



Subject:	Belfast City Council Draft Response to Consultation on the Northern Ireland Public Sector AI Strategy
Date:	18 September 2026
Reporting Officer:	Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Services
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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	☐
After Council Decision	☐
Sometime in the future	☐
Never	☐

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes ☒ No ☐

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To provide Members with an overview of the Northern Ireland Draft Public Sector AI Strategy and to seek approval for Belfast City Council's draft response to the consultation - which closes on 7 October 2026 . The Council's response seeks to strengthen the Strategy through greater recognition of local government, stronger adoption mechanisms, improved collaboration and a

	continued focus on inclusive growth, environmental considerations, trust and responsible innovation.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The Committee is asked to: 1. Approve the draft response to the Northern Ireland Draft Public Sector AI Strategy.
3.0	Main report
3.1	In August 2026, the Northern Ireland Executive published its Draft Public Sector AI Strategy for consultation. The Strategy establishes a framework for the responsible adoption of Artificial Intelligence across Northern Ireland's public sector and sets out a series of principles, governance arrangements and priority actions intended to guide future implementation. On-line responses are requested by 7 October 2026.
3.2	The Strategy is built around eight principles intended to guide how AI is developed, procured and deployed across public bodies while maintaining public trust and ensuring AI is used responsibly and ethically. Principle 1 – Human Oversight: AI projects should have a human oversight team to ensure accuracy, prevent bias, integrate citizen perspectives and values, and question outputs. Principle 2 – Accountability & Redress: Clear lines of responsibility should be documented and cover data, algorithms, project design and project outcomes. Principle 3 – Data Governance: Policies and processes must protect personal data, and data used should be subject to the highest standards of data governance. Principle 4 – Technical Safety & Security: Public sector AI must be safe, secure, and resilient to threat, with a 'no harm' approach to humans and the environment. Principle 5 – Fairness and Transparency: All uses of AI should uphold values of fairness and inclusivity without discrimination or bias against any demographic or individual, or to propagate misinformation. Principle 6 – Environmental Sustainability: AI should be deployed to support sustainable solutions in energy or to monitor and model our natural environment. AI use must consider energy sources and efficiencies across all stages of the AI lifecycle. This includes ensuring the development of AI is proportionate and does not place excessive demands on our energy and water infrastructure at the expense of communities. Principle 7 – Societal Benefit: AI systems must be used to enhance productivity and efficiency in the public sector, improve the citizen experience, and support better decision-making. Every initiative must demonstrate measurable benefit for citizens or public services. Principle 8 – Training & Literacy: This involves working with a proposed AI Workforce Observatory to futureproof for the longer term, while providing safe spaces for experimentation to increase confidence and trust. It includes public sector training in areas such as AI

	technologies, applications and ethical implications, support for those leading on strategic integration of AI, new career pathways and support for Human Oversight Teams.
3.3	Implications for Belfast AI has the potential to improve service delivery, reduce administrative burden, enhance data-driven decision making and support more efficient use of resources. Northern Ireland departments are already identifying opportunities in areas such as transport management, environmental monitoring, housing and healthcare. The Council is also progressing a number of initiatives which align strongly with the objectives of the Strategy, including: • Development of Council-wide Generative AI policy and staff training programme. • Establishment of a Data & Analytics Board to oversee data and AI governance. • Delivery of the Belfast: Inclusive Futures event series, examining the societal implications of AI and highlighting the need for inclusion and responsibility. • Development of potential support for businesses and local government to ensure responsible AI adoption. With this in mind, the draft response is broadly supportive of the overall direction of travel set out within the Strategy and the potential it presents to enhance public services, support innovation and deliver societal benefit. However, as the strategy also states this must happen within a framework that promotes safety, environmental responsibility and inclusion.
3.4	Proposals to Strengthen the Strategy a) Role of Local Government The important role of local government is not sufficiently reflected in the draft Strategy. Councils deliver a broad range of citizen-facing services and are likely to be significant adopters of AI technologies across areas such as planning, environmental services, regeneration, economic development and customer services. The response therefore recommends formal local government representation within future AI governance and implementation structures. b) Innovation and Economic Opportunity The Council's response highlights the opportunity for AI to support inclusive economic growth, productivity and innovation. It also recommends stronger support for SME adoption and practical pathways that connect Northern Ireland's research strengths with business and public sector adoption. The draft Strategy should provide a clearer framework for translating these assets into place-based economic growth, business adoption, productivity improvement and regional benefit, with local government recognised as a key delivery partner alongside Invest NI, academia and industry

	c) Public Trust and Inclusion The response strongly supports the Strategy's emphasis on human oversight, accountability and transparency. It also recommends additional focus on citizen participation, digital inclusion and ensuring that AI adoption supports wider societal benefit rather than solely efficiency gains. Public trust is viewed as a critical enabler of successful AI adoption.
3.5	Summary of Recommendations Officers have therefore proposed several areas where the draft Strategy could be strengthened. These include: a) Formal recognition of local government as a key delivery partner in AI governance, innovation and implementation - to share learning, capability and best practice. b) Greater emphasis on AI adoption and diffusion across public services, SMEs and communities to support inclusive growth and regional competitiveness. c) Greater emphasis on digital inclusion, AI literacy and workforce transition. d) Stronger commitment to supporting conditions for Northern Ireland to lead in promoting inclusive and place-based AI innovation - with living laboratories and regulatory sandboxes available to build capability across all sectors and support responsible innovation. e) Promotion of challenge-led innovation programmes that connect public sector organisations with AI solution providers to address real-world service challenges. f) Belfast City Council strongly supports the principle of Environmental Sustainability and agrees that the environmental impact of Artificial Intelligence should be considered alongside its economic and societal benefits. With this in mind, the public sector would benefit from an AI procurement framework to support ethical, transparent, sustainable and consistent procurement practices.
3.6	Financial & Resource Implications None
3.7	Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment None at present. Successful programmes will be subject to individual Equality screenings.
4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	Appendix 1 - Draft NI AI Strategy Response