



Subject:	International Engagement Approach – initial proposals
Date:	9 October 2024
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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Insert number <input type="checkbox"/>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information relating to any individual2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual3. 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 matter5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction7. 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 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to set out the proposed approach to a review of the council's international engagement activity. Subject to member agreement, a more detailed report will be brought back to the Committee at a future date.
2.0	Recommendation
	<p>It is recommended that Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the planned review of international opportunities and potential objectives and areas of interest aligned to city priorities and agree to receive a future report to consider how targeted international engagement activity can support and advance our key ambitions.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	At the September meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members noted a proposal to undertake a review of international opportunities and potential objectives and areas of interest aligned to city priorities and agreed to receive a future report to consider how targeted international engagement activity could support and advance our key ambitions.
3.2	As a first step in this work, it was agreed that officers would bring back a series of high-level considerations to shape the work and that, subject to agreement on the outline approach, a more detailed report setting out the framework would be brought back to a future meeting.
3.3	<p><u>Purpose</u></p> <p>In undertaking the initial review, officers reflected on the previous International Relations Framework which had expired in 2021. We consider that the purpose set out in that framework remains broadly valid, namely: “to ensure that Belfast is optimally positioned on the international stage to realise our ambitions, and that our resources and priorities are aligned with the overarching strategic vision for the city”. It notes that the council’s approach should consider the wider international engagement approach at a regional level – as articulated through the Programme for Government. The current Programme for Government is out to consultation. It comprises three key missions, one of which is “Prosperity”. One of the critical areas of action is identified as “building on our international relationships to advance our economic development and attract new investment opportunities”. It is understood that a new International Relations Strategy for NI, to support this, is currently being developed and will be brought before the Assembly in the near future. This reflects the approach set out above – and identifies the opportunity to leverage the NI Executive’s networks and resources to support our international engagement work.</p>

3.4

Priority work areas

The previous International Framework identified a number of priority areas of focus. These were broadly termed:

- Promoting trade and investment
- Attracting visitors and students.

3.5

Our initial assessment is that these should remain as priority areas of focus in any new approach. However, taking account of changes in the operating environment since the original framework, our views on how this work might evolve include:

- Promoting trade and investment: likely to remain our top priority but balance of effort to move towards supporting local businesses to explore international markets rather than FDI (although we should continue to support Invest NI in this work). Another significant change since the last framework is our strong capital investment proposition and – in particular – the need to identify and access international financing and profiling opportunities to bring forward critical development schemes.
- Attracting visitors and students: Tourism numbers have rallied significantly over the last year and are now back near pre-Covid numbers. The sector remains a key employer in the city and planned investments such as Belfast Stories and key international event opportunities such as Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann will increase the number of out-of-state visitors. We will need to work closely with Tourism Ireland through their international office network to tailor messaging and maximise coverage, in line with wider campaigns. Given the recent investment in culture through interventions such as Belfast 2024, it is likely that the cultural dimension of the tourism messaging will be profiled more significantly in the future. Increased investment in local tourism product should ensure a more authentic and unique local offer and will provide the opportunity for learning from international city partners and developing cultural relationships.
- With regard to the priority around attracting students, supporting our universities and colleges to attract international students is likely to remain an important part of our work given their significant ambitions in this field. Another aspect of this support to Universities and colleges that has grown in recent years, is making connections and introductions for our Academic Institutions with respect to teacher/staff exchange and joint research partnerships.
- One area that may be worth exploring is how we can support the work of Invest NI around “attracting in” talent to address some of the skills gaps in our growth sectors – potentially utilising the international students as part of our talent pool. This will obviously need to consider visa regulations and stipulations at the time and will

complement rather than replace our existing proposals to help our own residents into new or better jobs.

3.6 Other areas of engagement may include:

- Innovation City and Smart Belfast: with the appointment of a new Innovation Commissioner and the re-establishment of the Innovation City Belfast Board, there is likely to be an increased focus on promoting the city globally as a beacon for innovation – with a particular focus on inclusive innovation. The vision for ICB is that “Belfast is a place where global excellence in innovation supports inclusive economic growth, delivers more and better jobs, and has a sustainable positive impact on our city, its citizens and the wider region”. International partnerships, collaboration and profiling opportunities will be critical to ensure that this vision is realised.
- Resilience/net zero: since the launch of the Resilience Strategy in December 2020, the work to transition Belfast to an inclusive, zero-emissions, climate-resilient economy within a generation has stepped up significantly. In this field, global networks are critical for learning and sharing of good practice and the regulatory frameworks often derive from international agreements. There are emerging opportunities for profiling investment opportunities from external markets for the pipeline for priority projects identified through interventions such as the Belfast Local Area Energy Plan
- Supporting sustainable and inclusive growth: this has been identified as a priority area of work within the Belfast Agenda. It is likely to be an underpinning pillar of our engagement activities – and will drive our workplans to ensure that sufficient consideration is given to this narrative when exploring investment opportunities.

3.7 In addition to what we should focus on, officers have also given consideration to how we should work. Initial thinking on this includes:

- While recognising the need for some flexibility as part of an overall framework, we need to take a strategic approach to opportunity, building on the strengths of our existing city to city relationships. We have Sister City status with Nashville, Boston in the USA, and Shenyang in China, as well as the recently secured Memorandum of Understanding with Sejong in South Korea.
- We consider that this approach could be delivered through a multi-annual plan (aligned to the Belfast Agenda timelines) but with an annual action plan and review to take account of learning and new emerging opportunities
- Need to focus on areas where we can add value: this may mean leveraging partner resources to maximise impact and/or taking the decision not to progress with some proposals or areas of work

- Need to create an overall framework that is fully aligned to and supportive of ambitions and commitments set out in the Belfast Agenda – principally the “Our Economy” and “Our Place” themes – but may also be opportunities under “Our Planet”
- Need to establish a mechanism for objectively assessing emerging opportunities in order to prioritise resources and focus effort – we will not be able to do everything and there are activities that will not advance our city ambitions so we should be clear in our analysis of these
- Need to build on existing linkages – going stronger and deeper rather than spreading our resources too thin
- Need to work through strategic partners – making use of existing resources, and networks rather than duplicating effort
- Reciprocity – value of focusing collaboration on willing and engaged partners
- Need to consider appropriate metrics to assess impact of interventions and engagement, recognising that it can be difficult to directly attribute outputs and outcomes to single interventions and that the international engagement activity should be considered as a value-added element of an overall strategy
- Need to ensure value for money – in line with all service delivery
- Need to keep the approach under review in line with the changing global context and changes in personnel/political mandate/policy within the market.

Moving forward and proposed next steps

3.8

In order to move forward, members are asked to consider and comment on the initial reflections presented above. Following consideration of feedback from Members, officers plan to undertake a mapping of existing linkages across the council alongside a series of engagements with our external partners to understand the current levels and nature of activity as well as building an understanding of resource commitments and future plans. This initial review work will be critical in helping us to avoid duplication as well as maximise opportunities for synergy with external partners. It will also help consider internal resource allocations as part of the budget setting process. It is proposed that a more detailed framework will be brought back to this Committee in February/March 2025 in order to work towards an agreed approach for the new financial year onwards.

Financial and Resource Implications

3.9

No specific resource implications at this point. Available resources and future resource requirements will be identified through the scoping exercise.

Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

3.10

There are no direct Equality or Good Relations implications associated with this report.

4.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
	None