



Subject:	Visit Belfast Business Plan 2026-2027
Date:	11 March 2026
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director Economic Development Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Senior Manager Culture and Tourism
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Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time 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 or Summary of main Issues
1.1	The purpose of the report is to present the request for funding from Visit Belfast for the 2026-2027 financial year and to set out the organisation's strategic development and operational delivery, focused on supporting tourism growth. Members should note that Visit Belfast will be in attendance at Committee to present the detail of its 2026-2027 business plan.
2.0	Recommendations

2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Note the draft Visit Belfast business plan 2026-2027. The overall funding requirement for Visit Belfast in the coming financial year has been taken account of in the revenue estimates that have already been approved by Council. - Approve and agree a funding allocation of £2,143,073 for 2026-2027, subject to the development of a funding agreement, priority areas of activity and agreed targets.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p>Members will be aware that Visit Belfast was established by Council as the principal destination marketing and visitor servicing organisation for the city of Belfast. Visit Belfast leads on the tourism marketing activities and targets both the leisure and business tourism markets. It is a membership organisation with more than 500 partner businesses across the wider hospitality industry. Visit Belfast works on behalf of its funders and partners and with a range of public and private partners including Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland and Belfast Chamber to promote Belfast as a tourism destination.</p>
3.2	<p>Visit Belfast is a public/private partnership. Its current Chairperson is Marie-Thérèse McGivern; and Belfast City Council has four Councillor representatives on the Board: Councillor Sammy Douglas, Councillor Eric Hanvey, Councillor Tomás Ó Néill and Councillor Séanna Walsh. Also represented on the board are members from the private, public and community sectors.</p>
3.3	<p>The tourism and hospitality industry in Belfast has been going from strength to strength as Belfast continues to drive the regional tourism economy; in 2024, the most recent published Local Government District tourism statistics by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), Belfast hosted 1.5 million overnight trips accounting for 31% of all overnight trips to Northern Ireland generating tourism spend of £469 million, which is 43% of Northern Ireland overnight tourism spend. There are no tourism day visitor statistics available at this time.</p>
3.4	<p>Council has worked with Visit Belfast to continue to rebuild city tourism which has resulted in Belfast's visitor economy being stronger and more competitive in a market context that has been challenging. The city has charted a strong recovery, yet challenges such as staffing, higher costs of doing business within the tourism and hospitality sector and the knock-on impact on hospitality opening hours in the city remain.</p>
3.5	<p>The inclusion of tourism as a key growth sector in the City Region Deal, acknowledged the fact that the sector is already a significant economic generator but recognises the need for</p>

	<p>significant additional investment in order to sustain growth. The Council's 10-year plan for tourism in the city; "<i>Make Yourself at Home</i>" sets out a vision for the future of tourism in the city that is centred on a people-based and sustainable model of development with a focus on: increasing the coherency of the Belfast experience; supporting quality authentic products; developing skills; and strengthening the city's position through marketing and communications.</p>
3.6	<p>Belfast's <i>Make Yourself at Home</i>, Tourism Plan recognises both the challenges to increase tourism and to maximise the positive impact that it can have on the city; whilst the updated Belfast Agenda has set a target to double the value of tourism from £400m to £800m by 2030. As the Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) for Belfast, Visit Belfast has an important role to play in realising the vision for tourism. It is in this context that Visit Belfast developed its three-year strategy New Horizons (2024-2027) and its year three business plan-2026-2027 to support and promote tourism activity in the city region in a way that enriches the visitor experience, encourages longer stays and achieves meaningful economic and social impact for local people. Further details of activities that will be undertaken as part of this plan with associated targets will be set out in the presentation to the Committee and are included at Appendix A.</p>
3.7	<p>Visit Belfast's three-year strategy New Horizons (2024-2027) and year three business plan (2026-2027) are aligned to the four themes of Belfast's Tourism Plan: <i>Make Yourself at Home</i>, focused on delivering for the city:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grow the visitor economy in the Belfast city region in an inclusive and sustainable way ● Position the Belfast city region as a front of mind destination for leisure visits, business events and days out; ● Enhance the Experience for visitors by showcasing Belfast city region as a diverse and welcoming destination with a unique neighbourhood offer, and; ● Sustain its approach to championing sustainability, pioneering impactful initiatives, inspiring sustainable choices amongst visitors and clients and telling Belfast's sustainability story.
3.8	<p>Tourism Outlook – tourism contributes to the economic and social wellbeing of the city with high potential to create jobs quickly and provide the economic impetus for the wider economy. The global tourism landscape is being reshaped by shifts in demand, evolving traveller behaviours, and rising economic pressures, creating both opportunities and</p>

challenges for the city region. The analysis of tourism trends, market sentiment, policy context and performance indicators underscore the opportunity for growth in the coming year.

3.9 The year ahead presents a significant opportunity to attract visitors to the city and region with Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 set to become the largest cultural event in the city's history. This landmark moment is further reinforced by Belfast's designation as a UNESCO City of Music and European City of Sport, positioning the city firmly on the national and international stage. Beyond Fleadh, the marketing approach will continue to deepen the Explore the Unexpected narrative, showcasing Belfast's neighbourhoods, local voices and authentic experiences, thereby meeting the expectations of visitors seeking experiences that are authentic and inspiring; and where there are strong stories and a cultural connection.

3.10 Visit Belfast 2025-2026 performance - Visit Belfast's focus in year two of the New Horizons strategy was to achieve an economic impact target of £141m through leisure tourism marketing, business events, cruise and visitor servicing activity. Visit Belfast is on target to deliver a very strong year two performance in 2025-26 with all KPIs achieved or exceeded.

3.11 Priorities outlined in Visit Belfast's business plan 2026-2027 include: directly delivering on the ambitions and priorities set out in *Make Yourself at Home* tourism plan for Belfast through key strategic focus areas of growing demand by positioning Belfast as a front of mind destination for leisure city breaks and business events; increasing the value of overnight stays and day trips from NI, ROI and GB markets, prioritising midweek, shoulder season and winter months; leverage major events; marketing will focus on direct access cities within Europe and capitalise on increased US market via Dublin; enhance the experience for visitors by showcasing Belfast city region as a culturally diverse and welcoming destination with a unique neighbourhood offer and iconic attractions in order to connect visitors with authentic and unique experiences; collaboration across industry partnerships.

3.12 Operational Targets for 2026-2027 - based on projected levels of growth in 2026-2027, Visit Belfast is proposing the following targets for 2026-2027 as agreed by their board:

Target 2026-2027	Measurement
1.04 m Visits	Cruise 296,000 Daytrips 425,000 Overnight leisure trips 285,000

		Delegates 38,500
	500,000 Bednights	400,000 Leisure 100,000 Business
	£150m economic impact	Leisure £66m Business events £39m Visitor servicing £19m Cruise £26m
	825,000 Visitor Enquiries	Total enquiries across all sites
3.13	<p>A detailed business plan has been submitted and reviewed by officers. The targets outlined will form the basis of key performance indicators for Council's 2026-2027 funding agreement with Visit Belfast. Regular monitoring against targets will be included, and these key performance indicators will relate to the trajectory for growth and align with the implementation phases for Council's tourism plan. This provides a basis for more effective monitoring of performance.</p>	
3.14	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>In the current financial year, Belfast City Council's funding arrangement with Visit Belfast is £2,076,424. An allocation of £2,143,073 has been set aside within the Departmental estimates for the financial year 2026-2027.</p>	
3.15	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>No specific equality or good relations implications. Visit Belfast also works with councils outside of Belfast, as part of the Regional Tourism Partnership.</p>	
4.0	Appendices	
4.1	Appendix A: Visit Belfast Presentation of Business Plan 2026-2027	