



Subject:	LEP action plan – update on proposed priority projects
Date:	11 March 2026
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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?

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 No

1.0	Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues
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1.1	The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on progress with the development of the Local Economic Partnership (LEP) – a key element of the Department for the Economy’s (DfE) sub-regional economic plan and to identify a number of proposed priority projects to be funded through the Regional Balance Fund.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the update on work being undertaken as part of the Local Economic Partnership (LEP) • Note and endorse the emerging priority work areas set out in section 3.6 and agree that further engagement can now take place with DfE on the basis of these areas with a view to securing resources to support delivery.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	At the 12 March 2025 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members were updated on the Department for the Economy’s “sub-regional economic plan”, including the commitment to establish Local Economic Partnerships in each council area with an overall financial allocation of £45million over three years.
3.2	Members were also advised that the financial allocations for each council area had been confirmed. Belfast City Council will receive up to £956,000 per year – a total of £2,868,000 over three years (commencing March 2025). At that time, DfE noted that they were in the process of finalising the business case for the funding. In September 2025, officials confirmed that the business case for year one funding (2025-26) had received endorsement and draft Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were issued to each council. It was always recognised and accepted that the spend profile in year one will be lower than in other years – given the time taken to mobilise partnerships, agree priority projects and recruit staff to lead and oversee project development and delivery. DfE have also recently confirmed that there may be an opportunity for councils to carry over expenditure into a fourth financial year (although there will be no additional funding in year four).
3.3	<p>In line with the Minister’s vision and the sub-regional economic plan, the priority outcome for activities supported through the Local Economic Partnerships funding is higher productivity. The guidance notes suggest that there are a range of categories that are eligible for support including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial property/land development • Entrepreneurship support

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sectoral entrepreneurship support • Scaling support • Sectoral scaling support • R&D investment • Energy efficiency • Upskilling/reskilling in digital/engineering skills • Sectoral cluster development.
3.4	<p>At the March 2025 meeting, members agreed that, given the potential for alignment with existing work and the constraints on partner resources, our initial approach should be to utilise the Labour Market Partnership structure as the “partnership” – through which priority projects would be developed and to which progress would be reported. This extended partnership has been meeting since November 2025 and has been contributing to the process of project identification and prioritisation. The committee agreed that we explore this option as an initial way forward – but that we keep it under review in order to ensure that it remains appropriate for the priority work areas agreed. Partners involved in the combined LMP/LEP include private sector representative bodies (FSB; CBI; Belfast Chamber); BMC; DfE Careers Service; Advice Sector; VCSE Panel; LEA representative; Partnership Boards; Invest NI and Trade Unions.</p>
3.5	<p>The partnership agreed a number of principles or key considerations in prioritising projects for support. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreement to focus on a small number of more impactful areas - may mean lower volume of activity – but has the potential to effect most change. This is more important in Belfast given budget limitations • Ruling out funding for projects that “will happen anyway” or that could be funded from other sources • Agreement that City Deal “benefits realisation” projects should feature – otherwise we will limit the capacity of our residents to access opportunities and our businesses to develop capability in key growth sectors. There is also the potential for these projects to become a “proof of concept” for how we can make more sustainable local impact with these capital investments in the future • Projects more likely to be revenue (programme) than capital focused – given the limited budgets and short funding timelines • Important to recognise that these projects will be delivered within the context of a wider support ecosystem – can’t do everything but it is important to seek alignment and added value where possible.

3.6

Proposed priority work areas

Following a series of iterative engagements with the Partnership as well as targeted engagement with projects and partners working in this space, an action plan covering three broad areas is proposed. A more detailed overview of the three areas is included in Appendix

1. At a high level, the programme of work will include:

- **Creative sector incubation support:** working with Studio Ulster to develop and deliver a targeted business incubation support intervention for local companies. Businesses will have access to a range of supports including dedicated desk space for 6 months within a professional working virtual production (VP) studio and environment; access to VP studio facilities and resources for IP development, testing and validation; structured mentorship programme with leading industry experts in business, creative and technical fields; access to industry masterclasses ensuring knowledge of key sectoral developments and access to skills and peer support. This project has the potential to act as a catalyst for a wider creative sector support initiative (not all of which will be funded by LEP). This will include exploring how the Belfast Stories space can act as a focal point for new business development in this sector. An important factor in this wider approach will be to consider more inclusive approaches and pathways into the sector through non-traditional avenues
- **Capital investment for creative growth:** The proposal is to undertake a business case to identify the optimal funding model and route to market for a capital scheme that can support creative workspace development. Subject to the business case identifying a model that is acceptable to DfE, consideration will be given to how the funding is allocated, specific criteria etc. that will be developed in conjunction with the creative sector and brought into Committee prior to finalising. The capital investment is likely to include a seed-funding approach to act as a catalyst in addressing initial viability challenges that the creative sector experiences in securing their own assets, and to support the sector to address the urgent need for creative workspace provision. This will be complemented by targeted wrap-around support that will focus on business resilience and growth, including support for management and leadership
- **Business growth and innovation support:** this will involve a series of connected business support activities aimed at helping existing businesses to identify new markets; invest in their management and leadership capabilities and implement new technologies. We also propose to develop new interventions focused on reshaping the support available to “AI native” businesses who require a different approach to current SME-focused support activities – but who have the potential to generate significant revenues and position Belfast as a hub for new innovation-driven businesses. A critical

	<p>pillar of this support is to consolidate the Go Succeed service which is currently moving into a new funding phase and to which all councils have been asked to increase their match funding contribution.</p>
3.7	<p>At their most recent meeting (3 March), the group agreed the broad priority projects. In keeping with the agreed LEP governance structures, these are now being presented to the Committee for consideration and approval. Subject to members agreeing to these priority projects and/or taking account of any suggested amendments, officers will engage with the team at DfE and proceed to issuing an MoU in line with the approvals received.</p>
4.0	Financial and Resource Implications
4.1	<p>DfE has confirmed that the resources for the Local Enterprise Plan in Belfast are £956,000 per annum over three years. This includes an element of staff resources to manage the programme of work. An MoU has been issued for year one expenditure for staffing costs to date – subject to final decision on the projects, a further MoU will be issued to cover all project expenditure.</p>
4.2	<p>The indicative funding breakdown for each of the project areas is set out in Appendix 1. The final amounts may be subject to further engagement with DfE and other partners as well as any respective commissioning processes that may be required.</p>
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment
5.1	<p>All activities to be undertaken will be subject to equality screening. This funding formula was determined by the Department for the Economy.</p>
6.0	Appendices - Documents Attached
	<p>Appendix 1: Overview of draft priority project areas – Belfast LEP funding</p>