



<b>Subject:</b>	International engagement – update on proposed approach
<b>Date:</b>	8 October 2025
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Damien Martin, Strategic Director, Place and Economy
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Laura Leonard, EU and International Relations Manager

<b>Restricted Reports</b>	
<b>Is this report restricted?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b>	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
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<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Information relating to any individual</li><li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li><li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li><li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li><li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li><li>6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction</li><li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li></ol>	

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

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues</b>
	The purpose of this report is to respond to Members' queries regarding the proposed approach to the council's engagement in international activity for the coming three-year period following discussion at the August committee, and to propose a new framework for engagement, taking account of the comments received.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note the responses to issues raised at the August 2025 Committee set out in section 3.5 of the report</li> <li>• Approve the proposed approach to council activity in international engagement work for the coming three years, as well as the annual action plan for the current financial year.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	At the August 2025 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members received a draft International Relations Framework 2025 – 2028 along with an action plan for 2025/26 activity. At that meeting, there was a discussion regarding elements of the draft approach, and it was agreed that officers would review and produce an updated report at a future meeting.
3.2	Members will be aware that since the last International Relations Framework 2017-2021 there have been significant internal and external shifts that require a change of focus. Some of these present opportunities while others are potential threats. The global operating environment is facing significant headwinds and is highly volatile at the present time. Macro-level factors mean that it can be difficult to plan activities with any degree of certainty given that changes such as the introduction of tariffs can impact directly on commitments and ambitions around trade and FDI activity, visa restrictions impact on student mobility and research, and cuts in international funding may impact on international cultural activities.
3.3	At a regional level, The Executive Office is expected to issue a new International Relations Strategy in the coming period aimed towards using its resources – including the international office network and the Invest NI overseas teams – to deliver PfG priorities, principally to “Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy”. Invest NI has also released a new business strategy, including an enhanced focus on both FDI and international trade activity. That strategy also places a significant focus on sub-regional growth, ensuring that all parts of the region are supported.

3.4	<p>Locally, the recent Belfast Agenda refresh and collective commitment to a series of agreed priority actions means that any future approach needs to align with and support these actions. Within the council, the changing operational structures – with new teams established over recent years focusing on activities such as Innovation, Climate and City Regeneration and Development mean that many officers are engaging in international networks and partnerships as part of their “business as usual”. This would not have been the case when the original international relations framework was established in 2017. In addition, the increased focus on international events such as One Young World and Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, as well as the planned investment in Belfast Stories demonstrate an enhanced focus on attracting international visitors to Belfast. This presents additional opportunities not only for developing and implementing a strong city narrative for key audiences, but also to consider opportunities for “layering” business and cultural investment opportunities.</p>
3.5	<p>At the August 2025 meeting of the Committee, a series of questions were raised. By way of update, these are summarised below, along with a commentary/update on progress since the August meeting.</p> <p><u>Questions regarding nature and level of engagement with EU</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The draft framework recognises that the June 2025 UK/EU Reset and the unique NI trading relationship offered through the Windsor Framework presents new opportunities for European engagement. It also recognises the potential for working with Invest NI and our universities and businesses to rebuild relationships and enhance opportunities in relation to innovation and knowledge exchange.</li> <li>• In the context of the need to progress these new opportunities the August report outlined officers would be engaging on the value of maintaining Eurocities membership (fee is £16000 per annum) and potential alternative uses in relation to EU engagement.</li> <li>• Members will be aware that the Council has been a member of the Eurocities network since the early 1990s. While the network was a useful source of information on key policy developments and partnering opportunities for collaborative EU funds, this has been less relevant to us since EU exit. Belfast did host a meeting of the Eurocities Culture Forum in 2024 and this provided a good opportunity to showcase the work of Belfast 2024 during the year of cultural celebration. Following the August 2024 meeting of the Committee, the EU and International Relations Manager engaged with officers across the council to explore the level of engagement that they had in the Eurocities network over the course of the previous year. It appears that this was very limited and not providing value for money for the annual investment which is almost €16,000. Although Belfast was a very engaged member of the network for a long period of time, our view is that, in the new operating context, we are still able to access</li> </ul>

the relevant insights, networks and contacts that we need through our involvement in the UK Core Cities Group, for which there are no additional fees payable. In addition, through our involvement in the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor work, we have been exploring opportunities for collaborative funding projects with RoI partners and this is one of the priority areas of work within the action plan for the coming year.

- In addition to institutional and funding engagement in the EU, officers consider that there are opportunities to explore additional trade development and collaborative partnership activities with organisations and businesses within the EU member states. The International Relations Manager met with the team from the Invest NI Brussels Office. They have undertaken to carry out scoping work to identify priority events and activities aligned to Belfast's sectors and interests, utilising their networks across different EU cities and regions, as well as in Brussels itself. The NI Bureau has recruited a new Innovation & Economic Development Officer to undertake this work and this resource is available to the Council to help us identify a strategic engagement approach in this area of work. The NI Bureau has also offered the use of its offices and team to work with the Council to host any showcase events to promote the city for business culture, tourism and innovation, and matching similar cities with a presence in Brussels
- It is therefore our recommendation that we develop a scope of work with the NI Bureau Team in Brussels, based on the strategic priorities agreed through this International Relations engagement plan, tapping into their resources, networks and contacts. This scope of work will be completed by end November 2025, with a series of proposals for action within the current and next financial years
- Whilst we will continue to explore options to maintain cultural linkages, we also recommend that we pause our membership of the Eurocities network and refocus those resources towards development of this joint workplan with the NI Bureau and other partners, focusing on priority areas of collaboration across Europe for the benefit of our businesses and in conjunction with our partner organisations.

#### Questions regarding nature and level of engagement with China

- The NI Executive Office will sign off its International Strategy in the near future. This will give direction at an NI level for opportunities in China and other key international markets. Traditionally, the council has fallen in line with and supported those areas of work where they align with our city and corporate priorities
- Priority areas of work at present include use of the civic office to support annual inward student and research and innovation delegations as well as diplomatic engagement with officials from city, regional and national administrations. To do this work, we collaborate closely with organisations such as the Chinese Consulate and

the Confucius Institute. Through our stakeholder engagement, we facilitate a quarterly exchange of information on matters relating to collaboration between China and various Belfast-based partners

- Invest NI, the NI Executive Office and the Chinese Consulate are currently working on a NI/China Economic Forum which will take place in Belfast on 11-12 November 2025. This is likely to involve a number of large Chinese companies and banks who will be visiting the city to explore opportunities for investment and collaboration. Belfast City Council will work closely with the agencies to ensure that the city is well presented during these engagements and that opportunities for our businesses and partner organisations are maximised.

#### Questions regarding USA 250 activities

- At the September meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members were updated on the work of partner organisations to mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the United States in 2026, including the development and delivery of a small grants programme, to be supported by DfC. It was agreed that members would be kept updated on progress around these matters in the coming months.

#### Questions regarding how ethical and environmental considerations are taken account of in international relations activity

- As part of the development work on the international relations framework, an equality screening exercise was undertaken. In addition, sustainable and inclusive growth is a key theme of the draft framework, reflecting the wider council commitments in this field. All of our work will be directed by these commitments. Decisions around foreign direct investment (FDI) will be made by Invest NI but these are likely to be guided by the Minister's vision which focuses on four key pillars, namely good jobs; regional balance; improving productivity and reducing carbon emissions.

#### Member engagement in international relations activities

- Members raised some concerns at what they perceived to be limited opportunities for engagement in international relations activities in recent years. In line with the approach outlined in the framework which recognises the potential for elected members to play a key civic leadership role where their involvement supports our strategic objectives, since the August Committee, members have been invited to join officers for incoming international visits including the US Legislators visit on 21 August 2025, and the Belfast International Homecoming on 25 September 2025. Officers will continue to flag opportunities for engagement of elected members in relevant inward delegations.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With regard to more formal mechanisms for member engagement in international activities, officers are aware of a wider review of governance across the council. We would therefore recommend that discussions on potential structural approaches to engagement are considered as part of this work.</li> <li>• Aligned to this point, members noted that they wished to be kept more informed of international relations issues, including progress against targets and impact of investments. It is proposed that a quarterly review of international relations engagement activities is shared with the committee. This will serve to track progress over the previous quarter and to flag opportunities for engagement and key planned activities for the coming quarter. It will also enable elected members to identify opportunities for engagement in priority activities at an early stage (where these details are available).</li> </ul> <p><u>Tracking of progress and measurement of outcomes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was discussion regarding the difficulties associated with tracking KPIs for many of the international relations activities, given that progress is rarely linear, and activities can often take some time to come to fruition, following the initial investments. In order to address this, the quarterly reporting to the Committee will give more visibility to this programme of work. Officers have also established a CRM system to help track outcomes and to also help inform decisions around key contacts requiring follow-up as well as those who are more/less likely to help contribute to outcomes. This will help us target our resources more effectively</li> <li>• Members also noted that they wished to see a more detailed implementation plan, with more granular detail around targets and timelines – while acknowledging the difficulties referenced above. The plan in Appendix 2 includes more detail (where available) on planned activities and expected outcomes.</li> </ul>
3.6	<p>Taking account of the points raised above, the revised draft approach to council-led international engagement activity for the coming three-year period is set out in Appendix 1 and the supporting delivery plan for year one (2025-26) is set out in Appendix 2. The three-year “framework” document is intended to be a supporting document to other key strategies and plans such as the Belfast Agenda, the Corporate Plan and Local Development Plan – setting out how priority objectives and ambitions in those documents can be supported through international connections, networks and opportunities. Its purpose is to identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that can maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities.</p>
3.7	<p>The role of the council is positioned as using our civic leadership and convening role to:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilise existing relationships and connections to generate investment, both in our business and in key infrastructure such as housing, increase trade and tourism</li> <li>• Enhance Belfast's global visibility in key markets and communicate its unique assets and offer</li> <li>• Coordinate and amplify messaging to maximise return on investment</li> <li>• Support our partner organisations to deliver targets aligned with the Belfast Agenda ambition – with a focus on inclusive economic growth.</li> </ul>
3.8	<p>Evolving from the 2017-2021 document, the draft framework comprises three key pillars around which activity is likely to focus, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trade and investment</li> <li>• Innovation and knowledge exchange</li> <li>• City positioning, tourism promotion and cultural development.</li> </ul> <p>Each pillar contains a series of headline actions and the specific timeframes, outputs and benefits for each of these in the 2025-26 financial year is set out in Appendix 2.</p>
3.9	<p>Priority activities for the remainder of the current financial year include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development and production of new “investment prospectus”: collating key messaging (priority sectors; quality of life proposition; cultural assets; unique selling points) – timeline for completion – January 2026</li> <li>• Exploring opportunities for outward mission to Boston: explore opportunities to amplify planned activity/engagement by partner organisations, with a likely focus on priority growth sectors (including life and health sciences). Planning work ongoing – potential visit dates – first half of 2026</li> <li>• Working with Nashville partners to scope out inward life and health sciences business mission: early engagement is taking place to identify potential partners; areas of focus and preferred dates</li> <li>• Finalisation of scoping work with NI Executive Brussels Office on opportunities for engagement to support local businesses in accessing opportunities in EU markets – scoping work complete by November 2025 and proposals for action from January 2026</li> <li>• Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor: exploring additional funding opportunities including Peace Plus funded project on skills collaboration and addressing barriers to labour mobility. Project submitted – likely decision date October 2025. Delivery timeframe – three years</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in key international events e.g. Mobile World Congress (Barcelona) – promotion of key investment messaging (based on new investment prospectus)</li> <li>• Engagement in international partnership activity e.g. Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors' Challenge – twelve-month programme with 50 other cities aimed at delivering urban innovation solutions including officers and Innovation Commissioner visit to Columbia</li> <li>• Ongoing hosting opportunities for key inward delegations – prioritising key delegations aligned to city priorities and those with influence to help secure agreed outcomes.</li> </ul>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Financial and Resource Implications</b>
4.1	The EU and International Relations budget was approved as part of the 2025-26 estimates setting process. Budgets for individual activities are the responsibility of the respective teams.
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</b>
	No specific equality or good relations implications. Activities will focus on support for Belfast-based organisations and companies.
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Appendices</b>
	<b>Appendix 1:</b> Draft International Relations Framework – 2025-28 <b>Appendix 2:</b> International Relations Delivery Plan – 2025-26