



Subject:	Supporting local businesses – update report
Date:	5 November 2025
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time 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
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update members on the Enterprise Support Service (Go Succeed) – the regional initiative to support business start-up and growth that is being led by Belfast City Council on behalf of the 11 councils as well as sector-based activities being supported by the Enterprise and Business Growth team.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	Members are asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Note the update on progress at regional and Belfast level on the Enterprise Support ServiceNote the current funding challenges to the service post-March 2026 and agree to receive a further update report in the coming months to identify potential next steps

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree to provide funding of £25,000 to HIRANI to support delivery of the year two programme of work under the Launchpad initiative.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	At the April 2025 meeting of this Committee, members were provided with a performance update on the Northern Ireland Enterprise Support Service (Go Succeed). The service began operation in November 2023 and has supported thousands of potential entrepreneurs and existing businesses across Northern Ireland in that time.
3.2	By way of background, members will recall that Belfast City Council led on a successful funding application to the UK Government's Ministry for Community, Housing and Local Government (MHCLG) for UK Shared Prosperity Fund monies (SPF) to support delivery. This provided £17 million of support for the period to March 2025; £12 million programme delivery and £5 million for small grants.
3.3	Belfast City Council, as lead for the service, subsequently secured a further tranche of funding via an application to UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) of £9.2 million for the 2025/2026 financial year, ensuring continuity of the service. The focus of our activity for this year has been on ensuring the effective delivery of the service, while also exploring a more sustainable financial model beyond the March 2026 date. The current financial year is considered a "transition" year for Shared Prosperity Fund and the 11 June 2025 budget statement included high level details of a new approach to funding in the form of the "Local Growth Fund", to take effect from March 2026.
3.4	The service aims to be the go-to source for expert business advice across the region. It represents the councils' collective response to our statutory responsibility and offers a set of connected enterprise support services where individuals, entrepreneurs or businesses can access a continuum of support to meet their needs, depending on their stage of development. The concept is that the service will help people get the right support at the right time – and will also help maximise other available funding streams by helping businesses to navigate the complex support ecosystem.
3.5	The service has been established to deliver across three core areas – Start, Grow and Scale – with tailored support for clients aligned with their growth ambitions. In addition to the tiered menu of support, small grants of up to £3,000 (up to 50% of capital costs) are available to

	entrepreneurs or businesses accessing support through the service who demonstrate growth potential.
3.6	<p><u>Regional Performance Update</u></p> <p>Performance in the first two quarters of this financial year across the region includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 4,000 individuals 'reached' through community outreach activities • More than 2,200 individuals/entrepreneurs supported through start-up activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks) • More than 1,800 businesses supported through growth activity 1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks) • More than 380 entrepreneurs/businesses have accessed Go Succeed Grants, attracting around £2million in support which is matched by a similar contribution from the businesses themselves. Note that the final call for grant funding in this year is currently live and will close on 5 November 2025.
3.6	<p><u>Belfast Performance Update</u></p> <p>At a Belfast level, activity planned for the coming financial year includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant programme of outreach and engagement support covering under-represented groups. Examples of activities are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sector specific events for those in the hair and beauty industry including delivery of aspirational workshops and a masterclass with successful entrepreneurs from the sector ○ Hosting a female-focused 'Inspiring Entrepreneurship Conference' event for over 300 school-aged emerging female leaders on the regional SistersIN mentorship programme and providing practical support to starting or growing their enterprise ○ Working with apprenticeship providers across Belfast to deliver aspirational workshops to 100s of 16–18-year-olds encouraging entrepreneurship (especially in trades) as a very real and achievable pathway ○ Facilitation of the 'Young Entrepreneurs to Watch' initiative, designed to unearth, recognise and fast track 20 exceptional potential entrepreneurs ○ Planned conference on disability and entrepreneurship to take place in February 2026 advocating for disability inclusion in business whilst sharing entrepreneurial journeys and insights and providing aspiring disabled entrepreneurs with tangible support at each stage of their journey

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Supporting those who are economically inactive to access specialist support alongside financial incentives to address barriers to starting a new business • 360 Belfast entrepreneurs supported through start-up activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks) • 346 Belfast businesses supported through growth activity (1-1 mentoring, masterclasses, peer support networks) • 48 Belfast businesses have accessed Go Succeed Grants since the launch in February 2024, drawing down over £1 million. These grants have enabled businesses to purchase capital and/or revenue items which will support their future growth plans.
3.7	<p>Critical to the service is the ability to deliver place-based activity and to be responsive to the needs of local businesses. In Belfast, key areas of focus in the current year include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing, and building upon, relationships with key stakeholders across the city to put in place targeted interventions to engage with under-represented groups and work to overcome the barriers to starting or growing a business for those groups • Continuing to raise awareness of the Social Economy sector, including driving investment to support the acceleration of new social enterprises • Partnering with the council's Employability and Skills team to target self-employed sectors, including childminding, and delivering bespoke academies to break down barriers to self-employment • Developing a programme of support to businesses to raise awareness of opportunities arising from major events such as Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and helping them to maximise revenue generation through these events • Building strong local supply chains through Meet the Buyer events, including working with the construction sector (public housing focused opportunities) and food to go sector. Companies will be directed to targeted support to improve their chances of accessing public sector procurement opportunities as well as access new supply chain opportunities with private sector partners.
3.8	<p>Given the substantial interest in and uptake of the service, there is some concern at recent commentary from UK Government that the Local Growth Fund is likely to be heavily capital-focused (likely split 66% capital; 34% revenue funding). This will, undoubtedly, have a significant impact on any future allocation to support this type of activity, given that the current funding breakdown is 24% capital (mainly for grants) and 76% revenue funding.</p>

3.9	<p>Officers have been seeking to engage with officials from MHCLG, NIO and the regional government departments to understand the likely impact of these changes on the support for local businesses. At this stage, there has been very limited formal communication from any of the agencies although it is understood that the NIO team is planning a series of engagement sessions in November 2025 (no details forthcoming currently). We have also made all councils aware of the current situation and have been looking at a range of scenarios to minimise the impact on service delivery including leveraging resources from elsewhere (DfE, Local Economic Partnerships etc.). In reality, it is very difficult to plan with any degree of certainty given both the lack of official information being circulated and the potentially endless range of scenarios, depending on the final funding decision from the UK Government. The added complication is that the delay in any formal communication makes it difficult to manage customer and stakeholder expectations as well as creating operational challenges for the Programme Management Office, given that roles are fixed-term and therefore reliant on funding availability.</p>
3.10	<p>Officers will continue to seek clarity from the various government agencies and departments with a view to maximising the overall resources available to support enterprise and local business growth. A report will be brought back to a future meeting of this Committee to update on progress and to set out the likely approach at a Belfast and regional level.</p>
3.11	<p><u>Sector support activities</u></p> <p>In addition to the “core” business support interventions through Go Succeed, the Council’s Enterprise and Business Growth Team also works with partner organisations to support targeted activities across a range of key business sectors that are critical for the city’s economic growth.</p>
3.12	<p>One of the key growth sectors in Belfast is life and health sciences. At a regional level, the sector supports high value roles in companies such as Almac. In Belfast, the universities are driving sectoral excellence in areas such as diagnostics, clinical trials and medical instruments and City Deal investments such as Ulster University’s Centre for Digital and Healthcare Technology at the City Hospital and QUB’s iREACH Centre at City Hospital will support the further development of this sector – along with the associated societal and health-related benefits for the local population and beyond.</p>
3.13	<p>In May 2024, this Committee agreed to support the life and health sciences cluster organisation HIRANI, providing a financial contribution of £25,000 towards a new ‘Health and</p>

	Life Sciences Launchpad' in Northern Ireland. The Launchpad is a mentoring and investment initiative for small businesses in the health and life sciences sector, focusing on helping them to commercialise investments, attract funding and explore new market opportunities. It is a two-year project, and the principal funders are Invest NI and Innovate UK.
3.14	To date, the Launchpad has provided funding to 14 projects (12 SME-led and 2 collaborative R&D), and an additional 18 SMEs have received direct financial support to facilitate help progress product commercialisation work. Planning for year two activities is well advanced. It will involve the recruitment of at least 40 new participants who will avail of support such as matching them with mentors from clinical, academic, industry, and investment backgrounds, accelerating innovation readiness and commercialisation. A specific area of focus this year will be include artificial intelligence (AI) applications in health, digital transformation, and regulatory readiness, given the advances in this space. In keeping with the commitments in year one, it is proposed that a budget allocation of £25,000 is made towards the operation of the Launchpad in Year 2. Officers will work closely with HIRANI in the course of the year to maximise referrals from other council support and engagement activities. We will also explore the "exit strategy"/next steps following the launchpad, with a particular focus on understanding implications for the new City Deal projects in this sector.
4.0	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>NISS: Belfast City Council is currently acting as the lead council on behalf of the 11 councils for delivery of the service. To do so, we have established a delivery and management team which is fully resourced through the SPF funding. The overall indicative SPF budget for the 2025/26 financial year is in the region of £7.2 million revenue, with around £2 million in capital funding available across the funding period for grant support.</p> <p>HIRANI: Funding request is for a contribution of £25,000 to year two activities as part of the Launchpad initiative.</p>
5.0	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>An equality impact assessment for the service has been completed. Local targets for delivery in each council area have been established and will be part of the contractual commitments with delivery partners.</p>
6.0	Appendices
	N/A