



<b>Subject:</b>	City Innovation programme update
<b>Date:</b>	19 June 2026
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Services
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Mark McCann, City Innovation Manager Stephen Leonard, Director of Resources, Fleet, Transport & Open Spaces and Street Scene

<b>Restricted Reports</b>	
<b>Is this report restricted?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>Please indicate the description, as listed in Schedule 6, of the exempt information by virtue of which the council has deemed this report restricted.</b></p> <p>Insert number <input type="checkbox"/></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Information relating to any individual</li> <li>2. Information likely to reveal the identity of an individual</li> <li>3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the council holding that information)</li> <li>4. Information in connection with any labour relations matter</li> <li>5. Information in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained</li> <li>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</li> <li>7. Information on any action in relation to the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime</li> </ol>	
<b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b>	
<p><b>After Committee Decision</b></p> <p><b>After Council Decision</b></p> <p><b>Sometime in the future</b></p> <p><b>Never</b></p>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Call-in</b>	
<b>Is the decision eligible for Call-in?</b>	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report</b>
1.1	To update Members on a number of City Innovation programme initiatives including Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors' Challenge Belfast Alleyways Transformation programme.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Approve Belfast City Council to commence work, on behalf of Belfast Region City Deal partners, on the design and delivery of the Belfast ACTs programme and its associated grants competition. This will include commissioning expert support.</li> <li>2. To approve the submission of an application to the European Capital of Innovation Award 2027 promoting the Belfast innovation ecosystem and its commitment to inclusive growth.</li> <li>3. Note the work packages and planned phases of the Alleyways transformation programme.</li> </ol>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
	<b>Belfast Region ACTs programme</b>
3.1	Belfast City Council, on behalf of Belfast Region City Deal partners, has submitted a business case proposal to the Department for the Economy to deliver the £9 million Belfast Region Advanced Wireless Connectivity Technologies (ACTs) programme.
3.2	This work builds on the success of the recent Belfast 5G Innovation Regions programme which, with £5.1 million of funding for the UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, supported five major 'anchor' projects including an energy and building management project within the Cecil Ward Building to support long term efficiencies. It also provided grant funding for 15 smaller projects with local companies that allowed them to utilise 5G connectivity to create efficiencies and transformation within their business.
3.3	Belfast Region ACTs proposes to maintain this momentum to run three waves of competitions that will provide grants of between £500,000 and £1.5 million to projects that have significant business, industrial or public service needs that could be solved through the innovative adoption of advanced wireless technologies. At the same time, the programme also seeks to stimulate significant investment by the UK's Mobile Network Operators in business-ready public 5G networks across the Belfast region – which would generate opportunities for the region's businesses in general. Feedback from the wireless industry and local industry has been extremely encouraging.
3.4	Subject to DfE business case approval and legal advice, both of which are expected imminently, Members are asked approve Belfast City Council commence work, on behalf of Belfast Region City Deal partners, on the design and delivery of the Belfast ACTs programme and its associated grants competition. This will include commissioning expert support to design and

manage what is a complex technical programme, details of which are included in this month's contract report.

**3.5 European Capital of Innovation Award 2027 application**

Supported by the European Innovation Council under Horizon Europe, the European Capital of Innovation Awards (also known as iCapital) honours city regions with strong collaborative innovation ecosystems. The competition is open to cities in EU Member States and countries associated to Horizon Europe. The iCapital city for 2026 is Grenoble, France. This year's competition opened on 5 May with submissions due (from city governments only) by 4 August 2026.

3.6 Winners are selected following evaluations by panels of experts in early autumn. The winning city receives €1 million and two runners-up receive \$100,000 each. The process also allows participating cities to 'benchmark' themselves against their peers and shared criteria, while at the same time offering opportunities to promote themselves internationally as places to invest in innovation and to foster collaborations.

3.7 Belfast City Council is currently engaging with partners on the Belfast submission. This will be framed around the strengths and uniqueness of the city's innovation ecosystem and its capacity to generate inclusive economic and social impact.

3.8 Our 'ecosystem' constitutes the city's private, public and academic institutions, our residents and communities, our digital and data infrastructure, the supportive policy environment, programmes and initiatives that allow these elements to work together to maximise the opportunities. The core argument in the submission will be that Belfast is deliberately shaping this ecosystem towards inclusive growth. And that the city is doing so by building on the unique capacity and scale of our community and voluntary sector infrastructure. This approach builds on the recent *Belfast: Inclusive Futures* series.

3.9 Given the submission deadline of 4 August, Members are asked to approve the submission of an application to the competition which will be framed in this context. This will also require a letter of support from the Lord Mayor.

**3.10 Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayors Challenge update**

Work is underway to design, in collaboration with Bloomberg Philanthropies, a two-year programme that will put in place a new long-term, financially sustainable, Belfast City Council 'Alleyway Service' that's responsive and supportive of the needs and ambitions of neighbourhoods across the city. The programme is expected to deliver the following key outputs by March 2028:

3.11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>A detailed sustainability plan</b> that identifies a costed model for how Belfast City Council will deliver a citywide alleyways programme over subsequent years once the Bloomberg funding ends. This will address such things as support for residents, council service re-design, the role of partners, financing, administration, future funding models, etc.</li> <li>2. A <b>Belfast City Council business case</b> for onward delivery of the programme that may include costed proposals for the transformation of services, 'invest to save' propositions, models for new ways of working, etc.</li> <li>3. <b>25 miles of transformed alleyways.</b> The programme is not only about designing long-term solutions, it is also about learning how this can work in the real-world conditions by delivering 800 resident-led alley projects with residents.</li> </ol>
3.12	<p>To deliver these outputs the programme will have a number of inter-connected work packages.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <p><b>1. Programme management</b></p> <p>To put in place and manage all aspects of programme governance, delivery and co-ordination of work packages, including over-seeing risk, assurance, budget and reporting to Belfast City Council and Bloomberg Philanthropies as the main funder, to recruit and manage staff, commission technical and other support.</p> </li> <li> <p><b>2. Data and Insights</b></p> <p>Gathering the data and insights required to plan and evaluate the programme including the success of pilots, approaches, engagement with residents, service costs, impact, etc. This will generate evidence for the sustainability plan and any future 'invest to save' business case.</p> </li> <li> <p><b>3. Resident mobilisation</b></p> <p>A critical success factor for the programme is the mobilisation and continued involvement of residents over the long term. In the past, similar resident-led projects have managed to sustain resident motivation while other projects have failed. This work package will determine the best mix of support, incentives and approaches needed to inspire and maintain engagement and motivation over time.</p> </li> <li> <p><b>4. Stakeholders &amp; Partner engagement</b></p> <p>While the Council will lead on the programme, long term success depends on multi-agency cooperation with organisations such as NIHE, the Department for Communities, the Department for Infrastructure, potential third-party funders and, most importantly, the local community and voluntary sector.</p> </li> </ol>

	<p><b>5. Alleyway Transformation Resources</b></p> <p>There are a range of resources the programme will develop to support residents in their ambition. This may include resource hubs, materials, toolkits and guides, hands-on training, and micro-grants. These will be identified, developed and tested with residents over the life of the programme.</p> <p><b>6. Mobilisation and Delivery</b></p> <p>This is the ‘on-the-ground’ work of council officers, residents and partners in the delivery of the programme and its pilots. The Bloomberg funding will provide support for a temporary three-person programme team who will work with existing staff from City and Neighbourhoods.</p> <p><b>7. ‘Future State’ Delivery Model</b></p> <p>This is mapping the various existing council and partners services related to alleyways and developing a low cost, integrated approach that can support the alleyway programme.</p> <p><b>8. Learning &amp; Evaluation</b></p> <p>An obligation to our funders is to ensure that the programme is measured and evaluated at each phase, with a emphasise on determining impact through, for example, a social return on investment model.</p> <p>3.13 The programme has a number of discreet phases specified by Bloomberg’s innovation process. Over the next six months the focus will be on the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establishing the programme governance</li> <li>- Recruitment of the three-person team</li> <li>- Ramp up stakeholders and community engagement and awareness</li> <li>- Development of element of the alleyways support package for communities</li> <li>- Delivery of a small number of interventions to inspire and mobilise neighbourhoods</li> <li>- Design of a scalable approach ahead of the introduction of a citywide approach.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</b></p>
3.14	<p>Bloomberg Philanthropies will provide funding of approx. £900,000 for a two-year programme which includes funding for a Programme Manager and two staff.</p> <p>Other expenditure has been identified within existing departmental budgets.</p>
	<p><b>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</b></p>
3.15	<p>Equality and Rural screenings will be completed as part of the Bloomberg programme design process.</p>
4.0	<p><b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b></p>
	<p>Appendix 1 - Outline Proposal</p>