

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 9th September, 2026

MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor J. Duffy (Chairperson);
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, Bower, Bunting, Collins,
de Faoite, Groogan, Kelly, Lyons, McAteer,
McCabe, McDonough-Brown, McKay,
I. McLaughlin, R. McLaughlin, Meenehan,
Nelson and Ó Néill.

Also attended: Councillor Smyth.

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. L. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Ms. R. Campbell-Palmer, Culture Development Manager;
Ms. S. Kalke, Client Manager;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Mr. J. Uprichard, Business Research and Development
Manager; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology for inability to attend was reported on behalf of Councillor S. Douglas.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 26th August, 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 1st September, 2026.

Declarations of Interest

Councillors Groogan and McCabe declared an interest within the item 'Artist Studios Organisational Grants 2026/27' in connection to the discussion regarding the Cultural Multi-Annual Grants scheme in that they were associated with organisations which had applied for funding through the scheme. The Members left the meeting whilst this matter was under consideration.

Councillor Groogan also declared an interest in relation to the item 'Vacant to Vibrant Programme' in that her employer had been in receipt of a grant through the scheme but was not required to leave the meeting.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following six items was 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 item 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 Director of City Regeneration and Development submitted for the Committee’s consideration a report which provided an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and which sought approval for recommendations from the Vacant to Vibrant assessment panel following the receipt and assessment of recent applications.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme which would be supporting up to 87 businesses/organisations to locate or expand into long-term vacant units; and
- ii. agreed the recommended citywide grant awards as outlined within the report.

Artist Studios Organisational Grants 2026/27

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the Artist Studios Organisational Grants for 2026/27 and which sought approval for recommended grants.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Nelson,
Seconded by Councillor R. McLaughlin and

Resolved - That the Committee agrees that a report be submitted to its next meeting on the Cultural Multi-Annual Grants scheme, which would include further information on its impact and the discretionary transition fund to support organisations which had incurred a reduction in funding; and to write to the Minister for Communities to outline its support for the Arts sector and to highlight the value of the sector to the city.

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Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report;
- ii. agreed the recommendations for artist studio grants, as set out in Appendix 1 of the report;
- iii. agreed that a report be submitted to its next meeting in respect of the Cultural Multi-Annual Grants which would include information on impact and funding; and
- iv. agreed to write to the Minister for Communities to outline its support for the Arts sector and highlight the value of the sector to the city.

Belfast Zoo Q1 2026/27 Performance Update

The Director of Economic Development submitted a report which provided an update on the performance of Belfast Zoo for Quarter 1 of 2026/27, including information on its visitor and education services, animal collection and welfare, marketing and events, health and safety and financial performance.

The Director reminded the Committee that the next meeting of the Council's Zoo Long-Term Financial Sustainability Group would be held on 17th September, 2026.

The Committee noted the update on the performance of Belfast Zoo for Quarter 1 of 2026/27.

Belfast Bikes Q1 2026/27 Performance Update

The Director of Economic Development provided the Committee with an update on the performance of the Belfast Bikes Scheme for Quarter 1 of 2026/27, including information on its operator contract, operational performance, marketing activity, expansion of the scheme and sponsorship.

The Director highlighted that a new dockless e-bike scheme had been launched within the city in July, 2026, and that it had no connection to the Belfast Bikes scheme.

During discussion, a number of Members raised concerns in respect of the dockless e-bikes being left on pavements after use and highlighted the potential impact on pedestrians, including those with accessibility issues such as wheelchair users. In response, the Client Manager advised the Committee that officers would continue to engage with the Department for Infrastructure, the operator and the Council's Legal Services in relation to dockless e-bikes.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor R. McLaughlin,
Seconded by Councillor Duffy (Chairperson) and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees that a report be submitted to a future meeting which would provide an update on engagement with the Department for Infrastructure, operators and the Council's Legal Services in respect of dockless e-bikes.

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Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the update on the performance of the Belfast Bikes Scheme for Quarter 1 of 2026/27; and
- ii. agreed that a report be submitted to a future meeting which would provide an update on engagement with the Department for Infrastructure, operators and the Council's Legal Services in respect of dockless e-bikes.

Markets Quarterly Update

The Director of Economic Development submitted a report which provided the Committee with a quarterly update on the city's markets, including St. George's Market, Smithfield Market, and the 2026 Christmas Market, and which sought approval for a market licence to be granted for an external market.

In relation to the update provided on Smithfield Market, the Senior Manager, Economy, provided the Committee with further detail in relation to the ongoing work of repairs to address outstanding maintenance issues.

The Senior Manager reminded the Committee that, at its previous meeting in August, 2026, it had agreed for an update to be provided on the potential expansion of the Christmas Market, and she drew the Committee's attention to the update set out within the report. She advised the Committee that the Council-led market would likely remain focused on City Hall for 2026 and provided an update on the potential extension of the market from 2027 onward. The Senior Manager outlined for the Committee's information the wide range activities planned across the city for the 2026 Christmas period.

During discussion, the Senior Manager answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to the potential expansion of the market, the programme of events planned over the Christmas period, the marketing of the city's collective Christmas offering, festive lighting, and the ongoing repair and maintenance works at Smithfield Market.

During further discussion, a Member highlighted the number of visitors from the Republic of Ireland to the Christmas Market and St George's Market over the Christmas period and the need to ensure that reduced fares and regular departures from Dublin are maintained. The Member expressed concern in relation to the recent announcement by the Irish National Transport Authority that public transport fares would increase from 2027, and the potential impact that the planned fare increases might have on the Enterprise rail service route between Belfast and Dublin.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Lyons and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to write to the Minister for Infrastructure and the Irish Government's Minister for Transport to request that all efforts be made to ensure that fares on the Enterprise rail service

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route between Belfast and Dublin would not be increased, in light of the Irish National Transport Authority's announcement that public transport fares would increase from 2027.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the performance and financial update for Quarter 1 of 2026/27;
- ii. noted the feedback on the additional market activities during the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann;
- iii. noted the ongoing and planned works at Smithfield Market;
- iv. noted the update on plans for the extension of the Christmas Market;
- v. approved an external market licence for Cast and Clay to run a market in Carlisle Memorial Church in November, 2026; and
- vi. agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure and the Irish Government's Minister for Transport to request that all efforts be made to ensure that fares on the Enterprise rail service route between Belfast and Dublin would not be increased, in light of the Irish National Transport Authority's announcement that public transport fares would increase from 2027.

Financial Reporting - Quarter 1 2026/27

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy submitted a report which presented the Committee's financial position for Quarter 1 of 2026/27.

The Committee noted the report and the associated financial reporting pack.

Growing Businesses and the Economy

International Relations Quarterly Update

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 approval to progress imminent and planned activity in the second part of the year.

2.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to:

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- Note the progress of the last five months delivery of the International Relations Framework (April 2026 – August 2026);
- Note proposed activity for September 2026 to March 2027, as set out in Appendix 1, including opportunities for Member engagement;
- Approve the participation of an officer and the Chair or Deputy Chair of Committee to attend the EuroCities Gothenberg conference with costs fully covered by EuroCities;
- Approve the participation of the Lord Mayor and two officers in a civic and business visit to Boston and Chicago in Spring 2027, at an estimated cost of up to £12,000;
- Approve an EU & International Events & Conference financial contributions budget with a maximum budget of £40,000 for the financial year 2026/2027; and
- Approve a £5,000 contribution to the annual Belfast International Homecoming in October 2026 as a part of this Conference support scheme.

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 2026/27 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 and the Corporate 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** Members agreed that there would be quarterly reports back to the Committee outlining progress and key activities, as well as a look ahead to the coming quarter, including opportunities for Member engagement.

Progress highlights April to August 2026

- 3.4** Since approval of the new framework, a range of international relations activities has been undertaken by council teams and their partner organisations. Under the themes of the framework, key activities include:

Trade and Investment

- Participation in the June 2026 New York New Belfast annual Business and Investment conference and programme in partnership with Invest NI, Belfast Chamber and the NI Bureau in North America. The Belfast delegation met with key individuals including Comptroller di Napoli who has invested \$110million to date in NI scale up companies and is committed to a further investment. Meetings also took place with a company currently considering Belfast as an investment location, as well as with Bloomberg Philanthropies
- The former Lord Mayor undertook a brief visit to Nashville ahead of the North American Comhaltas Convention in Chicago. The Nashville programme focused on neighbourhood development, tourism product development, youth employment and skills and educational collaboration. This work has shaped the inward Nashville Sister Cities Belfast Visit planned for 18-22 October 2026
- Ahead of the early October 2026 Nashville life and health sciences business mission, the council and its partners hosted a planning visit in March 2026. Attendees included nine key Nashville economic partners in the field of life and health sciences. Local partners engaged in the programme development work included the Global Health Connector NI, Catalyst, HIRANI, both universities, Invest NI, Department of Health and City Deal projects such as Centre for Digital Healthcare Technology (CDHT) and Momentum 1.0. The early October visit will include targeted businesses, innovators and investors from the Greater Nashville area who are seeking to develop collaborations with local companies or explore trade and export opportunities
- The International Team provided key connections for the visit to Nashville by the former Health Minister Mike Nesbitt MLA in March 2026. Minister Nesbitt's visit focused on exploring good practice in connected health innovations and he met with potential investors and collaborators in this field
- Participation at UKREiiF - the UK's leading built environment showcase event in May 2026 in Leeds as part of the Belfast City & Region Place Partnership. The Belfast delegation attended a series of key meetings and engagements with senior UK Government Ministers, institutional investors and developers, other cities and city

regions. This is part of a wider programme of engagement to attract external capital investment into the city and the wider city region

- Ongoing support for Belfast-based partners seeking connections and introductions through our Sister City and other networks. Over the course of the last five months, the international team coordinated seventeen inward visits ranging from civic-based dignitaries, international students, exploratory business fact finding visits and potential future investors. Significant visits included the New York company mentioned above, who have already created twenty jobs in the city ahead of officially launching this year, and the US Teamsters' Union and Massport who have made introductions to high profile investors
- The team has also made introductions on behalf of twenty-eight organisations in this five month period ranging from inclusion of international artists into the Fleadh programme, to Belfast musicians connecting into key contacts in Nashville; as well as connecting two high growth Belfast companies with US-based investors and NI investment diaspora, and introductions leading to 5G investment in the Northern Ireland health estate.

Innovation and Knowledge Exchange

- The Council's Climate team continues to participate in an EU Horizon-funded project, "Pathways to Resilience", launched in Budapest earlier this year. 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
- In April, Belfast joined several Learning Cities from across Europe and North America in the UNESCO Learning City of Cork to exchange ideas, build momentum and accelerate the journey toward a European and North American Learning Cities network.

City Positioning, Tourism Promotion and Cultural Development

- The Council's Culture team continues to engage in the EuroCities Culture Forum as Vice Chair of the "Culture for Inclusive Cities" Working Group looking at Older People's participation in culture
- The culture team participated in Spancirfest, Varazdin, Croatia, in August 2026 with an opportunity to host Belfast

musicians at an inaugural Belfast Music stage at future iterations of the festival

- The council also took its first steps to re-engage with Europe through attendance at the EuroCities annual conference in June and also attended the inaugural “Liverpool Welcomes Europe” Summit in June. Topics covered included some of the biggest opportunities and challenges facing cities today – AI, Innovation, place-based leadership and city centre growth. Belfast was one of four Core Cities asked to present at a private Cities Roundtable
- The Council participated in the inaugural UK-China Cities Alliance, led by Bristol, to begin to look at best practice engagement with China. The NI Executive Office is also looking at how to encourage and develop China-NI relations into tangible outcomes, and Belfast City Council will follow this work closely
- The International Unit engaged with TG4 with respect to Nashville Sister City music links, resulting in Nashville artists performing as a central component to the TG4 opening concert on their live stage at the Fleadh on 6 August
- City Hall was the venue for PRONI’s launch of its publication “Ulster American Treasures: The Migration Story”. City Hall was also illuminated in USA national colours on 4 July.

3.5 Looking forward – outline plan for rest of financial year

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

- Planned inward economic and innovation mission led by the Greater Nashville Chamber and Global Health Connector US bringing twenty Nashville businesses, investors and economic development leads from 5-7 October 2026 to connect with city anchor institutions
- Participation in the annual Belfast International Homecoming programme 7-9 October. The council will support visit programmes for key delegates as appropriate. Outcomes of the Homecoming 2025 include plans for Belfast Harbour and net zero tenant companies to collaborate with New York State’s Red Hook terminals on green hydrogen, and potential future US investment in NI

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scaling companies. Members are asked to agree a financial contribution of £5,000 towards the event delivery through the unit's Conference and Events support budget

- Development of new promotional materials and revamp of Invest in Belfast website by year end, to ensure consistent messaging across FDI investment and capital investment materials as well as development of new innovation-focused investment prospectus
- Undertaking a new programme of work for the Belfast City and Region Place Partnership, with re-focused planning for attendance at MIPIIM in March 2027 and UKREiiF May 2027
- Exploratory and planning work on a potential business mission to Boston and Chicago in Spring 2027. The Boston programme will focus on profiling trade and investment opportunities in key growth sectors, particularly life and health sciences while the Chicago visit will build on connections established in the course of last year's participation in last year's North American Comhaltas Convention, particularly focusing on cultural and tourism linkages, and capitalising on the impact of this year's Fleadh. While initial engagements with local partner organisations and key contacts in both host cities has helped shape an outline itinerary, further scoping of additional engagements and opportunities will be undertaken subject to Committee approval of this proposal. Updates on progress will be shared as part of the next quarterly update.

Innovation and Knowledge Exchange

- Visit to Belfast by Head of Mayors' Challenge programme at Bloomberg Philanthropies on 22-23 October to meet with Chief Executive and Lord Mayor
- Participation in significant global innovation events 2026, including Mobile World Congress and Smart City World Congress in partnership with Global Health Connector, pending Council approval (separate approval process)
- City Innovation Team will attend the UK-France Local Government event in Bordeaux in November to promote the City Council's work in AI and innovation programmes
- Chief Executive participation in the Bloomberg LSE European City Leadership Initiative with thirty other European Mayors and Chief Executives.

**City Positioning, Tourism Promotion
and Cultural Development**

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- **Reviewing and planning for VIP support delivery for Fleadh 2027, including early engagement at UK, ROI and NI government level for VIP participation, working with interested international artists to integrate into the programming, and also targeted sponsorship activity, including live interest from international partners**
- **Hosting a Nashville Sister City delegation with a cohort of fifteen politicians, diplomats, University representatives, music and cultural leads 18-22 October. The focus of the engagement will be to explore collaboration in culture, music, academia via teacher and student exchange, and political peer to peer cooperation**
- **Ongoing engagement and collaboration as part of UNESCO city of music network with a September 2026 sub-network meeting planned in Sanliurfa, Turkey to plan UNESCO Music partnerships for the year ahead**
- **Sixteen Irish traditional artists will be supported to take part in the Oulu Irish Festival in September 2026, with a strong Fleadh promotion planned**
- **UNESCO Creative City of Film, Galway will host a Belfast artist/band at their own sub network of film meeting in September 2026**
- **Participation as speaker and Vice-Chair of Working Group, Culture for Inclusive Cities at EuroCities Culture Forum in Gothenburg 30th Sept – 2 Oct 2026. Opportunity for one officer and Chair or nominee to attend. Special ‘Political Track’ events on 1 October**
- **Facilitation of the all-party delegation to Brussels to participate in the annual EU Week of Cities and Regions in October 2026 to re-engage with EU peers, explore relevant funding and policy opportunity and develop connections with other UK and Irish cities active in EU activity, including exploring potential for engagement opportunities as part of Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU (from July-December 2026). Culture Unit to present a paper on heritage collaboration at the event**
- **Participation in the annual commemoration for the Founding of the Chinese People’s Republic, September 2026, and the inaugural celebration of India’s National Day in January 2027**
- **Participation in the 15-16 October meeting of the European and North American Learning Network in the Learning City**

of Lausanne, Switzerland. Purpose of the meeting is to define how the network will operate with opportunity to explore city to city exchange and joint projects/funding bids

- The World Monuments Fund are organising a delegation of their donors to Belfast for an event known as “Escapades”. As part of their programme there is a planned reception in City Hall on Thursday 17 September.

3.6 Measuring EU & International Activity impact

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, a new CRM system is now operational. This should allow more effective tracking of our impact, as well as facilitating data collection.

3.7 Supporting EU & International Conferences and Events

The EU and International 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 position Belfast internationally, some of can be last-minute requests for relatively small amounts of money and/or provide little measurable return or opportunity for promotion of the council’s investment.

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 International Relations Framework. The total budget to support contributions to events and conferences in this financial year is £40,000 and it is proposed that each application for support will be capped at a maximum of £5,000. Objectives and outputs will be agreed through a funding agreement with the event organisers and this will be signed off by the Director under delegated authority. This approach will help ensure that our resources are focused on areas of maximum return and will provide an objective rationale for assessing the relative merits of individual applications. Any events that will have wider corporate impact will be brought back to the Committee for consideration and endorsement.

4.0 Finance and Resource Implications

- Establishment of an International Unit Conference and Events fund of £40,000 for the 2026/2027 financial year
- Annual sponsorship and participation in the Belfast International Homecoming at a maximum cost of £5,000
- A maximum of £12,000 to deliver a business and tourism mission to Boston and Chicago in Spring 2027.

The EU and International Relations budget was approved as part of the 2026-27 estimates setting process. The amounts indicated above were included within those estimates. Budgets for individual activities (apart from those set out above) 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.”

Proposal

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Groogan and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees that the Council engage with Dublin City Council in relation to the potential for joint funding bids, including, but not limited to, those which would be strategically aligned to the vision of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the progress update in relation to the delivery of the International Relations Framework over the period April to August, 2026;
- ii. noted the proposed activity for September 2026 to March 2027, as set out within the report, which would include opportunities for Member engagement;
- iii. approved the attendance of the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson and one Council officer to attend the 2026 Eurocities Culture Forum in Gothenberg and noted that the costs would be fully covered by Eurocities;
- iv. approved the attendance of the Lord Mayor and two Council officers in a civic and business visit to Boston and Chicago in Spring 2027, at an estimated cost of up to £12,000;

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- v. approved the establishment of an EU and International Events and Conference contributions budget for the financial year 2026/27 up to a maximum of £40,000;
- vi. approved a contribution to the annual Belfast International Homecoming in October, 2026, as a part of the conference support scheme, up to a maximum of £5,000; and
- vii. agreed that the Council engage with Dublin City Council in relation to the potential for joint funding bids, including, but not limited to, those which would be strategically aligned to the vision of the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor.

Strategic and Operational Issues

Notices of Motion Quarterly Update

The Committee considered a report which provided an update on the twelve motions and issues raised in advance which it was responsible for.

The report recommended that the motion 'Artist and Creative Studio Space' (ID 465) be closed given that the Committee had approved the first year of the Artist Workspaces five-year action plan which had included an action which addressed the motion.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Groogan,
Seconded by Councillor Nelson and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees that the motion 'Artist and Creative Studio Space' remain open given the Council's ongoing work in relation to this matter and the challenges facing the sector.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted the update on all the notices of motion and issues raised in advance which it was responsible; and
- ii. agreed that the motion 'Artist and Creative Studio Space' (ID 465) would remain open.

Translink Consultation on Fare and Services Changes - Council Response

In accordance with the Committee's agreement at its previous meeting in August, 2026, the Strategic Director of Place and Economy submitted a report which set out draft Council responses to Translink's public consultation as part of its Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on a range of potential changes to services and fares.

The report stated that, under the statutory duties contained within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, Translink gave an undertaking to carry out an equality

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impact assessment (EQIA) on each policy where screening had indicated that there might be significant implications in relation to one or more of the nine Section 75 categories. It was reported that there were two policies which might have an impact, namely, 'Bus and Rail Evening Service Adjustments' and 'Amendment to Translink Commercial Discounted Fares and Purchase of Singles Only Onboard NIR Services'.

Accordingly, the report set out responses to the consultation stage of the EQIA in relation to each policy.

The Committee:

- i. noted the details of each policy which Translink had anticipated might have significant implications in relation to one or more of the nine Section 75 categories; and
- ii. approved the draft consultation responses as set out within the report for submission to Translink by the consultation deadline noting that they would be subject to ratification by the Council at its meeting on 1st October, 2026.

Chairperson