



Subject:	Draft City Centre Byelaws
Date:	20 February 2026
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 <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>								
<p>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</p> <p>Insert number <input type="checkbox"/></p> <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									
<p>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</p> <table><tr><td>After Committee Decision</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>After Council Decision</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>Sometime in the future</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>Never</td><td><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr></table>		After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>
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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 consider draft bye laws for the city centre in relation to amenity issues and the display of graphic imagery.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>It is recommended that Members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consider the contents of this report; authorise officers to formally consult the Department for Communities in relation to both draft bye laws; Note that a further update report will be presented to Committee after that formal engagement concludes before final approval of the bye laws is sought.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p><u>Background</u></p> <p>Members will recall that on 21 November 2025 Committee agreed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to write to the Justice Minister to, among other things, outline the need for a standalone Hate Crime Bill. to write to the Chief Constable to seek clarity in the use of the PSNI powers under Articles 9, 18 and 19 of The Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 <p>Committee noted that a report would be submitted to a future committee in relation to the display of promotional material (including graphic imagery) in the city centre.</p> <p>Members will also recall that on 19th December 2025 Committee agreed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to authorise officers to engage with the Department for Communities in relation to revised draft bye laws which related only to arrangements for special events, such as the Fleadh; and that a report be submitted to the Committee in February in relation to the options on the remainder of the revised draft bye laws, including the enforcement of existing bye laws. <p>This report will provide updates in respect of the above.</p>
3.2	<p><u>Correspondence from the Justice Minister and PSNI</u></p> <p>Correspondence has been received from the Justice Minister, which states that proposed new legislative provisions in this Assembly mandate will modernise hate crime law in Northern Ireland and provide a more robust system to sanction offenders. These provisions will be</p>

	<p>delivered through a Sentencing Bill that the Minister plans to introduce to the Assembly in early 2026, and a Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill - planned for introduction in spring 2026.</p> <p>No correspondence has yet been received from the PSNI.</p>
3.3	<p><u>Bye laws for Special Events</u></p> <p>Officers met with representatives from the Department for Communities informally in relation to bye laws for special events in the city, such as the Fleadh. Those discussions remain ongoing but at this time, whilst it would be preferable to have the powers in relation to special events, it is considered unlikely to be necessary to have these powers in place prior to the Fleadh. This will be kept under review should the Council be successful in its bid for the Fleadh in 2027.</p>
3.4	<p><u>Graphic Imagery</u></p> <p>Members will be aware that the set of draft bye laws published for consultation between 27th November 2023 and 4th March 2024 contained provisions relating to promotional literature and information.</p> <p>As noted in the report that went to Committee on 21st November 2025, feedback from the public consultation indicated that the display of certain images in the city centre has a mixed reception. Whilst the majority of respondents 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.</p> <p>Respondents commented that images displayed by pro-life / anti-abortion groups are 'medically sensitive', 'highly triggering', cause 'stress', are 'disturbing', 'hugely traumatising for anyone that has been through a 'pregnancy loss' and 'should not be seen by children'. It was suggested that the use of 'very graphic images / contentious campaigns should only be used after 9:30 pm / similar to TV watershed', which would 'help balance equality with freedom of speech'.</p> <p>Those whose experience of graphic imagery was positive commented that it is 'important that Belfast is a space for inclusive views which allows everyone to express and share them freely and openly', that it 'offers a diverse range of information' and that 'it helps people understand'. Respondents commented on the importance of freedom of expression, noting that 'people should be free to promote or protest whatever images they want'. Respondents commented that if people don't like certain imagery, 'they don't have to look at it'. Although respondents acknowledged that some graphic imagery 'might be difficult to look at', it should not be 'censored' and that it is important for 'raising awareness'. It was also noted that such imagery is less 'intrusive' than loud noise.</p>

European Convention on Human Rights

It was clear from the consultation responses that respondents attached great importance to the (qualified) human rights afforded by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Members will be aware that freedom of expression is a fundamental right protected under the Human Rights Act 1998 by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is established that protection under Article 10 extends to the expression of views that may shock, disturb or offend the deeply held beliefs of others.

Article 10 is not an absolute but a qualified right; the rights of the individual must be balanced against the interests of society. The draft bye law in relation to graphic imagery seeks to strike the proper balance between those competing interests. When drafting the bye law, officers were conscious that any restrictions on freedom of expression must always be clearly set out in law, necessary in a democratic society for a legitimate aim, and proportionate.

In any situation where there is a proposed interference with freedom of expression, a balance must be struck between the right of the individual to express themselves and the broader public interest justifying the interference (for example, the protection of the rights of others). In particular, the restriction must be proportionate to the legitimate purpose that the state or public bodies are seeking to uphold.

The draft bye law therefore is deliberately narrow in scope, with clear and objective definitions. Members will note that the proposed bye law will not prevent those who are opposed to abortion from protesting, displaying posters, handing out promotional materials etc. Promotional materials which contain graphic imagery as defined in the bye laws are permitted but must be no more than A4 size and contained within an envelope bearing an appropriate warning.

The bye law is intended to address the display of graphic images intended to draw the public's attention whereby the sight of such material is unavoidable. It will not preclude the handing out of any leaflets, flyers or other small scale printed materials provided they are supplied in an opaque envelope with an appropriate advisory warning.

Furthermore, the bye law would only apply in the City Centre and not throughout the City.

3.6	<p><u>Next Steps</u></p> <p>Subject to Committee's agreement, officers will commence formal engagement with DfC in relation to both sets of Bye Laws and will also seek updated counsel opinion on the proposed bye law relating to graphic imagery.</p>
3.7	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>There are no financial or resource implications connected to this report. As outlined in the report tabled on 21st November 2025, there will be resource implications in enforcing the bye laws if approved by DfC. This remains under consideration and more detail will be provided before the final proposed bye laws presented to Committee for approval.</p>
3.8	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>An equality screening was carried out on the draft bye laws that were presented for public consultation. This draft screening will be updated in light of the consultation findings and brought back to Members for noting.</p> <p>Further screening will be undertaken on the Bye Laws as they progress.</p>
4.0	<p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p>
	<p>Appendix 1: Draft Bye Laws for the Regulation of Graphic Imagery in the City Centre</p> <p>Appendix 2: Draft Amenity Bye Laws for the City Centre</p>