



Subject:	Belfast City Innovation programme update
Date:	23 January 2026
Reporting Officer:	Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Services
Contact Officer:	Mark McCann, City Innovation Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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	<input type="text"/>
<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
1.1	To update Members on a number of urban innovation initiatives including the Belfast Region City Deal Contracts for Innovation programme, the Belfast Region AI Adoption programme and the way forward for the City Hall Immersive experience.

2.0 Recommendations	
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Approve that, on behalf of Belfast Region City Deal partners, Belfast City Council enter into an Operational Partnership Agreement (OPA) with the Strategic Advisory Board to the value of £431,250 to deliver aspects of the planned £4.4 million Contracts for Innovation programme. Approve that, on behalf of City Deal partners, Belfast City Council provide £50,000 to support an operational partnership agreement (OPA) between the Council and the Strategic Advisory Board to develop the programme business case for the £5 million AI Adoption programme. To note that Belfast City Council's engagement on any specific opportunities arising from the AI programme will be managed through the Council's own Data & Analytics Board with updates being brought to Members via this board. To consider the options for the future of the City Hall immersive experience from April 2026. To approve the commissioning of data modelling on the growth of the city region's innovation sectors to inform future City Deal and Innovation City Belfast decision-making and initiatives.
3.0 Main report	
3.1	<p>Belfast City Region Contracts for Innovation programme</p> <p>On behalf of Belfast City Region Deal (BRCD) Partners, Belfast City Council's City Innovation Office is currently designing the £4.4 million 'Contract for Innovation' programme. This three-year programme will use a modified version of the 'Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) methodology to allow the six local councils of the city region to procure Research & Development expertise to address large-scale challenges.</p>
3.2	<p>The new programme builds on the learning from the recent Augment the City project, which provided £610,000 R&D funding to Belfast Stories to develop prototypes that will help shape the design of their approach to storytelling.</p>
3.3	<p>Members are asked to note that to support the delivery of aspects of the new programme, City Deal partners have agreed to enter into an operational partnership agreement (OPA) with the Strategic Advisory Board (SIB) which has a full-time SBRI team in place and access to other technical expertise. This OPA, which will be between Belfast City Council and SIB, will be to the value of £431,250.</p>
3.4	<p>Belfast City Region AI Adoption programme</p>

	<p>On behalf of Belfast Region City Deal partners, Belfast City Council are designing a £5 million AI adoption programme for the six BRCD councils. The programme, which will be subject to business case approval, will provide funding to the councils to work with AI specialist to integrate AI into aspects of council service delivery that will support organisational transformation and efficiencies.</p>
3.5	<p>Following a series of AI readiness workshops with officers from all six Belfast Region councils (alongside officers from all NI's councils who were also invited), City Deal partners now wish to develop the business case for the programme. This programme is likely to take an agile approach that would include a Discovery Phase, and then a series of alpha, beta and full deployment projects depending on the progress of each.</p>
3.6	<p>Members are asked to approve that, on behalf of City Deal partners, Belfast City Council enter into an operational partnership agreement (OPA) with the Strategic Advisory Board (SIB) which has a full-time AI team in place and access to relevant technical expertise. The business case is expected to cost £100,000 to develop.</p>
3.7	<p>SIB will contribute £50,000 for this work. Members asked to approve that Belfast City Council provide the additional £50,000.</p>
3.8	<p>The development of the programme business case and related approval process is expected to take approximately six months. Depending on the outcomes from this process, the programme is expected to go live in autumn 2026.</p>
3.9	<p>Members should note that Belfast City Council's engagement on the opportunities arising from this AI programme will be managed through the council's own Data & Analytics Board with updates being brought to Members via this board.</p>
3.10	<p>City Hall immersive experience</p> <p>The City Hall Immersive experience, in Rooms 7, 8 and 9 of City Hall, was the result of a collaborative six-month R&D project with BT Northern Ireland. The project (to which BT contributed £1 million in R&D technology and expertise) used Augmented Reality, iPads and video displays to explore elements of the speech, geography and history of the city in new and interactive ways. When the six-month R&D collaboration ended in March 2024, Members approved a one-year extension of the project until April 2026.</p>
3.11	<p>The experience received overwhelming positive feedback from visitors and staff, and has proven particularly attractive to younger visitors. Key facts from the feedback include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The experience was used over 50,694 times.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People stayed in the rooms 30% longer than previous. • Visiting with partner and families increased by 25% • Increase of 14.5% for city hall tour during the period. • 88.4% of users would recommend City Hall as a visitor attraction. <p>With the extension now coming to an end, there are three main options for going forward. These include:</p> <p>Option 1: Close the experience. The rooms would be returned to their previous set up. There are minimal costs associated with this.</p> <p>Option 2: Retain the ‘Roadrunner’ interactive game in room 9. This item has proved popular with out of state visitors and children in particular. This would cost £23,700 for one year (or £32,400 for three years) and would require no staff supervision.</p> <p>Option 3: Retain the experience as is. This option will require a number of technical changes to the system (to allow it to continue efficiently beyond its original six-month lifespan). This option would also require support from one full time member of staff. The cost for this option is estimated to be £78,000 for twelve months (including staffing costs).</p> <p>Options 2 or 3 could be procured via the Department of Finance’s PSSN procurement framework.</p> <p>Members are asked to consider the options for the experience going forward. Any option will need to be confirmed and in place by 31 March 2026.</p> <p>Data modelling for the Belfast region innovation ecosystem</p> <p>Belfast Region City Deal partners, and partners from Innovation City Belfast, have been developing a shared innovation investment proposition for the city region. This seeks to maximise the opportunities of the investments made in digital, innovation and skills by City Deal partners, and their impact on those sectors of the region’s knowledge economy with the most potential for growth through innovation. This work is mindful of UK Government’s Modern Industrial Strategy and its commitment to supporting the eight most important sectors in the economy, which in turn will have significant implications for government’s innovation funding over the next four years.</p> <p>With this in mind, Members are asked to approve the commissioning of a data modelling piece that will provide fine-grain information on key sectors and subsectors of the city region economy. This will be used to inform decision-making by City Deal partners, and by Innovation City Belfast. This is expected to cost no more than £30,000.</p>
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4.0	Financial & Resource Implications
4.1	Resources for these initiatives have been identified within the existing departmental budgets.
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment
5.1	None at present. Successful programmes will be subject to individual Equality screenings.
6.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
6.1	None.