



Subject:	Enterprise and Business Growth – update and forward workplan
Date:	13 May 2026
Reporting Officer:	Keith Forster, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Margie McKay, Enterprise & Business Growth Manager
Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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 <input type="checkbox"/>	
<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	
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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 or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to advise members of a range of activity undertaken in 2025/26 to support the development of new and existing businesses across the City. The report sets out key priority areas of work for the 2026/27 financial year, seeking approval of activity to support the delivery of the targets under the “Our Economy” pillar of the Belfast Agenda.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the work undertaken and outputs delivered in the financial year to date • Agree the priority work areas presented for the 2026/27 financial year and approve the allocations from the existing 2026/2027 Enterprise and Business Growth budget as set out in sections 3.4-3.10 • Note and endorse the financial contribution to support the ongoing development of the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (work to be coordinated through Newry, Mourne and Down District Council) up to a maximum of £45,000 • Note and endorse the contribution to support the ongoing delivery of the Northern Ireland Entrepreneurship Support Service (Go Succeed) and the achievement of the Council’s statutory target up to a maximum of £317,415.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	<p><u>2025/26 Update</u></p> <p>Members will be aware that within the 2026/27 period, the Enterprise and Business Growth team has been working to develop and deliver a range of activity to support the growth and development of new and existing businesses across the city, aligned with the “Our Economy” pillar of the Belfast Agenda.</p>
3.2	<p>Since April 2025, the team has been working with partners to develop and deliver interventions that address the City’s challenges in relation to low levels of business start-up, innovation, competitiveness, and productivity. Some of the key achievements in 2025/26 include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprise awareness activity: engaged 1258 individuals through community outreach activity targeting under-represented groups including people with disabilities, individuals who are economically inactive, females and young people providing them with tools to overcome barriers to take positive steps to starting a business. We also enabled test trading opportunities for 48 new businesses through our dedicated start up space at St George’s Market and many of those are seeking to trade at the market on a more regular basis or are exploring alternative retail outlets for their products.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start a business activity: 900 individuals recruited onto the 'Start' stage of Go Succeed availing of nearly 5,000 hours of 1-1 mentoring support focused on business plan development and business fundamentals. • Support for Social Enterprises and Co-Operatives: 54 organisations were supported with one-to-one mentoring, advice, and guidance. We again delivered the Social Economy Incentive Fund in late 2025, with an available pot of almost £90,000 to support social economy businesses to bring forward their business growth plans. There were 49 eligible applications for the SEIF, with 22 applicants invited to pitch for funding, 17 applicants were successful with just under £90,000 awarded to support growth goals. • Growing a business: 435 existing Belfast businesses supported on the 'Growth' and 'Scaling' stages of the Go Succeed service availing of nearly 5,500 hours of 1-1 mentoring support tailored to support business growth aspirations. Through the service we have also successfully awarded and administered grants to businesses to remove barriers to growth, with 127 Belfast businesses receiving Go Succeed grants in the 26/27 year to a value of £285,220.57. • Innovation Factory: overall performance against targets at the centre improved significantly in the 2026/27 year. Centre occupancy is now at 94% occupancy (with a final average occupancy for the year at 72%) against a 90% target. Throughout the year we have been working through a reprioritisation change in the contract enabling performance targets to be amended to streamline reporting and to be more reflective of the current market.
3.3	<p>2026/27 Business Plan</p> <p>Building on these achievements, the proposed work programme for the next financial year will include a number of new work areas including:</p>
3.4	<p><u>Starting a Business</u>: Key to meeting the Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) Order of 2015 is the continued delivery of the Go Succeed service. The service aims to foster a culture of entrepreneurship, attract more people into the "pipeline" and to help more high-growth potential start-ups to get the help they need to grow and scale. The ability to attract more people into the "pipeline" will require innovative approaches, particularly where there is a need for cultural change amongst under-represented groups. It is expected that this will support the creation of 271 new businesses and 209 new jobs. To support delivery of the numbers highlighted above, Belfast City Council will make a payment of £317,415 in match funding towards service delivery.</p>

Community Outreach: Crucial to the success of our business support interventions is the fostering of an entrepreneurial mindset and creation of a pipeline of entrepreneurs in Belfast. This activity involves actively targeting under-represented groups including people with disabilities, individuals who are economically inactive, females and young people providing them with tools to overcome barriers to take positive steps to starting a business. A budget of £80,000 is allocated to this area of work; activity will include delivery of our young entrepreneurs to watch initiative, our fearless event targeting people with a disability, as well as a range of female focussed interventions and Community partnerships. We will also continue with our test trading offering at St George's Market.

Social Enterprise and Cooperative Development: In the next financial year, we will refine our social economy action plan based on research conducted in the 25/26 year and engagement with appropriate sector partners. A continued area of focus is the administration of the Social Economy Incentive Fund (SEIF) with a budget of £90,000 however we will also be working with a co-design group to develop a roadmap for the SEIF to progress against the strategic goals in the Belfast Agenda action plans. In addition to the SEIF, a budget of £90,000 has been set aside for dedicated social enterprise and co-operative support. This will cover a range of support interventions including mentoring, workshops, and events via our Go Social delivery. Go Social delivery is complementary to Go Succeed, encouraging a pipeline of social entrepreneurs progressing into Go Succeed support.

3.5 Growing a Business: The Go Succeed Service has proven successful over the past two years in providing flexible, tailored growth support for existing businesses. It is expected that through the service we will engage with 323 businesses and directly lead to the creation of 102 new jobs. We will also work to deliver a series of workshops and events on issues such as financial planning and forecasting, E-commerce essentials, Sales and Marketing, accessing finance, Writing a Winning bid, Strategy and Business Planning and Employee legal considerations. Go Succeed grants will continue to support this stream of work with the target for 2026/27 to be confirmed.

Whilst our main area of support for established businesses is Go Succeed, we also ensure we are responsive to the needs of our business community. Work is currently under way on a range of new development projects including support for high growth sectors, place-based activity where there is demand and a focus on the Fleadh Cheoil opportunities to businesses. Alongside our colleagues in Culture and Tourism, we are leading on the business engagement aspect of the Fleadh Cheoil. This includes ensuring businesses are fully informed on the

	<p>opportunities available to them through the Fleadh but also of the aspects which may impact them including licensing and road closures. Activity to date has included information sessions disseminating relevant information to businesses in the City Centre and beyond as well as gathering information from the businesses on what they need to get 'Fleadh ready'. An overall budget for these additional "Growing a Business" support activities is set at £282,614. Where new interventions require specific approval, additional details will be brought back to the Committee for approval if required.</p>
3.6	<p><u>Supporting events</u>: The Enterprise and Business Growth Team is regularly asked to sponsor/financially support events and conferences in areas that – to a greater or lesser extent – are associated with the unit's priorities, as set out above. While these events can often act as a useful promotional vehicle for Council interventions and can help secure referrals to programme activity, many of these tend to be last-minute requests for relatively small amounts of money and provide little measurable return. In order to assess the impact of the requests, officers have developed a process to measure and score these requests based on their alignment to the "Our Economy" pillar of the Belfast Agenda, the contribution to the work of the team as set out in this report and the potential to profile the Council activities and generate interest and demand for the services. The total budget to support contributions to events and conferences in this financial year is £73,000 and it is proposed that each application for support will be capped at a maximum of £10,000. Objectives and outputs will be agreed through a funding agreement with the event organisers. This approach has been effective in the past and has helped ensure that our resources are focused on areas of maximum return. Any events that will have wider corporate impact will be brought back to the relevant Committee for consideration and endorsement.</p>
3.7	<p><u>Scaling Support and Innovation</u>: The 'Our Economy' pillar of the Belfast Agenda identifies the need to focus on educational inequalities, jobs and skills and sustainable and inclusive economic growth. A key part of sustainable economic growth is the focus on key growth sectors and emerging technologies; these include Creative and Digital (Virtual Production, Immersive), Fintech and AI.</p> <p>This year we will continue to build upon our work with the City Innovation and Culture and Arts team, working to build capacity among local businesses. Work will include supporting businesses to grow and scale, provide knowledge and connections within SMEs to access export opportunities, challenge funds and alternative funding sources, including those coming from the Belfast Region City Deal. We will also continue to work with key partners including</p>

	<p>Digital Catapult, Ulster University, Queen’s University and Invest NI to increase the number of innovation driven enterprises and businesses with scaling potential.</p> <p>This work also directly aligns with the DfE funded Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) within which proposed outcomes include higher productivity, wages and employment rates. Members agreed a series of activities to be take forward using LEP funding at the 11 March Committee meeting. Numbers of businesses in highest productivity sectors (aligned with those identified above with a focus on Studio Ulster), number of businesses who export and percentage employment in Invest NI supported companies will all be metrics used to monitor progress. A budget of £100,000 has been allocated to this area of work.</p>
3.8	<p><u>Innovation Factory:</u> Members will be aware that the Innovation Factory is the council-owned innovation centre located in Forthriver Business Park on Springfield Road. The Enterprise and Business Growth Team is responsible for the contract management of the Innovation Factory. This role includes management and monitoring of the performance of the Service Provider in operating the Innovation Factory in accordance with the performance regime of the Contract. On occasion this area of work requires guidance from subject matter experts on both contractual and commercial matters. A budget of £15,800 is allocated to this within the current estimates.</p>
3.9	<p><u>Research and development:</u> The programme of work set out in this report is informed by an ongoing series of research and insights work, undertaken in collaboration with our Business Research and Development team. This ensures that our programmes are receptive and responsive to the changing needs of the local economy and helps track the impact and outcomes against high level strategic commitments. This will include continued research of the key growth areas, gaps in existing provision and challenges in the local economy as well as a continued subscription to the Beauhurst platform ensuring informed intelligence. A budget of £50,000 is allocated to this area of work and individual research and services will be commissioned appropriately as part of this overall budget allocation.</p>
3.10	<p><u>Belfast Business Promise:</u> The inclusive growth city charter is a key commitment in the Council’s Inclusive Growth strategy and the Belfast Agenda. Co-created with businesses, it was designed to provide an assessment framework to enable employers to look at their current practices and identify where they could make changes which would have a beneficial impact on inclusive growth in the city. Driven by the Council’s Social Policy Working Group (SPWG), the charter has been operationalised as the Belfast Business Promise (BBP) since</p>

	<p>April 2023 and delivered by a cross-council team, led by the Strategy, Programmes and Partnership and Economic Development teams, with support from Corporate HR, CPS and Climate teams.</p> <p>A report to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in March outlined a series of operational and structural changes to the service and these were endorsed as a way forward for the coming year. In order to support delivery, a budget of £50,000 is allocated to Belfast Business Promise and this year will focus on further development/refinement of the business promise, with potential development of a CRM which will enable greater potential to scale and manage the programme.</p>
4.0	Financial and Resource Implications
4.1	The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2026/27 budget for the Enterprise & Business growth section of the Place and Economy departmental budget that was approved as part of the 2026/27 estimates process.
5.0	Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment
5.1	Each of the proposed projects referenced in this report is informed by statistical research, stakeholder engagement and complementary policies and strategies. Considerations given to equality and good relations impacts at the initial stages of project development and monitored throughout delivery. Officers will work closely with the Equality and Good Relations Team on this activity.
6.0	Appendices
	None