equality screening.”

During discussion, the Director of Economic Development confirmed that the Cultural/Music Development officer liaised with applicants regarding the grant programme application process.

In response to a Member’s question in relation to the locations across the city of the three previous phases of the City Animation “Belfast Canvas” project, the Director of Economic Development advised that this information could be provided.

The Committee:

- Noted the work which had been undertaken in the financial year to date;
- Approved the allocation of £28,000 towards the Output Conference;
- Agreed to participate in Culture Commons, an open policy development programme that would run in partnership with UK based partners;
- Agreed to the pilot micro-grant programme in collaboration with the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival (CQAF); and
- Noted that a location breakdown of the three previous phases of the City Animation “Belfast Canvas” project would be provided to the Committee in due course.

Belfast Bikes Scheme - Quarterly Update

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

- 1.1 To update Members on the performance of the Belfast Bikes scheme in quarter two (1st July 2023 - 30th September 2023) of year 8 of operation.**

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is requested to:

- note the update of the Belfast Bikes performance for Y8 Q2 (July-September); financial year
- note the update to the notice of motion regarding free access for young people;
- note the progress regarding phase one and phase two expansion.
- note the update that tender will be prepared for a procurement of a new Public Bike Hire Scheme
- note an Expression of Interest has been circulated for a new sponsor for the Public Bike Hire Scheme

3.0 Main report

3.1 Background

The Belfast Bikes scheme was launched in 2015 as part of Belfast City Council's physical investment programme. The Department for Regional Development provided initial capital funding for the scheme as part of their Active Travel Demonstration Projects budget. The scheme was launched with a network of 30 docking stations and 300 bikes. The scheme has been operated by NSL continually since inception using bikes and supporting infrastructure from 'Nextbike by TIER'. The scheme currently operates with 588 (including those in reserve for new stands) and 56 docking stations.

3.2 Expansion of the Scheme

At CG&R on 12 May 2021 it was agreed that an additional four Belfast Bikes docking stations would be deployed using DFI Active Travel funding. All stations below are now operational

- Lisnasharragh Leisure Centre
- Olympia Leisure Centre
- Kennedy Centre
- Waterworks

3.3 At CG&R on 9 June 2021 it was agreed to proceed with an additional 15 docking stations. At SP&R on 18 June 2021 members agreed for £980,000 to be invested in the expansion proposal (£480,000 non-recurrent funding for Belfast Bikes expansion and £500,000 non-recurrent reallocated from public space programme).

3.4 Works are ongoing for the design and installation of eight stations in Phase 1 (to be installed throughout 2023):

- North: Shore Road - complete & operational
- West: Coláiste Feirste – complete & operational
- South: Malone Road (Elms Village) - complete & operational
- East: Castlereagh Road – complete & operational
- North: Yorkgate – on hold due to train station construction
- West: Glencairn Park – to be installed in Autumn 2023
- South: Lisburn Road (Drumglass Park)- to be installed in Autumn 2023
- East: Upper Newtownards Road (Sandown Carpark) – to be installed late 2023

3.5 There are plans for seven further stations in Phase 2 in year 2023/24. Planning for those are on hold as officers are currently preparing documents for a tender process to appoint a new provider/operator. Locations for the seven stations will be identified and brought back to the AWG and to be implemented in the new scheme.

3.6 Operational Performance

Availability

Following the ongoing challenges sourcing replacement bike parts, this issue has now been resolved and the number of bikes on the street during Q2 has increased. The average daily bikes on the street during Q2 was 385

3.7 An additional 180 bikes have been purchased to facilitate the ongoing docking station expansion, and this stock has been filtered onto the street, so availability levels have further increased.

3.8 Membership

There were 26,974 registered Belfast Bike users at the end of Q2. This is a 19% increase of users from the previous quarter. Nextbike by Tier the current provider changed their payment operator during Q4 (2022-2023) and as such the details of non-active members are no longer recorded as registered users. Going forward all active users will need to update their information with the new supplier.

- In Q2 'Pay as you go' (PAYG) memberships remained the most popular form of membership, accounting for 83.5% of users.
- Annual memberships accounted for 15% of users. There is an ongoing trend of users switching from annual membership to PAYG.
- Casual memberships have greatly reduced, accounting for just over 1% of memberships, due to the introduction of PAYG.

3.9 Journeys

There have been 1,422,196 journeys since the scheme was launched including 36,043 journeys during Q2 Year 8.

This is a decrease of 36% from the same period in Year 7 (which was a very busy year for the scheme) and also 12% lower than with the 5-year average for Q2.

3.10 Vandalism

Members will be aware that vandalism is an ongoing problem. Upgrades to the forks to help prevent the unauthorised removal of bikes has been successful however, damage is now being caused to the rear wheels and to the docking points while bikes are being forced from docking stations.

3.11 There were 299 instances of vandalism in Q2. This is much higher than in previous periods and higher than the quarterly average by 54%. Vandalism costs payable by the Council for this period is £12,838 Whilst this figure is significantly lower than the same period last year it is higher than the quarterly average (£3,689).

3.12 Members should note that generally the number of vandalism incidents had increased in recent times. However, Members should also note that following the upgrade to 'SMART' bikes, the amount of theft has decreased due to GPS tracking in the bike allowing for recovery. The operator is very proactive at retrieving missing bikes.

3.13 The bikes operator continues to deliver operational improvements and community engagement initiatives with PSNI to help decrease vandalism incidents.

3.14 Subscriptions and Usage Revenue

Income from fees and charges YTD is £67,958. This is 57% lower than estimated for this period and is partly due to

change of payment provider and associated issues and the fact that there currently is no sponsor for the Bike Share Scheme.

3.15 MARCOMMS

Marketing activity during Q2 included:

- Promotion of a specially animated & fun Belfast Bikes video – promoting the different docking stations across the city. This was promoted on Belfast City Council and Belfast Bikes social media channels.
- Promotion of newly installed docking stations on social media channels
- Social media messaging on the new Belfast Bike branding of other council assets e.g. Belfast Castle, 2 Royal Avenue, Belfast Zoo, St George’s Market

Belfast Bikes currently has 5k followers on Twitter; 1.8k on Facebook; and 1.1k on Instagram.

3.16 Operator contract

NSL continues to operate the Belfast Bikes scheme until March 2024. Council staff have reviewed the scheme and a recent Expression of Interest (EOI) was completed as a market testing exercise. This is used to inform the next stage of the tender process. It is suggested to brief parties about the main specifications of the tender documents before it will be published.

3.17 Sponsorship

Sponsorship has ended and council officers released an Expression of Interest (EOI) seeking a sponsor for the scheme. This process is currently ongoing.

3.18 Response to Notice of Motion

Following a Notice of Motion from Councillor O’Hara the Committee agreed on 4th March 2020 to investigate ‘*as part of the current strategic review of the Belfast Bikes Scheme, consideration be given to granting free access to young people 25 years of age and under to the scheme*’.

3.19 Belfast Bikes operator, NSL, added date of birth (D.O.B.) as an essential criterion for users from 13 October 2022. From this data we now know that the majority of Belfast Bike users fall within the ‘25 and under’ age group.

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3.20 From (October 22 – June 23), the 16 – 25 age group accounted for 52% of users across the scheme.

3.21 If free usage was implemented for under 25's- then it would have resulted in a loss of income for the current financial year and previous 3 years as per the table below.

	<u>Year 20 / 21</u>	<u>Year 21 / 22</u>	<u>Year 22 / 23</u>	<u>Forecasted 23 / 24</u>
Loss 52% of bike usage revenue	£70,205	£177,901	£91,609	£72,169

3.22 At its meeting in September 2023, the Committee considered an update on the Motion. Furthermore, the Committee agreed that it would consider this as part of the rate setting process for 2024/25 and to write to the Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Health to request investment in this proposal, to be delivered on an annual basis.

3.23 A response was received from the Department for Infrastructure advising that the operation of the Belfast Bikes scheme is a matter for council. However, if DFI was to consider future capital investment, they would seek assurance that the operation of the Belfast Bike Scheme remains sustainable.

3.24 Financial & Resource Implications

Finance

Providing free usage to under 25's is likely to have a significant detrimental impact on revenue generated from the bike scheme, which directly contributes to its operating costs and sustainability.

3.25 Members are asked to confirm if they wish the additional financial allocation to cover the loss of revenue to be considered as part of the rate setting process however members are advised that any financial implications, from any

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decision, have not yet been factored into the current rate setting process.

Equality or Good Relations Implications

None.”

During discussion, the Director of Economic Development explained further the need to decrease vandalism, the potential location of a new cycle stand at Sandown Road, and confirmed that a map of the cycle lanes across the city would be provided to the Committee.

In relation to Members concerns regarding the impact of the Expression of Interest which had been circulated for a new sponsor for the Public Bike Hire Scheme, the Director of Economic Development clarified the process and advised that an update could be provided once this had been completed.

Regarding the update on the Motion to consider free access to young people 25 years of age and under to the scheme. One Member pointed out that it had been agreed by the Committee, at its meeting in September, that the Committee would consider this as part of the rate setting process for 2024/25. One Member requested that financial information be provided regarding the Bikes Scheme revenue, the outcome of the Sponsorship, and the potential impact of the motion to inform the rate setting priorities.

After discussion, the Committee:

- Noted the update of the Belfast Bikes performance for Y8 Q2 (July-September); financial year;
- Noted the update to the notice of motion regarding free access for young people;
- Noted the progress regarding phase one and phase two expansion;
- Noted the update that tender will be prepared for a procurement of a new Public Bike Hire Scheme;
- Noted that an Expression of Interest had been circulated for a new sponsor for the Public Bike Hire Scheme and agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting regarding the outcome and financial impact; and
- Noted that a map of the cycle lanes across the city would be provided to the Committee.

Tourism Strategy Consultation Response

The Committee was reminded that the Department for the Economy (DfE) had opened consultation on its Draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland on the 6th November which would close on the 12th January, 2024.

The Director of Economic Development explained that the draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland was a 10 year plan that set out DfE’s vision and mission for the growth

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of the tourism sector in Northern Ireland over the next decade. It sought to help position the region internationally as an attractive place to visit, making visitors feel welcome while at the same time helping to make the lives better of all of our citizens. It sought to deliver on the objectives of 10x by generating economic growth that was sustainable, inclusive and innovative.

He advised that, since the publication of the 10x strategy, the Department had been working to consider how the practical implementation of overarching objectives set out in the 10X Economic Vision was to be achieved. It has issued a number of related documents such as the Skills Strategy (Skills for a 10X Economy) and had been working on appropriate metrics to track progress. He informed the Committee that the Tourism Strategy was a continuation of this delivery and remained aligned to the proposal of DfE investment to be aligned with activity that supported the 10x ambition.

He highlighted that the draft Tourism Strategy identified the key challenges and opportunities for growth and was premised on five themes and sought to strive for a new and ambitious growth trajectory that was:

- Innovative and uses our creative skills;
- Inclusive by bringing opportunities for all;
- Sustainable for generations;
- Attractive to visitors and investors; and
- Collaborative to deliver a shared vision.

He stated that the Department now requested that all interested parties consider the draft proposals for growth in the tourism sector and saw this as an opportunity to help shape the final strategy and next steps.

The Director of Economic Development advised that a summary of the five questions posed and draft responses to each of these had been collated and were attached in [Appendix 1](#) for the Committee to review and confirm their agreement for submission to DfE, subject to any other matters that they wished to incorporate.

He explained that, from the perspective of the Council, the fact that the regional government department with responsibility for economic growth had identified the role that Tourism plays as an economic driver that could be delivered for visitors and citizens alike was welcome. As a result, the tone of the draft response was to recognise and support the need for an innovative and collaborative tourism strategy and sector. However, the response also suggested that there was a more effective mechanism for achieving this, namely, to utilise the data, insights and structures that already existed at local level and to identify greater opportunities for collaborative working that took cognisance of cross cutting objectives and shared resources, that focused efforts and facilitated effective delivery.

During discussion, one Member highlighted the importance of Neighbourhood Tourism and suggested it's inclusion in the response to align with the Council's strategy.

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The Committee noted the contents of report and agreed the draft response to the consultation as set out in Appendix 1, with the additional request to emphasis neighbourhood tourism.

Update on the Fleadh Cheoil

The Director of Economic Development provided an update on the ongoing Fleadh bid work and requested associated budget.

He stated that, in recent weeks, officers had developed an updated edition of the Fleadh Cheoil bid book and this would accompany the Council’s Expression of Interest for the 2025 event, which must be with the Fleadh Executive Office in Dublin by 15th December, 2023.

He advised that this updated iteration had been consolidated by feedback received on our previous submissions – and it now included an English version with Irish language headings, a separate full Irish language version and additional content inserted on Accessibility and Sustainability (as per previous bid submission feedback from Comhaltas).

He reminded the Committee that, at its meeting in June, it had approved officers to continue with the bid process for future years, approved the budget for 2023-24 associated with the bid process (including attendance of a delegation at each event including attendance by Lord Mayor at the Fleadh Cheoil in Mullingar in August) and noted the costs associated with bid activity for 2024-25 and 2025-26.

He pointed out that, since then, the 2024 / 2025 calendar of Fleadh related events had become available as follows:

Comhaltas HQ Christmas Dinner 2023	Dublin	Saturday 9 December 23	Lord Mayor, Chief Executive, Director
Ulster Convention	Dun Uladh Centre, Omagh	Sunday 18 February 24	Director, Senior Manager
GB Convention	London	Friday 1 – Sunday 3 March 24	Senior Manager
HQ Comhaltas Congress	Sligo	4 – 5 May	Director
US Convention	Buffalo, New York	4 – 7 April 2024	Director
All Ireland Fleadh	Wexford	4 – 12 August 2024	Lord Mayor, Chief Executive, Director, Senior Manager and various Officers (tbc)
Comhaltas HQ Christmas Dinner 2024	Dublin	<i>Possibly Saturday 7 December 24 (tbc)</i>	Lord Mayor, Director and various Officers (tbc)

The table also illustrates which events the Lord Mayor and other Council officials might need to attend.

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The Director of Economic Development highlighted that officers were now seeking permission to send the Lord Mayor and appropriate officers to these events as detailed. He highlighted that attendance was important to demonstrate the ongoing commitment from the Council and Ards Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCE) to securing Fleadh Cheoil. In particular, it was critical that approval was provided promptly to allow travel arrangements to be booked as soon as possible for the US Convention in Buffalo, New York in early April 2024 (which was within the first week of the new financial year). This would ensure optimum value for money in the booking process and to allow for synergy between the travel plans of the Council's delegation and that of Ards CCE. For the appropriate Director detailed as above, costs were expected to be circa £2,500 for attendance at the US Convention.

He explained that the in-year Events Development Budget (£40,000) had to-date covered the costs of the Ards Letter of Offer in-year, and other Fleadh bid book work to date including translation, design and print costs. In addition, members agreed to provide a Eurovision event in Belfast in May from this budget line. While some budget remained (circa £7,000), a full Fleadh Executive visit was also planned for Belfast within the first financial quarter of 2024, which needed to be accounted for in budget profiling.

The Director of Economic Development advised that the Committee was requested to consider approval for the additional budget required to accommodate the arrangements for the US Convention in - year to a value of £2,500.

In relation to Ards CCE, the Committee was reminded that under the conditions of the current in-year Funding Agreement with Ards CCE, the branch were responsible for making their own travel and accommodation arrangements. This included the US Convention at the beginning of April 2024. Officers were working with Finance and Legal to ensure the early release of appropriate funds from the 2024/2025 financial year were processed to enable flights and accommodation bookings to proceed (circa £22k).

The Committee noted the contents of report and approved that the budget from 2024/25 financial year be used to accommodate the arrangements for the US Convention in April 2024.

Growing Business and the Economy

**Building an inclusive labour market –
research and event update**

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update members on plans for a conference to take place on 22 January 2024. The conference will focus on how to make the labour market more inclusive – with a particular focus on addressing economic inactivity.**

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 Members are asked to:

- Note the report including details of the planned 22 January 2024 event focusing on inclusive labour markets
- Promote the event to key contacts in their networks in order to ensure a wide representation and discussion at the event.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Members will be aware that funding for projects and organisations working with those who are economically inactive were significantly impacted with the cessation of EU funds. Traditionally, this work had been resourced through European Social Fund (ESF) funding. This concluded in March 2023. The replacement funding – Shared Prosperity Fund – does include a theme which focuses on People and Skills. The most significant element of this funding – around £50million – has been set aside for projects which focus on addressing economic inactivity. 18 projects were awarded funding for delivery through to March 2025 (from April 2023). 13 of these projects are based in Belfast (but some have regional coverage).

3.2 As these projects mobilise for delivery, there are concerns around the sustainability of the funding model (which will run out in just over a year from now) as well as the ability of those projects, alone, to address a long-standing structural issue in the local labour market.

3.3 In Belfast, economic inactivity presents a significant challenge for the city. The current economic inactivity rate for Belfast is around 29% - slightly ahead of the regional average. There are a number of reasons why people are economically inactive: students are counted among this figure as are those with caring responsibilities (looking after the family and home), health reasons and early retirees. While the inactivity rate is high, the overall unemployment rate for the region has decreased to an all-time low: figures for November 2023 show it sitting around 2.1%. What this means is that employers are competing within a limited talent pool. However the inactivity rate has never seen any real improvement over many decades – regardless of the prevailing economic climate and employment/unemployment rate.

- 3.4** In more recent times, there has been a wider discourse around what solutions are needed to address the challenges of economic inactivity. This is a very complex problem that will require a multi-faceted solution involving partners across many areas including health; skills support; economic development; social security and childcare support.
- 3.5** While DfC retains the policy remit for this area of work, the input from a wider number of partners means that sustainable solutions that make an impact can only be found if all partners get behind the issue and make long-term commitments in this space.
- 3.6** One of the reflections that we have identified is the absence of a clear understanding of the scale, nature and scope of the challenge. This inhibits the ability to have an informed discussion on potential solutions. In recognition of this, under the banner of the Belfast Labour Market Partnership, officers are planning to host an event at Ulster University's Belfast campus on 22 January 2024 entitled: Inclusive Labour Markets: Opportunities, Challenges and Solutions.
- 3.7** The aim of the conference is to facilitate discussion and instigate actions which can address economic inactivity and champion inclusive employment, stimulate an informed discussion of the need for and value of creating a more inclusive labour market and work towards a coherent solution that can improve outcomes for citizens and support a more competitive and productive economy.
- 3.8** The objectives of the event are to:
- Establish a shared understanding of the nature and scale of economic inactivity across the region
 - Establish a critical analysis of challenges and solutions within 'the system'
 - Develop a shared understanding of what is possible and what could be achieved through collaboration
 - Provide opportunities to learn from best practice, exchange knowledge and share ideas for the future
 - Identify key steps require to move towards a sustainable solution.
- 3.9** The conference is intended to act as an opener for a much wider discussion on this issue. This is particularly important given the pending funding end-date in March 2025 and the need to ensure that a well-considered solution in developed and resourced to take over at that point.

3.10 Aligning with key policy and strategic priorities, including the Belfast Agenda, the Inclusive Growth Strategy, Levelling Up and 10X, the programme will include opportunities for discussions on a range of issues such as:

- **Opportunities for greater engagement between health and employment support services**
- **Potential implications of further welfare reform**
- **Re-skilling and upskilling support to encourage labour market participation and progress**
- **A future investment model that can make an impact.**

3.11 A draft agenda can be found in Appendix 1. This is still in development and is subject to further changes as we work through it with our partner organisations.

3.12 The target audience for the event will include:

- **Employer/business organisations: Chambers of Commerce, FSB, CBI, Software Alliance, CITB, NISCC etc. as well as local enterprise agencies and anchor institutions such as Belfast HSC Trust, Belfast Harbour**
- **Government departments and agencies responsible for policy, commissioning and delivery: Department for Communities, Department for the Economy, NI Skills Council, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Department for Health, Public Health Agency, Department of Justice, The Executive Office**
- **Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs) across the region**
- **Employability and skills providers and representative/support groups such as NICVA, UKSPF projects, Apprenticeships NI providers, FE colleges, Belfast Area Partnerships, VCSE panel, advice sector etc.**
- **Other key stakeholders within the employability and skills field such as RSA, Institute for Employment Studies, IPPO, QUB, UU, ERSI, The Law Centre etc.**
- **Academic input through universities, colleges and research institutes.**

3.13 In order to set the scene and ensure that the discussion is grounded in research and analysis, Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (EPC) team will undertake research in advance of the conference and this will be shared on the day. This research will focus on:

- **Context and background: high level long-term trends in economic inactivity, identifying the social and economic implications, backdrop of demographic and labour shortage challenges, importance and**

success of third sector in working with key marginalised groups and need for creative solutions

- Understanding the economically inactive: outlining definitions, levels and rates of inactivity in Belfast/NI, overview of headline reasons for inactivity
- Medium term and post-pandemic picture: reasons for inactivity both medium term and post-pandemic; long-term sick (e.g. benefit system, reasons for sickness, severity of conditions, increased waiting lists, etc.), looking after family home (e.g. women overrepresented in unpaid labour, lack of flexibility in positions across all sectors/occupations, affordable childcare etc.), early retirees (e.g. 'great resignation' post-pandemic but broader need to retain older workers) and other
- Geographic concentration: outline the spatial composition of inactivity, highlighting inner city areas that perform particularly poorly on multiple economic indicators (e.g. inactivity, employment deprivation, multiple health conditions, poverty) and how these indicators link together to form at times entrenched concentrations over many years
- Demand-side insights: understanding where jobs are likely to come from; in what numbers; what skills levels they will require – and thinking about potential impacts for engaging those not currently actively engaged in the labour market
- Policy and employer solutions: begin to identify policy solutions and the need for creativity, including third-sector cooperation, cross-departmental approaches and employer engagement.

3.14 There will also be a contribution from Tony Wilson who leads up the Brighton-based think tank Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and who is currently working on the Commission for the Future of Employment Support. Tony has worked at the heart of UK government on a range of labour market and skills issues and has particular expertise in labour market policy and analysis, the design, delivery and evaluation of employment and skills programmes and supporting organisations to understand and apply evidence of 'what works' in employment policy and service delivery. Tony was part of the team that developed the Employability NI model which had, at its core, the Labour Market Partnerships structure so he is very familiar with the Northern Ireland landscape.

3.15 The event will also include an input from Andy Haldane, Chief Executive of RSA and former Chief Economist at the Bank of England. Belfast City Council has been working closely with

the RSA over a number of years on projects such as Digital Badging.

3.16 It is hoped that the conference can act as the start of a conversation about what needs to change to create the best conditions for achieving an inclusive labour market. It is expected that it will lead to further cross-sector engagement in order to drill into this complex issue and to try to identify sustainable solutions that can start to make an impact on what has been an intractable challenge for many decades. This has been identified as a priority area of work in the refresh of the Belfast Agenda.

3.17 Financial and Resource Implications

Funding for the event has been set aside within existing Employability and Skills and Labour Market Partnership budgets already approved by this committee. Ulster University is making the venue available free of charge.

3.18 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

The outcomes of this event are to try to identify solutions that can have a positive impact on equality and good relations as well as addressing other economic and social challenges. The event will include invitees from all across the region.”

The Committee:

- Noted the report including details of the planned 22nd January 2024 event focusing on inclusive labour markets; and
- Agreed to promote the event to key contacts in their networks in order to ensure a wide representation and discussion at the event.

Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor Partnership Agreement approval

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting in March, it had received an update on progress to support the development of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor including work on the strategy and action plan. The plan aimed to support sustainable economic growth across the region, identifying areas of focus for the partnership to address future opportunities and seeking to address any gaps in existing provision.

The vision of the strategy was to become a leading economic corridor in Europe, achieving sustainable growth through collaborative research and development, a highly skilled workforce and enabling infrastructure. This included an ambition to be world renowned as a major international centre in growth sectors such as Professional Services, Advanced Manufacturing, ICT and Life and Health Sciences.

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The action plan outlined key pillars to support effective delivery, including ways of working, governance and resourcing, and communication and marketing. Priority actions to date included:

- Staffing: in line with recommendations under the strategy, two full time staff members, a Programme Manager and Project Officer were recruited in Summer 2023. The staff were based at Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and operate across the partnership;
- Management and governance: Dates had been agreed until September 2024 for regular meetings of the partnership governance structure, including monthly meetings at Director level, bi-monthly among CEOs and quarterly meetings for elected representatives. A new Collaboration and Funding Agreement had been prepared to further clarify areas of co-operation and partnership working and to confirm the budget profile for 2024;
- Communications: DBEC was developing a coherent marketing and communications strategy in line with the strategic objectives. The team would work with an external communications partner to support delivery;
- Engagement: Given that the Partnership now had dedicated resources in place, the team was working on a stakeholder engagement framework that would identify priority linkages, aligned to the action plan. The Team was already engaging in key meetings and this work would continue in order to further shape the programme of activity;
- Research: The immediate focus on research included a review of existing skills strategies, identifying gaps, barriers and opportunities for co-operation. The DBEC staff had also participated in consultation around research commissioned by the Shared Island Unit in relation to the all-island labour market and were exploring opportunities for engagement in Peace Plus projects in this area of work; and
- Funding: The Irish Government's Shared Island initiative aimed to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement to enhance cooperation, connection and mutual understanding on the island and engage with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future. The DBEC Partnership was successful in an application for Shared Island funding to carry out a feasibility study into regional innovation hubs within the partnership area. This work would conclude in early December and relevant findings would be brought back to this committee for information.

The Committee was reminded that, as part of the governance structure for the partnership, there were 24 councillors on a Political Advisory Group (3 nominees from each council area) and the Council nominees were Councillors Bunting, Hanvey and R. McLaughlin. Nominees were appointed for a two-year period, with a view to participating in quarterly meetings. The most recent meeting of the group took place in

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September 2023 hosted by Dublin City University. The next meeting was expected to take place at the Ulster University Belfast Campus in December 2023.

The development of a new Collaboration and Funding Agreement was recommended as part of previous work to strengthen and clarify the governance and management arrangements for the Partnership. A draft document was prepared by the DBEC secretariat and had been reviewed by council officers ([Appendix 1](#)).

He explained that the Agreement sets out the detailed workings of the collaborative partnership between the 8 partner councils and the 2 universities. Newry Mourne and Down District Council had agreed to undertake the role of Lead Council on behalf of and with the agreement of the other Collaborating Members. The Lead Council would continue to administer the DBEC resource team and would request and co-ordinate input from the Collaborating Members as and when required. The Lead Council would also provide accounting and financial management for the partnership and would be responsible for procurement.

It was reported that the Political Advisory Group (PAG), Chief Executive Officers (CEO) Steering Group and Directors Steering Group would oversee programme delivery and review performance against the DBEC Strategy and the Action Plan.

The Committee:

- Noted the progress on the development of the DBEC initiative; and
- Approved the Collaboration and Funding Agreement as outlined at Appendix 1.

Vibrant Business Destinations Update

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting in November 2022, it had agreed a new investment approach to support local business associations to develop and deliver interventions to drive footfall and create vibrancy in those areas.

The overarching purpose of the pilot initiative was to strengthen the competitiveness of our local business destinations, focusing on actions which aim to:

- Support the development of shared and safely accessible commercial areas;
- Support the diversification of business destinations outside of the city centre;
- Bring together key stakeholders to benefit business destinations outside of the city centre; and
- Improve the quality of urban design, distinctiveness, and townscape quality.

The Committee was also reminded that the pilot was developed in response to feedback from a range of businesses and traders' associations across the city regarding drop off in footfall and a challenging operating environment post-Covid. Through engagement with the Department for Communities (DfC), an opportunity was identified to

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secure resources through the DfC Revitalisation programme. The concept for the “Vibrant Business Destinations” (VBD) intervention was identified as a pilot programme in keeping with work undertaken by the Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) to develop a “Living High Street Toolkit”. The Council successfully secured funding of £475,000 from the Department for Communities (DfC). The Council also provided match funding to enable the delivery of advice and support to extend the scope of the scheme. VBD was intended to complement a wider programme of support and activity that was taking place within the city centre, including the Vacant to Vibrant Support Programme and previous business support interventions through the Covid Revitalisation Programme.

The Director of Economic Development advised that the pilot initiative aimed to support up to 10 business associations to a maximum of £40,000 each for expenditure on a range of eligible activities. The objectives were to:

- Increase engagement and partnership working between statutory partners and local business associations;
- Support the development of area-based actions plans which address specific local concerns and deliver specific, measurable benefits over the short/medium and long term;
- Increase footfall and sales as a direct result of marketing and promotional activity; generate new customers or sustaining customer loyalty through increasing sales revenue, increasing the number of new customers or developing repeat business;
- Enhance the profile of the area with a view to stimulating economic activity;
- Support the growth and development of businesses engaged in associated activity; and
- Support the sustainability of businesses and local business associations.

He explained that the initiative operated via a two-stage application process and that basic eligibility criteria included:

- Groups or established associations must be led by the business community (including social enterprises and cooperatives) to address locally based issues and be committed to becoming a constituted association;
- Groups or established associations must be made up of retail/hospitality/consumer facing businesses located on road frontage/local high streets;
- The priority focus is on arterial routes and routes with a minimum number of 15 confirmed businesses located on road frontage;
- Group membership should be representative of the businesses in the eligible area – both by volume and by business type; and
- Business membership must represent predominantly owner-occupiers and independent traders, however, it could involve representation from community organisations.

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He informed the Committee that there were 48 initial Expression of Interest (Eol) requests covering the following areas: East Belfast: Eastside Partnership, Ballyhackamore, Cregagh and Woodstock Roads, Newtownards Road, Tullycarnett, The Mount, Albert Bridge, Castlereagh Place, Belmont Road, Kings Square and Gilnahirk, Castlereagh Road, Holywood Arches. South Belfast: Forward South Partnership Board, Lower Ormeau Road, Crescent Arts, Malone Road. West Belfast: West Belfast Partnership Board, Falls, Springbank Industrial Estate, Blackstaff Mill, Andersonstown Road. North Belfast: Cliftonville Circus, Lower Antrim Road, Cavehill Road, Argyle Business Park. Other: City Centre Management, Dundonald.

He highlighted that many of the original requests had failed to meet the funding criteria or the initial enthusiasm of groups or individuals diminished over time, while others couldn't garner enough local business support to formally apply. From the original 48 requests, ten groups were now currently being supported.

He advised that, following successful completion of an Eol at stage 1, groups were supported to become formally constituted, and to develop area-based action plans. These plans provided an analysis of the locality, the physical environment, existing provision and key challenges and opportunities. They identified priority issues to be addressed to improve the business environment through engagement with existing businesses and stakeholders in the area. In addition, a Design Team was appointed to assist trader groups in the delivery of any capitalbased activities. The action plans and designs formed the basis for moving to a stage 2 application. A successful Stage 2 application enabled the group to draw down funding to support their action plan delivery. An overview of support was included in [Appendix 1](#).

The Director of Economic Development confirmed that the following groups were currently delivering agreed project activity, having had their action plan approved by an Assessment Panel whose members included Department for Communities (DfC), Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and council officers:

1. Ballyhackamore Business Association
2. Cliftonville/Oldpark Business Association
3. Kings Square and Cherryvalley Traders
4. Cregagh Woodstock Traders
5. Cavehill Business Association
6. Belmont Road Traders Association
7. Lower Ormeau Traders Association

He pointed out that each of these groups had received £32,000 (80%) of their £40,000. The remaining £8,000 (20%) balance would be released upon successful delivery and monitoring of their activities.

He highlighted that, in addition to the work of these seven groups, three other groups were actively engaging with the Council. They included Holywood Arches, Twin Spires and Lisburn Road Traders. They were working through issues including resolving land ownership, finalising locations for planters and displays and addressing potential traffic impact of proposed measures. He explained that, in some instances, projects had not progressed as the groups had not been able to take ownership of the plan in a way

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that would make the investment sustainable or secure local ownership. Council officers continued to liaise with these groups to complete their applications and work towards agreed action plans.

He informed the Committee that, to date, there had been a number of successful activities, including development of new markets, installation of planters and plant tubs and additional landscaping work and development of new mural artworks. In addition, areas had begun to develop their marketing, branding and advertising in line with the programme outcomes. As predicted, there had been a significant ramp-up in activity in the run-up to Christmas in order to derive maximum return on investment.

The Director of Economic Development explained that early evidence from the funded interventions had shown an increase in retail spend, increase in footfall, and an uplift in positive perceptions of neighbourhoods. Trader groups had also developed their networks through additional internal cooperation and exchange of ideas and resources.

He advised that the Enterprise and Business Growth Team continued to coordinate this programme and engage with internal officers and departments to identify wider opportunities and synergies with similar projects across the Council. Council officers would continue to engage with DfC to identify any potential future funding opportunities following the conclusion of the pilot.

During discussion, in response to a Member's question regarding the success of the scheme and its impact, the Director of Economic Development advised that an evaluation and the benefits of the scheme would be provided to the Committee in due course.

After discussion, the Committee:

- Noted the update and work undertaken to support the delivery of area-based Vibrant Business Destinations; and
- Noted that an evaluation and the benefits of the scheme would be provided to the Committee.

Employability and Skills - Bridges to Progression Update

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the allocation of Bridges to Progression resources based on the outcome of the competitive application process undertaken.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- **Approve the allocation of Labour Market Partnership (LMP) resources for Bridges to Progression and note**

the proposals to seek proposals from delivery partners to provide targeted support that can improve outcomes for participants.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Labour Market Partnership

Members will be aware that the Labour Market Partnership is an intervention supported by DfC within all 11 council areas. Resources from the Labour Market Partnership enable the Council to increase the range and scope of employability and skills activity. The LMP also provides a platform for engagement with government departments, community partners and business organisations as a means of refocusing regional programmes more effectively within the Belfast area. The LMP action plan recognises that, while there are gaps that have been identified that will necessitate the creation of new interventions, not all activity need be new 'provision' or 'programmes'; sometimes it is equally important to profile and/or promote existing interventions. One of these interventions is Bridges to Progression which officers have ensured operates as a 'test and learn' to inform any recommissioning of Skills for Life & Work DfE contracts.

3.2 Bridges to Progression

Bridges to Progression is an intervention to support young people aged 16-17 years who are at risk of disengaging from Skills for Life & Work due to their personal circumstances. Participants can access intensive personal support to help them progress in and complete their formal training, with the ambition of improving the levels of progression into employment or further training. Previous analysis had flagged a very high level of drop out from these programmes, particularly in Belfast. It showed that the reasons behind participants no longer engaging with the programme related to wider social challenges – rather than the programme content itself.

3.3 At the October 2023 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, it was agreed that officers would seek expressions of interest from organisations delivering these programmes, outlining how they would use resources to add value to the core activity with the objective of improving outcomes for participants. It was also agreed that officers would undertake assessment of the applications for funding in line with the approach detailed in this report.

**City Growth and Regeneration Committee,
Wednesday, 6th December, 2023**

3.4 While all Training for Success/Skills for Life & Work providers were invited to submit applications for 2023/24 outlining how they would use the resources, seven applied and six met the quality threshold. Bridges to Progression offers an average of £750 per participant up to the maximum of £90,000 allocated from LMP Budget 2023/24:

Applicant	Activity proposed	Requested	Awarded
Springvale	Engage Programme: teambuilding, mentoring, mental health support, employer engagement & lifestyle support	£19,811	£15,113
People First	Employ a counsellor: 1-1 and group counselling sessions, crisis response service, behavioural support through CBT & staff support around boundaries, signposting and managing challenging behaviour	£20,000	£15,257
Springboard	HeadStart Programme: lifestyle support, employer engagement, training, team building and extra tutoring support for essential skills	£18,466	£14,087
Workforce	Jets Programme: personal and social development mentoring, employability coaching	£20,000	£15,257
Bryson	Well-Mind: mental health support through goal planning, conflict resolution, health and nutrition	£19,700	£15,028
Impact	LEAVE Programme: employability mentoring, mental health support, employer interfacing, training, workplace resilience, steps to overall participation	£20,000	£15,257

3.5 While the LMP budget has £90,000 allocated for Bridges to Progression, the total cost of applications above was £117,977. As outlined above, officers recommend to proportionally reduce each award to ensure that we keep within budget.

3.6 The key performance indicators are to engage with 120 young people at risk of disengaging from Skills for Life & Work for a minimum of 10 hours contact time. With the submissions and awards as detailed above we are confident we can deliver a quality and effective intervention to support those most at risk of disengagement supporting a minimum of 120 young people.

Officers are also engaging with the Department for the Economy to seek to incorporate the flexibility offered within

Bridges to Progression with future iterations of Skills for Life & Work with the aim of improving employability outcomes. The Department are keen to ensure that the learning from Bridges to Progression are utilised as a 'testbed' for innovative approaches to keep young people engaged on and progressing from statutory programmes such as Skills for Life & Work. This engagement will therefore include establishing common measurement and evaluation tools and processes as well as convening targeted engagement with each provider and their participants to capture learning in real time.

3.7 Finance and Resource Implications

The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the agreed 2023/24 budget for the Belfast LMP Action Plan.

3.8 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

The project referenced in this report is informed by statistical research, stakeholder engagement and complementary policies and strategies. New projects or service areas are equality screened and a rural needs assessment completed. Consideration is given to equality and good relation impacts at the initial stages of project development.”

During discussion, one Member questioned the geographical spread of the Success/Skills for Life and Work Providers who would be delivering the scheme across the city. The Director of Economic Development advised that this information could be collated as part of the wider analysis of the scheme.

The Committee:

- Approved the allocation of Labour Market Partnership (LMP) resources for Bridges to Progression and noted the proposals would be sought from delivery partners to provide targeted support that could improve outcomes for participants; and
- Noted that the geographical spread of providers and participants in the scheme would be collated as part of the wider analysis of the scheme.

Chairperson