

Social Policy Working Group

Monday, 16th February, 2026

MINUTE OF MEETING & WORKSHOP

- Members present: Councillor Doherty (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors F. McAteer and I. McLaughlin.
- In attendance: Ms. S. McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Director
of Corporate Services;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Mr J. Girvan, Director of Neighbourhood Services;
Ms. N. Bohill, Head of Commercial and Procurement
Services;
Mr. K. Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty;
Ms S. McStay, Category Officer
Ms. L. Armstrong, Solicitor;
Mr M. McCann, City Innovation Manager;
Ms D. Ferguson, City Innovation Programme Lead;
Ms S. O'Regan, Employability and Skills Manager;
Ms C. Christy, HR Manager (Development);
Ms. C. Patterson, Policy and Programme Manager,
Inclusive Growth;
Ms C. Hutchinson, Strategic Policy and Planning Officer;
Ms. M. Robinson, Belfast Business Promise Co-ordinator; and
Mr B Flynn, Committee Services Officer

Apologies

An apology was received from the Director of Human Resources.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 17th June, 2025, were adopted.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Members' Workshop

The meeting continued in the form of a Members' workshop, the main items discussed are set out below:

Planning Discussion

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy provided the Working Group with an overview of the achievements and progress linked to the commitments in the Inclusive Growth Strategy, referring to the Belfast Agenda, the Belfast Region City Deal and emerging work across the Council that would support efforts to build community wealth and deliver on inclusive growth ambitions. The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty outlined the changes to the strategic context and introduced several proposed priority areas of work.

During discussion, Members agreed with the proposed areas of focus and highlighted the importance of ensuring that Council teams and Members were aware of the various programmes of work and pathways in place to support their delivery. The proposed direction of travel for the Belfast Business Promise was noted and it was agreed that further detail would be brought to Members in due course.

The Working Group also identified a number of priorities that would benefit from enhanced focus. These included:

- the growing issue of the in-work poverty, as well as those not in work and to also consider linking to the Cost of Living Working Group and the positive impacts of the Hardship Fund working with schools and breakfast clubs;
- the role of good jobs and supporting people to reach their potential through pathways for future job opportunities and 'jobs of the future', with particular reference to innovation and apprenticeships;
- the role of innovation and inclusive innovation, with opportunities to connect to the community and voluntary sectors and the potential to link to emerging BRCD/innovation funding to address social challenges; and
- the potential opportunities presented in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility and developing a city proposition which would direct and/or sign-post organisations towards specific issues, such as poverty, hardship etc. Also the need to consider what measured were received well with organisations - the Belfast Business Promise could be a platform for this.

In addition, Members discussed the importance of maximising social value through collaborative procurement and the use of developer contributions. It was suggested that there would be value in understanding the future pipeline of investment/inward investment opportunities to explore how the Council could work across government and with training providers to support pathways to employment opportunities - engagement with DfE/INI would be vital.

It was agreed that the presentation, along with the presentation from the recent Anti-Poverty Network event would be circulated to Members.

Sustainable Procurement Policy

The Head of Commercial and Procurement Services referred to the draft policy that had previously been circulated to Members and explained that the overall aim was to ensure contracts deliver value for communities.

The Working Group was supportive of the proposed approach to engage and test the viability of proposals with key stakeholder, such as the BBP Network Anchors, Federation of Small Business, social enterprises and others as part of the development of the policy. The draft policy would be brought back to the Working Group in advance of any formal public consultation process, with a view to securing Council approval in September, 2026. All Members were encouraged to provide further feedback on the draft policy.

Corporate Social Responsibility

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty provided members with an update on proposals and progress. While Members highlighted the need to avoid 'initiative-overload' on businesses, it was felt that there would be opportunities to better connect or direct businesses to specific issues to benefit communities.

The example of the 'match-making platform' used by Birmingham City Council and many U.K. cities was referred to as an approach that could be tested for its viability in a Belfast context. A Member also highlighted the 'Vacant to Vibrant' scheme, which had included a successful 'match-making' service. It was also noted that community capacity to avail of CSR offers was also likely to vary across the city and that research on capacity levels/needs recently agreed by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee could be taken account of in an emerging approach.

The Members noted the proposal to facilitate a citywide philanthropy round-table discussion in partnership with Community Foundation NI, and that SPWG/Elected Members would be involved in these discussions.

Discussion around sponsorship opportunities recognised that initial discussions/testing has been largely from a commercial perspective, however, there was potential for it to also deliver on an organisation's CSR commitments.

There was support for progressing with initial discussions with key businesses and anchors, with the Belfast Business Promise network suggested as a starting point to scope the opportunity and issues of interest.

It was agreed that further engagement takes place with Members through Party Group briefings to inform emerging approach.

The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty confirmed that following the discussion, an outline workplan would be prepared and brought back to SPWG.

Social Value Procurement Policy - Delivery Report

The Working Group was provided with an update on the delivery of social value outcomes via open tender competitions awarded in accordance with the Council's Social Value Procurement Policy (SVPP), for the reporting period 1st October 2025 to 30th November 2025.

Noted.

Following a query, the Head of Commercial and Procurement Services agreed to provide Cllr McLaughlin with further information on the numbers of contracts below the Social Value threshold.

Chairperson