

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 11th March, 2026

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor I. McLaughlin (Chairperson);
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, Bunting, de Faoite,
S. Douglas, Duffy, Groogan, Hanvey, Lyons,
McAteer, McCabe, McCallin, McCormick, McKay,
R. McLaughlin, Meenehan, Nelson and Ó Néill.

Also attended: Alderman McCullough.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and
Development;
Mr. K. Forster, Director of Economic Development;
Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy;
Ms. C. Cassin, Markets Development Manager;
Mr. F. Grant, Operations Development Manager;
Mr. N. Simpson, Zoo Development Manager; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was received from Councillor McDonough-Brown.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 14th January and 9th February, 2026, were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 9th February, 2026.

Declarations of Interest

In relation to the item 'Vacant to Vibrant Programme Update', Councillor Groogan declared an interest in that her employer was in receipt of a grant through the scheme. As this item did not become the subject of debate, she was not required to leave the meeting.

Councillor McCabe declared an interest in relation to the item 'Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 Update' in that her employer was referenced within the report. As this item did not become the subject of debate, she was not required to leave the meeting.

Councillors Groogan and McCabe also declared an interest in the items 'City Imagining Investment Programme - Cultural Multi-Annual Grants' and 'Financial Reporting - Quarter 3 2025/26' in that they were associated with organisations which had

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applied for cultural multi-annual grant funding and left the meeting whilst this item was under consideration.

Presentation

Visit Belfast

The Director of Economic Development submitted for the Committee's consideration the following report:

“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 The Committee is asked to:**

- 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 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.**
- 3.2 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.

- 3.3 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.**
- 3.4 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.**
- 3.5 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 significant additional investment in order to sustain growth. The Council’s 10-year plan for tourism in the city; ‘Make Yourself at Home’ 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.**
- 3.6 Belfast’s Make Yourself at Home, 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.

- 3.7** 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: Make Yourself at Home, focused on delivering for the city:
- 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** 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 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

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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
1.04m 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** 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.

3.14 **Financial & Resource Implications**

In the current financial year, Belfast City Council’s funding arrangement with Visit Belfast is £2,076,424. An allocation of

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£2,143,073 has been set aside within the Departmental estimates for the financial year 2026-2027.

3.15 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

No specific equality or good relations implications. Visit Belfast also works with councils outside of Belfast, as part of the Regional Tourism Partnership."

The Chairperson welcomed Visit Belfast's Chief Executive, Mr. G. Lennon, and Chair, Ms. M. T. McGivern, to the meeting.

Mr. Lennon and Ms. McGivern presented the Committee with an overview of Visit Belfast's Business Plan for 2026/27, year three of its 2024-27 strategy 'New Horizons for Belfast City Region', which included:

- Key pillars of the strategy;
- Strategy objectives;
- Performance for year one and two of the strategy;
- Outlook for 2026/27 including opportunities and challenges;
- Key development areas for 2026/27;
- Marketing and communications;
- Public relations and engagement;
- Cruise tourism;
- Business events;
- Travel trade;
- Sustainability; and
- Visitor servicing.

During discussion, Mr. Lennon and Ms. McGivern answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to the upcoming Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, festival and events within the city, neighbourhood tourism, digital marketing and communications, business tourism and sustainability.

The Chairperson thanked Visit Belfast for their attendance at the meeting and the information provided within the presentation, and they left the meeting.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the draft Visit Belfast Business Plan for 2026/27;
- ii. that the overall funding requirement for Visit Belfast for 2026/27 had been accounted for in the revenue estimates approved by the Council; and
- iii. approved a funding allocation of £2,143,073 to Visit Belfast for 2026/27, subject to the development of a funding agreement, priority areas of activity and agreed targets.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following seven items is restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the press and public from the meeting during discussion of the following items as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Members were also reminded that the content of ‘restricted’ reports and any discussion which took place during closed session must be treated as ‘confidential information’ and that no such information should be disclosed to the public as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Code of Conduct.

Vacant to Vibrant Programme Update

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and sought approval for citywide grant awards as recommended by the Vacant to Vibrant assessment panel following receipt of recent applications.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme which would be supporting up to 75 businesses/organisations to locate or expand into long-term vacant units; and
- ii. agreed the recommended citywide grant awards as outlined within the report.

Cultural Multi-Annual Grants

The Committee was reminded that, at its meetings on 11th and 24th February, 2026, it had agreed to defer consideration of the Cultural Multi-Annual Grants for 2026-28, to enable further information to be provided.

The Director of Economic Development submitted for the Committee’s consideration a report which provided further information in respect of the allocation of the grant funding and set out a range of options for both strands of the grant scheme, namely Festivals and Events, and Arts and Heritage.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Nelson,
Seconded by McDonough-Brown,

“That the Committee agrees to defer the cultural multi-annual grants for 2026-28 to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee to seek additional funding for the scheme.”

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Amendment

Moved by Councillor Bunting,
Seconded by Councillor R. McLaughlin,

“That the Committee agrees the approach to the cultural multi-annual grants for 2026-2028, as set out within option six of the report.”

On a vote, twelve Members voted for the amendment and six against and it was declared carried.

During discussion, the Strategic Director of Place and Economy advised that further detail would be brought back to the Committee in respect of the allocation of funding.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report; and
- ii. agreed the approach to the cultural multi-annual grants for 2026-2028, as set out within option six of the report, and that a further report would be submitted to a future meeting on proposed funding allocations.

Markets Quarterly Update

The Committee considered a report which provided a quarterly update on the performance of St. George’s Market for Quarter 3, 2025/26, set out the St. George’s Market Business Plan for 206/27, provided an overview of the 2025 Christmas Continental Market, and outlined two requests for external markets licences.

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting in November, 2025, it had agreed the introduction of a storage charge fee for St. George’s Market from 1st April, 2026. The Director of Economic Development advised that, following recent engagement with the market traders, a request had been received from the traders for the introduction of the storage charge fees to be deferred until 1st June, 2026. The Director outlined the request and the financial implications of a deferral for the Committee’s consideration.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Lyons
Seconded by Councillor McKay, and

Resolved - That the Committee agrees to defer the introduction of the St. George’s Market storage charge fees until 1st June, 2026.

During discussion, a Member highlighted the ongoing engagement with traders and suggested that the Committee undertake a site visit to St. George’s Market. A Member also requested that further information be brought back in relation to the market’s governance arrangements.

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During further discussion, in relation to the future procurement process for the Christmas Market, a Member requested that the potential to expand the Market be included as part of the process.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the markets performance and financial update for Quarter 3, 2025/26;
- ii. noted the St. George's Market Business Plan for 2026/27;
- iii. approved the granting of two external markets licences as set out within the report;
- iv. agreed that the introduction of the St. George's Market storage charge fees be deferred to 1st June, 2026;
- v. agreed to undertake a site visit to St. George's Market;
- vi. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting in respect of St. George's Market's governance arrangements; and
- vii. agreed that the potential to expand the Christmas Market be included as part of the future procurement process.

Belfast Zoo Quarterly Performance Report

The Director of Economic Development provided the Committee with an update on the performance of Belfast Zoo for Quarter 3 of 2025/26 which included visitor and education services, animal collection, marketing and events, and financial performance.

The Committee noted the update on the performance of Belfast Zoo for Quarter 3 of 2025/26.

Belfast Bikes Quarterly Performance Report

The Director of Economic Development provided the Committee with an update on the performance of the Belfast Bikes Scheme for Quarter 3 of 2025/26 which included the operator contract, operational performance, marketing activity, expansion of the scheme and sponsorship.

During discussion, a Member highlighted the need to ensure that docking stations were fully resourced, particularly when large events were being held within the city such as the upcoming Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

In response to a Member's suggestion, the Director agreed to explore the potential to engage with other Councils in respect of expanding the scheme beyond the city's boundary.

During further discussion, the Operations Development Manager advised that further information would be brought back to the Committee in respect of a Member's query on the operator's annual survey.

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In relation to the planned expansion of the scheme, a Member requested that Belvoir be considered as a potential location for a docking station.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the update on the performance of the Belfast Bikes Scheme for Quarter 3 of 2025/26; and
- ii. agreed that, as part of the planned expansion of the scheme, Belvoir would be considered as a potential location for a docking station.

Financial Reporting - Quarter 3 2025/26

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided an update on the Committee's financial position for Quarter 3 of 2025/26.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Nelson,
Seconded by Councillor Lyons, and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to submit a request to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee to explore the potential for additional funding to be allocated to the Cultural Multi-Annual Grants scheme.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the report and associated financial reporting pack; and
- ii. agreed that a request be submitted to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee to explore the potential for additional funding to be allocated to the Cultural Multi-Annual Grants scheme.

Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 Update

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy provided the Committee with an update on the preparations for the delivery of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026, which included progress and emerging issues in relation to licensing, food provision, engagement, cultural programming and visitor accommodation.

The Committee noted the update on the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026.

Matters Referred Back from Council

Notice of Motion - Ormeau Arts Centre

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 24th February, 2026, the Standards and Business Committee had referred

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the following motion, which had been proposed by Councillor de Faoite and seconded by Councillor McKeown, to the Committee for its consideration:

“Belfast City Council acknowledges the thriving and inclusive arts and cultural scene in Ballynafeigh and the benefits this brings not just to the local area, but to the city and region more widely;

- notes the growing aspiration in the community, particularly emerging through the Open Ormeau Community Visioning project which took place in 2025, for a dedicated arts and cultural space in Ballynafeigh, recognising the strong local interest in the arts, music and culture, and the area's increasing status as a destination for both residents and visitors to Belfast;
- and therefore agrees to fund a feasibility study to examine the potential for a dedicated arts and culture space in Ballynafeigh, working with Open Ormeau and the local community.”

Councillor de Faoite highlighted the Open Ormeau community visioning project and the emergence of an aspiration within the local community for an improved provision of arts and culture within the Ballynafeigh area.

At the request of Councillor de Faoite, the Committee agreed to invite Open Ormeau to attend a future meeting to provide further information on its community visioning project and in relation to a potential feasibility study.

Accordingly, the Committee agreed:

- i. that a report be submitted to a future meeting which would outline a detailed consideration of the motion, including potential cost implications; and
- ii. to invite Open Ormeau to attend a future meeting to present on its community visioning project and the potential for a dedicated arts and culture space in Ballynafeigh.

Growing Business and the Economy

Innovation Factory Update

The Director of Economic Development submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided an update on the ongoing work of the Innovation Factory, a council-owned enterprise workspace operated by Oxford Innovation on behalf of the Council since its opening in 2016 to address historically low levels of entrepreneurship within West Belfast, inspire young people considering self-employment, and act as a catalyst for wider regeneration of a site that had been derelict for more than two decades.

The update provided an overview of the centre's performance for 2025/26 and set out Oxford Innovation's Annual Service Plan for 2026/27. It was reported that Council officers had worked closely with Oxford Innovation to streamline processes, review targets, capitalise on collaboration opportunities, reduce duplication of effort, improve

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operational efficiency, and identify opportunities for shared delivery with council teams and partner organisations to maximise revenue generation and reduce the financial liability to the council for the centre.

The report recommended that the centre's management team attend a future meeting to provide Members with a more detailed overview of its work and the plans for 2026/27.

The Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report; and
- ii. agreed that the centre's management team attend a future meeting to provide an overview of the work of the centre and its plans for the coming year.

**International Relations Quarterly Update
and Forward Plan 2026/27**

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

The purpose of this report is to provide a quarterly progress update on delivery as part of the council's new International Relations Framework 2025-2028, as agreed at the November 2025 Committee meeting and to seek a number of outlined approvals required to progress imminent and planned activity in the first part of the year.

2.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- **Note the progress of the first quarter delivery of the International Relations Framework (November 2025 to March 2026);**
- **Note proposed activity for April 2026 to March 2027, as set out in Appendix 1, including opportunities for Member engagement;**
- **Approve the participation of the Lord Mayor and an officer in a civic visit to Sister City Nashville in April 2026 at a cost of £4,000;**
- **Approve the proposed EU engagement activity, including participation of an All-Party delegation and one officer in the annual European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels October 2026, as well as the payment of the 2026 Eurocities Membership fee. Costs in respect to this activity include £8,000 for the proposed Brussels visit in October plus Eurocities annual membership of £15,000;**

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- Approve the purchase of a one-year pilot CRM system as a means of tracking and measuring the impact of international activity at a cost of around £7,000; and
- Approve Council's annual participation in the New York New Belfast event, including stakeholder sponsorship, travel and attendance for the Lord Mayor, the Chief Executive, senior officer (or nominees) and one accompanying officer at a cost of £15,000.

3.0 Main report

3.1 At the November 2025 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members approved the International Relations Framework 2025 – 2028, along with an action plan for 2025/26 activity.

3.2 The three-year “framework” document is intended to be a supporting document to other key strategies and plans such as the Belfast Agenda, the Corporate Plan and Local Development Plan – setting out how priority objectives and ambitions in those documents can be achieved through international connections, networks and opportunities. Its purpose is to identify areas of collaborative advantage and help focus resources on opportunities that can maximise return on investment, in keeping with city priorities.

3.3 As part of this Framework, it was agreed that there would be quarterly reports back to the Committee outlining progress and key activities over the previous three months as well as a look ahead to the coming quarter, including opportunities for Member engagement.

3.4 Quarterly progress highlights November 2025 to March 2026
Since approval of the new framework, a range of international relations activities has been undertaken by council teams and their partner organisations or are scheduled to take place before the end of the month. Under the themes of the framework, key activities include:

Trade and Investment

- Participation in the November 2025 inaugural China/NI Economic Summit event, co-hosted by Invest NI, the Chinese Consulate and Chinese Chamber UK. The event was attended by Chinese Ambassador to the UK Mr Zeguang;
- Planning work undertaken on a March 2026 recce visit to Belfast by key Nashville economic partners. This visit is ahead of a planned inward economic mission involving senior government, business and innovation partners from Nashville that will take place in October 2026.

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The recce and the full programme will involve stakeholders including the Global Health Connector NI, Catalyst, HIRANI, Department of Health and Invest NI;

- Facilitation of a two-day fact finding programme for the NI Health Minister to Nashville in March 2026 to look at best practice connected health innovations and to meet investors and collaborators in this field;
- Attendance at MIPIM international real estate and property investment event in March 2026 as part of a Belfast City and Region Place Partnership delegation;
- Preparatory work ahead of the annual New York-New Belfast event in June 2026, working with Invest NI, Belfast Chamber, New York State Comptroller Di Napoli's office and new Mayor Mamdani's office, to maximise our positioning this year. Included in this is collaboration with Tourism Ireland to incorporate strong messaging around Belfast Stories and Fleadh Cheoil;
- Work is ongoing under the banner of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor Partnership. The Political Advisory Group meeting was hosted in Belfast City Hall in December 2025 and the second meeting of the DBEC Industry Advisory Group was hosted by Belfast Harbour in February 2026; and
- Ongoing support for Belfast-based partners seeking connections and introductions through our Sister City and other networks. Over the course of the last three months, we made introductions on behalf of 16 organisations.

Innovation & Knowledge Exchange

- The Council's Resilience team participated in the launch of an EU Horizon funded project 'Pathways to Resilience' in Budapest in February. This is a €200,000 funded programme to support the development of a Climate Resilience Baseline report, a Climate Resilience Strategy, Action Plan and Investment Plan. The team also attended the Katowice-based PGM UPSURGE project General Meeting of partners before submission of the final report in February 2026;
- In December 2025, we supported Queen's University's celebratory event to mark the departure of 90 North Eastern University students who had spent the previous semester in the city. This is directly linked to our Belfast-Boston Sister City relationship;
- The EU and International Relations Team hosted two US academic inward missions including one from Belmont University in Nashville and also facilitated a visit from US College Counsellors who were in Belfast on a fact-finding

mission to promote Belfast as an international study location; and

- The EU and International Relations Team connected the Innovation Commissioner to the Global Health Connector worldwide network. This led to opportunities for showcasing roles and meetings with potential investors at two key global health-related events.

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

- The council supported the annual Friendship Four ice hockey NCAA tournament in November and the Women's Friendship Series in January 2026 as part of the ongoing Boston Sister City connections;
- The Council's Culture team engaged in EuroCities Culture Forum planning for the year ahead and in particular, as Vice Chair, contributed to the Work of Culture for Inclusive Cities Working Group looking at Older People's participation in culture;
- The Culture team also enabled 2 Belfast musicians to participate in an event in Germany – the inaugural Hannover-Brno-Belfast collaboration with plans for further activity in 2026/27;
- The Council's Music Officer took part in the Daegu, South Korea Global World Forum where she presented opportunities for collaboration with other UNESCO Cities of Music. A Belfast artist also performed at the Daegu Opera House;
- The Lord Mayor and elected members recently supported a number of Chinese New Year celebration events and the council demonstrated its support to the celebrations by lighting the City Hall in red on the eve of Chinese New Year; and
- The EU and International Relations Team facilitated key connections for the January 2026 conference and showcase Your Roots Are Showing. This is Ireland's largest folk music event and strong connections with our partner city of Nashville.

3.5 Looking forward outline plan for 2026/27

The draft action plan for the coming year is attached in Appendix 1. Priority actions that members may wish to note include:

Trade and Investment

- Participation in New York New Belfast in June 2026 including key engagements and investment meetings;

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- Planned inward economic visit by Nashville businesses, investors and economic development leads: recce visit in March 2026 and full delegation to visit in October;
- Engagement with NI Office in Brussels with regard to opportunities for EU-based trade promotion and engagement activities; and
- Development of new promotional materials and revamp of Invest in Belfast website to ensure consistent messaging across FDI investment and capital investment materials.

Innovation and Knowledge Exchange

- Preparatory work on application for European Capital of Innovation 2027;
- Participation in significant global innovation events including Mobile World Congress and Smart City World Congress; and
- Development of new innovation investment prospectus.

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

- Supporting Fleadh team with key messaging to international audiences;
- Ongoing engagement and collaboration as part of UNESCO city of music network; and
- Exploring potential for engagement opportunities as part of Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU (from July 2026).

Updates on progress against commitments as well as any developments as part of this plan will be brought back to the Committee on a quarterly basis for information and approval.

3.6 As previously noted as part of the November 2025 report to Committee, it can be challenging to track outcomes of much of the international relations activity. This is because progress can often come from an initial introduction that we made but that takes a while to develop. In order to track the impact of our work more effectively, it is proposed that we undertake a one-year subscription to the Amplify CRM system. This system is used by many other partners that work in this field and it appears to support more effective tracking of impact which should be helpful for the regular updates to Committee. The total cost for a one-year subscription is around £7,000.

3.7 There are a number of specific activities that will require Committee approval to progress in the coming quarter. These include:

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- **Support for Lord Mayor’s visit to Nashville:** Following an invitation recently received from the Mayor of Nashville, it is proposed that the Lord Mayor – accompanied by one officer – undertakes a two-day programme in Nashville. This will include meetings and visits to key government, academic, civil society and Sister City representatives. The estimated cost of the visit is £4,000;
- **Confirmation of participation at EU Week of Regions and Cities:** Following elected members’ agreement that the EU & International Unit augments its European activity, officers have commenced scoping activities that align with strategic need and seek to increase Belfast’s profile. The EU Week of Regions and Cities takes place annually in Brussels. It offers an opportunity to consider and profile the role that cities and regions play in shaping and transforming Europe’s economy, innovation, urban and societal landscapes. It is proposed that an all-party delegation led by one Council Officer attends this year’s event which is scheduled for 13-15 October 2026. It is proposed that upon approval the EU and International Unit will convene a working group of members to prepare for the event. The Unit will also work in partnership with NILGA, the NI Bureau in Brussels and The Irish Regional European Office to create a bespoke programme of side meetings and events. The total estimated cost for delivering this initiative is £8,000;
- **Eurocities membership:** Since the ratification of the new International Relations Framework, officers have also been engaged in conversations with the Eurocities staff to also identify opportunities to benefit from membership. Eurocities staff recently agreed to provide additional support to assist with the identification of good practice, showcasing opportunities and learning exchange opportunities with relevant cities. The annual membership fee is now due for renewal at a cost of £15,000 and elected members are asked to approve this cost; and
- **New York New Belfast:** This annual conference is a key moment to position Belfast, its innovation, economic ambitions and tourism developments to a select audience of strategic decision makers who represent government, business, civic society and investors. In recent years, the Belfast representation has enhanced to include tourism and economic development agencies, Belfast Chamber of Commerce, local entrepreneurs and media influencers. In addition to the conference the Council delegation undertakes bespoke meetings which serve to contribute to communicate the city’s investment and development portfolio. It is proposed that the Lord Mayor, Chief

Executive, one Senior Manager (or nominees) and accompanying officer with a total cost for a three-day programme plus conference sponsorship amounting to £15,000.

4.0 Finance and Resource Implications

- **Lord Mayor’s Nashville civic visit estimated at £4,000;**
- **All party delegation to EU Week of Regions and Cities – travel, accommodation and subsistence estimated at maximum £8,000;**
- **EuroCities annual membership fee £15,000;**
- **A 1-year pilot CRM system to monitor and measure International Relations activity at a cost of £7,000;**
- **Annual sponsorship and participation in New York New Belfast at maximum cost of £15,000; and**
- **The EU and International Relations budget was approved as part of the 2026-27 estimates setting process. Budgets for individual activities are the responsibility of the respective teams.**

5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

No specific equality or good relations implications. Activities will focus on support for Belfast-based organisations and companies.”

The Committee:

- i. noted the progress of the first quarter delivery of the International Relations Framework (November, 2025, to March, 2026);
- ii. noted the proposed activity for April, 2026 to March, 2027, as set out within Appendix 1 of the report, including the opportunities for Member engagement;
- iii. approved the participation of the Lord Mayor and an officer in a civic visit to sister city Nashville in April, 2026, at a cost of £4,000;
- iv. approved the proposed EU engagement activity, which would include the participation of an All-Party delegation and one officer in the annual European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels in October, 2026, at a cost of £8,000, and the payment of the 2026 Eurocities Membership fee, at a cost of £15,000;
- v. approved the purchase of a one-year pilot CRM system as a means of tracking and measuring the impact of international activity, at a cost of around £7,000; and

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- vi. approved the Council's annual participation in the New York New Belfast event, which would include stakeholder sponsorship, travel and attendance of the Lord Mayor, the Chief Executive, a senior officer (or nominees) and one accompanying officer, at a cost of £15,000.

**Local Economic Partnership Action Plan –
Update on Proposed Priority Projects**

The Director of Economic Development submitted for the Committee's consideration a report which provided a progress update on the development of the Local Economic Partnership, a key element of the Department for the Economy's Sub-Regional Economic Plan and which set out the proposed priority work areas which would cover creative sector incubation support, capital investment for creative growth, and business growth and innovation support.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update on the work being undertaken as part of the Local Economic Partnership;
- ii. noted and endorsed the emerging priority work areas, as set out within section 3.6 of the report; and
- iii. agreed that officers further engage with the Department for the Economy based on the emerging priority work areas, with a view to secure resources to support delivery.

Strategic and Operational Issues

Notices of Motion - Quarterly Update

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the ten Notices of Motion and Issues Raised in Advance which it was responsible for, and which recommended the closure of the motion 'Gary Moore Statue', as the project had been added to the Council's Capital Programme.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update on the Notices of Motion and Issues Raised in Advance that it was responsible for, as set out within Appendix 1 of the report; and
- ii. agreed to the closure of the motion 'Gary Moore Statue' (ID 425), as outlined within section 3.3 and Appendix 1 of the report.

Chairperson