



Subject:	City Centre Byelaws
Date:	21 November 2025
Reporting Officer:	Nora Largey, City Solicitor / Director of Legal and Civic Services
Contact Officer:	Russell Connelly, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer

Restricted Reports									
Is this report restricted?	Yes ☐ No ☒								
Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted. Insert number ☐ 1. Information relating to any individual 2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information) 4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter 5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained 6. Information showing that the council proposes to (a) to give a notice imposing restrictions on a person; or (b) to make an order or direction 7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime									
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted? <table><tr><td>After Committee Decision</td><td>☐</td></tr><tr><td>After Council Decision</td><td>☐</td></tr><tr><td>Sometime in the future</td><td>☐</td></tr><tr><td>Never</td><td>☐</td></tr></table>		After Committee Decision	☐	After Council Decision	☐	Sometime in the future	☐	Never	☐
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Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes ☒ No ☐

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
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1.1	The purpose of this report is to: • update Members on the results of formal public consultation on draft byelaws for the city centre and further engagement, • provide Members with revised draft byelaws for approval
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	It is recommended that Members: • note the contents of this report and appendices • approve the revised draft byelaws
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<u>Background</u> Members will be aware of ongoing issues caused by noise and the display of graphic imagery in the city centre and the negative effect that this can have on social and economic activity. This primarily impacts the primary retail core but also extends more widely to those who work, live in and visit Belfast. The Council is empowered to draft byelaws under Part VI of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (the “Act”) and in the absence of primary legislation to enforce such a nuisance, officers agreed to draft byelaws to address these issues. On 26 June 2023, Committee agreed to authorise officers to begin the formal public consultation process on a set of draft byelaws. This followed formal consultation and engagement with the Department for Communities and receipt of a legal opinion that addressed issues on human rights considerations that were raised by DfC.
3.2	<u>Consultation and Engagement</u> A public consultation was launched on 27 November 2023 on the Council’s online engagement platform YourSay Belfast. The consultation ran for a period of 14 weeks and ended on 4 March 2024. At the request of Elected Members, further workshops were held with stakeholders in May 2025. Party briefings have been carried out in the past few months. This report will give Members a high-level summary of the results of the public consultation and the workshops.

	The proposed draft byelaws are attached to this report as Appendix 1 and the detailed Consultation Report is attached as Appendix 2.
3.3	<u>Consultation Format</u> The online survey contained a series of questions designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative information in relation to the following areas: • Extent of agreement or disagreement with the introduction of a rules and regulations around the use of amplification devices and the display of promotional material (including graphic imagery) in the city centre • Level of usage of amplification and display of promotional material (including graphic imagery) in the city centre and for which purposes • Experience of the use of amplification and display of promotional material (including graphic imagery) in the city centre (positive, neutral or negative) • Extent of agreement or disagreement with the introduction of a permit scheme around the use of amplification devices and promotional literature (including graphic imagery) in the city centre • Extent of agreement or disagreement with standard conditions for a permit as listed in the draft byelaws • Extent of agreement or disagreement with the proposal that the Council may designate areas in which specific types of instruments or amplification is prohibited Respondents were asked to declare their interest in Belfast in terms of whether they lived, worked, studied in Belfast, if they were a business owner in Belfast or a visitor. Respondents were also asked for feedback on equality of opportunity or good relations issues that they thought should be considered by the Council in relation to the draft byelaws. Standard monitoring questions for the categories of age, gender, community background, ethnic origin, disability and dependancy status were asked for the purpose of capturing data in relation to the Council's obligations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Just under three-quarters of respondents indicated that they would be happy to answer these questions.
3.4	<u>Further Engagement</u> At Members' requests, two further workshops with a range of stakeholders were held on 12 and 14 May 2025. These sessions were facilitated by an independent consultant and were attended by Elected Members from the DUP, the UUP, the Alliance Party, the Green Party and the TUV as well as representatives from the following organisations: The Committee on the Administration of

	Justice; Belfast Chamber; Linen Quarter BID; Crown Jesus Ministries; Socialist Party NI; TUV; PSNI; Belfast One and the Free Presbyterian Church. These sessions provided useful feedback, with general consensus being reached that there is nuisance created by amplified noise in the city centre.
3.5	<u>Consultation results and analysis</u> There was a total of 3,571 responses to the survey, with a combined total of 14,878 written comments. There was an extremely high level of engagement from varied sections of the public, who had a wide range of backgrounds, perspectives and opinions. Many of the written responses were nuanced, thoughtful, detailed, reasoned and complex. They provide a rich source of data in terms of how the city centre is experienced by individuals and groups from a wide range of backgrounds. Respondents stated in detail how amplified noise and /or the content of that amplified noise, as well as the display of graphic imagery have affected them personally, whether positively, negatively or both. An overriding theme amongst respondents' written answers is the importance that is attached to the (qualified) human rights afforded by the European Convention on Human Rights. The Consultation Report explores other themes in responses in more depth. Written submissions were received from a diverse selection of interested groups and organisations as follows: • Belfast & District Trades Union Council • The Committee on the Administration of Justice • HERe NI • Free Presbyterian Church • Northern Ireland Committee – Irish Congress of Trade Unions • NIPSA • UNISON NI • Rainbow Project • Socialist Party • Traditional Unionist Voice • WRDA • A joint response from People Before Profit on behalf of a range of political parties, activist groups, art collectives, and other organisations A summary of these submissions is included as Appendix 3 to the Consultation Report.

	A total of 36 hard copy responses were received, which all expressed disagreement with the draft byelaws. High-level quantitative results from the public survey in the form of pie charts and bar charts are attached to this report as Appendix 3.
3.6	<u>Summary of Content of Draft Byelaws</u> The draft byelaws that were published for public consultation aimed to strike the balance between freedom of expression and the need to tackle the nuisance that can result when multiple individuals or organisations come together in busy pedestrian areas to share their views, ideas or performances, often using amplification devices. The draft byelaws contained a requirement for a permit for anyone wishing to use an amplification device in the city centre, including the primary retail core. This related to any situation where on-street amplification is used, such as busking, preaching and outdoor performances. The same rules applied for anyone wishing to place a stand, stall or vehicle carrying any form of promotional literature or other information, regardless of its purpose. This would include displays of graphic imagery. The draft byelaws further provided that a modest annual fee (to be determined) would be charged to cover the costs of administering the permit scheme.
3.7	<u>Proposed Changes to Draft Byelaws Following Consultation</u> <u>Permits</u> Feedback from the public survey and further engagement has indicated that whilst most respondents are in favour of regulating amplification in the city centre, a permit system is not considered to be the optimal way to achieve such regulation. Reasons for disagreement with a permit system ranged from concerns around any fee to be charged, potential interference with freedom of expression and the ability to undertake spontaneous performances, and the administration and enforcement of such a scheme. These are explored in more detail in the consultation report. Officers have therefore removed a permit system from the draft byelaws. <u>Decibel limit</u> The revised byelaws now provide for a maximum decibel limit of 70dB for performers wishing play music or operate amplifiers and similar devices in the city centre. This decibel limit is slightly louder than the ambient street noise and should ensure that performers can be heard, whilst not being excessively loud or intrusive. <u>Graphic Imagery</u>

	The draft byelaws presented for public consultation included provisions around the regulation of graphic imagery. Feedback from the public consultation indicates that the display of certain images in the city centre has a mixed reception. Whilst the majority of respondents in the public consultation indicated quantitatively that their experience was positive, the written comments of those not in favour of the display of graphic imagery (particularly with regards to abortion) expressed strong views to the contrary. Officers are aware that enforcing a ban on certain graphic images is difficult given the current lack of legislative framework in this area. It is therefore suggested that the provisions on graphic imagery are removed from the current draft of the byelaws and that a separate report is brought back as this issue is further considered. <u>Special Events</u> The revised byelaws now contain provisions relating to Special Events to be held in the city centre. Provision is made (i) for the restriction or prohibition of amplification in the city centre during Special Events and (ii) for the suspension contained within applicable Council byelaws for prohibition of consumption of alcohol in public places in certain areas of the city centre. <u>Alcohol</u> Whilst not directly addressed in the draft byelaws, the issue of on-street drinking was raised in the written comments during the public consultation and subsequently in the workshops. Members will note that a report on the Council's view of the proposed commencement of Articles 68-72 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 was presented at the People and Communities Committee on 9 September 2025 and subsequently ratified at Council on 1 October. The proposed commencement of these Articles would effectively extend the powers conferred on police officers requiring individuals to stop drinking alcohol in a designated area, and surrender any alcoholic drinks in their possession, to council officers. Anyone refusing will be committing an offence and may be issued with a fixed penalty notice. This is an 'opt in' power that the Council may choose to avail of. The Council has indicated broad support of the commencement of these provisions to DfC and has noted that they would complement the proposed byelaws to make Belfast a safe and welcoming place for all, in line with the Belfast Agenda.
3.8	<u>Enforcement Mechanisms</u> The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides a mechanism for officers to issue abatement notices in relation to noise, however, the current

	issues around noise in the city centre for the most part do not meet the threshold of a statutory nuisance. Members may be aware that Section 92 of the Act provides that penalties for the contravention of byelaws shall be in the form of a fine payable on summary conviction. The draft byelaws contain a provision whereby an authorised officer may issue a fixed penalty notice for an offence committed under the byelaws. Whilst the issuance of a fixed penalty notice via byelaws is not usual practice, the Department has indicated that it will consider the fixed penalty enforcement mechanism currently included in the draft byelaws.
3.9	<u>Suggested next steps</u> After considering feedback from the public consultation and workshops, officers have revised the draft byelaws that reflect the changes noted above. These are attached as Appendix 1 for Members' consideration and approval. Members are also advised that officers will continue to log and monitor all complaints about busking, preaching, or any other kind of street performance. Current statistics are included in the consultation report. Members will be aware that Section 91 of the Act requires byelaws to be approved by the Department for Communities before they can be adopted. Therefore, any revised draft byelaws will be subject to this process.
3.10	<u>Financial and Resource Implications</u> There are no financial or resource implications connected to this report. There will however be resource implications in enforcing the bye-laws if approved by DfC. This remains under consideration and more detail will be provided once a response is received from DfC. <u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> An equality screening was carried out on the draft byelaws that were presented for public consultation. The consultation provided useful feedback both on the draft screening form and more generally from Section 75 groups. Further screening will be undertaken as the byelaws progress to finalisation.
4.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
	Appendix 1: Proposed draft byelaws Appendix 2 & (a): Consultation report Appendix 3: High level quantitative survey results