

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 8th March, 2023

HYBRID MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Murphy (Chairperson);
Alderman Dorrian;
Councillors Beattie, Bunting, Duffy,
Hanvey, Heading, Hussey, T. Kelly,
Lyons, Maskey, McCabe, McLaughlin,
Murray, Nelson, O'Hara, Spratt and Whyte.

In attendance: Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development;
Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Ms. S. O'Regan, Employability and Skills Manager; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor Ferguson.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the 8th and 22nd February 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 March, subject to the following amendments (22nd February minutes):

- Under the heading "Strategic Planning and Performance Group – GP Services", the Council agreed that the following questions be added to the letter the Permanent Secretary to request an update on the work being undertaken to resolve GP indemnity in Northern Ireland:
 - What mitigation measures were being taken to try and address the number of GPs leaving the Health Services; and
 - What measures were being taken to try and increase the number of medical students year on year.
- Under the heading "York Street Interchange (YSI) Placemaking and Active Travel Review (PATR)", the Council agreed that the decision be amended to provide that the Council will only reconsider corporately supporting the York Street Interchange project when confirmation is given by the Department for Infrastructure that they will proceed with the option that ensures safety of current residents, delivers the best place making and

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regeneration outcomes including plans for the bridges across the Lagan and a commitment from the Department that they will co-ordinate efforts to work collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders including Belfast City Council, Department for Communities, Housing Executive, Belfast Harbour, The Ashton Centre and Sailortown Regeneration as part of the overall scheme. To include Community Stakeholders, the Stella Maris Hostel and Ulster University as relevant stakeholders and state that the project needed to address both the air quality needs and housing objectives in the city.

Declarations of Interest

In relation to item 5.b) Work Plan - 23-24 Employability and Skills, Councillor Duffy declared an interest in that he was employed by the organisation which managed the GCSE programme and fibre academy and left the room whilst the item was being considered.

Schedule of Meetings Update

The Committee was reminded that it had previously agreed that the June monthly meeting of the Committee would be held on Wednesday, 7th June, and the Special meeting would be held on Wednesday, 21st June. However, due to a change in the date of the Local Government Elections it had been necessary to move the meetings to later in the month.

The Committee approved the following changes to the dates of the Committee Meetings:

- Monthly meeting from Wednesday, 7th June to Wednesday, 14th June: and
- Special meeting from Wednesday, 21st June to Wednesday, 28th June.

Presentation

Visit Belfast Business Plan 23-24

The Chairperson welcomed Ms. K. Thomson, Chair of Visit Belfast and Chief Executive, National Museums NI, Mr. G. Lennon, CEO Visit Belfast, and Mr. R. Rana, Board member and Director, Andras House Ltd, to the Committee and they were admitted to the meeting.

Ms. Thomson explained the importance of the Visit Belfast Business Plan to rebuild the city's tourism. She advised that it included a new direction of travel for marketing and destination management and for the first-time placed sustainability and community at the heart of Belfast City tourism recovery. As a result, Visit Belfast had a renewed purpose and core values. She highlighted that the need to work together and collaborate and coordinate the city's tourism effort had never been greater.

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Mr. Lennon provided an overview of the Visit Belfast Business Plan 23-24 which had been submitted in advance of the Committee for consideration. He advised that Belfast Tourism had delivered £417m tourism spend in 2019 and 22k jobs, together with community regeneration and strategic investment across the city. He informed the Committee that Visit Belfast had had to rethink tourism as a result of Covid, with more of a holistic view on making the city a better place to live. He explained the overall economic impact of tourism and the expected outturns to be achieved for 2022/23, together with the targets up to 2024/2025.

He highlighted the progress to date and the cultural change to input sustainability at its core to deliver on the wider city objective's. He pointed out that an example of this was the 'Changing the menu. For good' launch which was a pioneering project by Visit Belfast and the industry to raise funds and supplies for those experiencing food poverty in Belfast.

Mr. Lennon described the green tourism initiative where 69% of city hotels were Green Certified and Belfast was ranked 8th in the most sustainable destination in the world. He provided an overview of the 2023 outlook, which included the booking of 57 conferences and 170 cruise calls, and the growth of the staycation market. He summarised the policy framework and its links to the Belfast Agenda and the 10x Economy Strategy. He described the challenges that tourism was facing and the impact of reduced disposable incomes. He stated that opportunities included the new Frankfurt Service, Belfast being a value for money proposition for city breaks and the pending Air Passenger Duty reduction.

He advised the Committee of the Visit Belfast Strategy for 2023/24; Visitor serving targets and outputs; Travel trade targets and approach; Sustainability impact and interventions; Marketing and communication targets and outputs. He concluded that Visit Belfast would continue its transition to a Destination Marketing Management Organisation by selling and managing the destination for the benefit of its citizens.

During discussion, the representatives answered a range of questions in relation to the Christmas events, the impact of the lack of cycle infrastructure on tourism, Sunday trading hours, city centre waste management and hygiene, the need to become a family friendly city and the spread of the economic impact across the city.

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A number of Members stressed the importance of neighbourhood tourism and Mr. Lennon advised that 25% of Visit Belfast Partners would be classified as neighbourhood tourism partners and they intended to significantly prioritise and promote neighbourhood initiatives to ensure benefits across the city.

In response to a Member's question regarding the Council's Social Value Procurement Policy and the need to address exploitative labour, Mr. Lennon advised that their procurement policies were reviewed annually and he would liaise with Council officers on the review. Ms. Thompson highlighted that this work could also be advocated amongst the tourism sector and their partners.

After discussion, the Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee then considered the undernoted 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 2023/24 financial year and to set out the organisation's strategic development and operational delivery, focused on supporting tourism recovery. Members should note that Visit Belfast will be in attendance at the Committee to present the detail of its 2023/24 plan.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the draft Visit Belfast business plan 2023/24. 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 the Council.**
- Approve funding agreement for 2023-24 and agree a funding allocation of £2,035,710 for 2023/24, subject to the development of a funding agreement confirming priority areas of activity as outlined in the presentation and agreed targets.**

3.0 Main report

3.1 Members will be aware that Visit Belfast is the principal Destination Management and Marketing Organisation for the city of Belfast. Visit Belfast leads on the tourism marketing activities in Belfast and targets both the leisure and business tourism markets. It is a membership organisation with more than 500 member businesses across the wider hospitality

industry. Visit Belfast works, on behalf of its members, with a range of public and private partners including Tourism NI, Belfast Chamber and the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to promote Belfast as a tourism destination.

- 3.2** Visit Belfast is a public/private partnership. Its current Chairperson is Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive of the National Museums of Northern Ireland. Belfast City Council has four Councillor representatives on the Board: Councillor Fred Cobain, Councillor Eric Hanvey, Councillor Paul McCusker 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 had been going from strength to strength as Belfast continued to drive the regional tourism economy; in 2019 (last published Local Government District tourism statistics by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency NISRA), Belfast hosted 1.9m trips accounting for one third of all tourism trips to Northern Ireland and tourism spend amounted to £417m, 40% of Northern Ireland tourism spend.
- 3.4** In advance of COVID-19 the trajectory had been positive with forecasts suggesting that the sector would account for around 15% of new jobs in the decade. This was further reinforced by the inclusion of tourism as a key growth sector in the City Deal. This acknowledged the fact that the sector was already a significant economic generator but recognised the need for significant additional investment in order to sustain growth. The council's Cultural Strategy 'A City Imagining' also identified the importance of growing the city's sustainable cultural tourism offer through a creative approach that respects the city's heritage and communities.
- 3.5** Belfast City Council has also developed a 10-year vision and plan for tourism in the city; 'Make Yourself at Home'. This committee approved the tourism plan which 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** It is in this context that Visit Belfast has set out their business plan to support the rebuilding of city tourism. 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 Rebuilding City Tourism

The new tourism plan for Belfast, *Make Yourself at Home*, recognises both the challenges to tourism recovery as well as the opportunities to rebuild tourism in such a way as to maximise the positive impact that it can have on the city. As the Destination Management (and marketing) Organisation (DMO) for Belfast, Visit Belfast has an important role to play in realising a new vision for tourism. They have responded to this by setting out a new approach:

‘To create and service visitors for Belfast and Northern Ireland in order to generate economic benefit and inclusive growth, creating jobs and prosperity for the city region, enabling Belfast to become a more sustainable place to visit, meet and live in.’

3.8 This will require the ongoing adaptation and updating of their strategic planning and delivery recognising that the DMO must respond to the changing environment with a sensitivity to both economic and social context within which they work. This is evident in an increased focus on supporting local tourism and on sustainability.

3.9 Generating £417m tourism spend and supporting 10% of city jobs in 2019, Belfast’s tourism growth and development have seen the city’s tourism industry crucially emerge both as a key pillar of the city economy, and also of strategic importance to the wider visitor economy of Northern Ireland. As the regional driver for the Northern Ireland visitor economy, the Belfast City Region is playing a significant and important part in regional recovery plans.

3.10 Tourism Outlook and indications of Recovery

Despite the outlook being far from certain, tourism can contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of the city with high potential to create jobs quickly and provide the economic impetus for a wider economic recovery.

3.11 According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), international tourism saw stronger than expected results in 2022, backed principally by pent-up demand and the lifting or relaxation of travel restrictions in a large number of countries. More than 900 million tourists travelled internationally in 2022, double the number recorded in 2021.

Every global region recorded notable increases in international tourist numbers, with Europe reaching nearly 80% of pre-pandemic levels as it welcomed 585 million arrivals.

- 3.12 Inbound visitors to United Kingdom and Ireland is recovering strongly - pent up demand and the desire to travel saw inbound visitor recovery rates to both the UK and Ireland exceed the global level of 63% of pre pandemic levels. Visit Britain expects year end figure for visitors and spend in 2022 to reach 73% and 91% of record 2019 levels respectively, whilst Tourism Ireland estimated 2022 tourism spend to the island of Ireland to be at 75% of pre-pandemic levels
- 3.13 The reporting of tourism statistics and meaningful visitor analysis at a local level continues to be impacted by the effects of the pandemic. While tourism related surveys including passenger and household travel surveys have resumed, it remains unclear when we will see a full return of annual government tourism statistics particularly at a local level. Full year statistics for 2022 – 23 are not yet confirmed, however, a range of data analytics from a number of sources have provided valuable metrics illustrating recovery has been stronger than expected including for example - 1.3m hotel rooms sold: 93% of 2019 levels and hotel revenue 19% above 2019 levels; 141 cruise ships welcoming 250,000 cruise visitors came to Belfast: 91% of 2019 levels; 95 conferences attracting 30,711 delegates generating over 103,000 bed nights; 2.3m web visits: 26% above 2019 levels; 551,059 visitor enquiries: 61% of 2019 levels.
- 3.14 Visit Belfast's business plan mirrors the Council's long term tourism plan to develop a regenerative model and to place tourism at the heart of recovery working with the tourism sector, businesses, organisations and policy makers. In tandem with city tourism development plans, Visit Belfast is proposing to implement new and innovative approaches to its destination sales, marketing and communications and visitor servicing. This will be achieved by utilising the City's core values and place branding to reposition itself, promoting authentic Belfast experiences to enhance competitiveness in order to deliver growth that will benefit residents, businesses and visitors equally.
- 3.15 Visit Belfast has considered their own strategic and operation plans in the context of the Council's tourism priorities as set out in the 10 year tourism plan: *Make Yourself at Home*:

- **Grow Belfast:** The role of tourism is critical to city recovery. For Belfast this will mean the stabilisation of the tourism industry and the requirement for further growth.
- **Positioning Belfast:** strengthening Belfast’s positioning in domestic and international tourism markets - business and leisure - and as a gateway to the region.
- **Experience Belfast:** increasing connectivity between existing and planned for tourism assets will improve the overall Belfast Experience, inspiring the visitor to stay longer, return and to recommend the city to others.
- **Sustain Belfast:** The sustainable development of cities is not just a local imperative it is also a key motivation for the visitor.

3.16 Priorities for Visit Belfast’s business plan include:

- Directly deliver on the ambitions and priorities set out in *Make Yourself at Home* tourism plan for Belfast
- Utilise the strength of the city brand and its equity to position Belfast to compete on a national and international platform through the promotion of unique Belfast experiences
- Support tourism businesses, protect jobs and contribute to economic recovery
- Achieve tourism growth from high value markets in a sustainable and inclusive way
- Promote and stimulate stronger, fairer and more sustainable eco practices
- Engage with local communities and amplify local experiences & stories
- Utilise and invest in digital technology and communications to increase competitiveness
- Commit to longer term initiatives including signature events, 2024 International Year of Culture and UNESCO City of Music

3.17 Operational Targets for 2023-24

Based on projected levels of recovery in 2023/24, Visit Belfast is proposing the following targets for 2023/24 as agreed by their board:

<u>Total Output</u>	<u>Target</u>
Leisure Tourism Bed nights	200,000 bed nights
Leisure Tourism Day trips	150,000 day trips

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Business Tourism Bed nights	86,000 bed nights
Cruise Visitors	375,000 pax & crew
Visitor Enquiries	735,000 enquiries

<u>Economic Impact</u>	<u>2023-24 Target</u>
Leisure Tourism	£45m
Business Tourism	£42m
Leisure Trade	£2m
Cruise Tourism	£22m
Visitor Servicing	£16m

<u>Visit Belfast Economic Impact</u>	<u>£125m</u>
Budget	£4.5m
<u>ROI</u>	<u>£1:28</u>

- 3.18 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 2023/24 funding agreement with Visit Belfast. Regular monitoring against targets will be included and these key performance indicators will relate to the trajectory for recovery and align with the implementation phases for Council's new tourism plan. This provides a basis for more effective monitoring of performance and will be subject to annual review and renewal with necessary break clauses included.

Financial & Resource Implications

- 3.19 In the current financial year, Belfast City Council's funding arrangement with Visit Belfast is £1,997,465. An allocation of £2,035,710 has been set aside within the Departmental estimates for the financial year 2023/24.

Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

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

The Committee adopted the recommendations as set out in the report.

Restricted Items

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

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Financial Reporting - Quarter 3 2022/23

The Committee considered the Quarter 3 financial position for the Committee which included a forecast of the year end outturn, a summary of the financial indicators and an executive summary.

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

Future City Centre - Vacant to Vibrant

The Senior Development Manager provided an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Grant Programme and the recommendations from the Vacant to Vibrant assessment panel.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i Noted the update in relation to the city centre Vacant to Vibrant pilot capital grant scheme;
- ii Approved the recommendations of the Assessment Panel as outlined within Section 3.11 of the report; and
- iii Noted the update on the award value to V2V105 Skull and Bones as included within Section 3.12 of the report.

Belfast Zoo - Fees and Charges

The Director of Economic Development provided an update on the Zoo scale of charges increase for financial year 2023-24.

The Committee noted the price increases for the existing categories.

Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

**Responses from the Department
for Infrastructure (DfI)**

Response from DfI Roads – Autumn Report

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting in November, it had received a presentation for the Department for Infrastructure Roads in relation to its Autumn Report 2022. During the meeting, Members had requested information on a number of additional matters, which DfI advised would be investigated. A response had been received for consideration (Copy available [here](#)).

During discussion, the Committee expressed its disappointment in the lack of detail and up to date information in the response and highlighted that they had found it difficult to contact DfI to obtain updates on their individual issues and agreed that the Council write to DfI Roads to request a further update on the issues raised.

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Response from the Permanent Secretary – Belfast Cycle Network

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting in December, the Committee agreed to write to the Department for Infrastructure to request confirmation of the budget allocation for the delivery of the Belfast Cycle Network in the financial year 2022/23. A response had been received for consideration (Copy available [here](#)).

During discussion, one Member requested further detail in relation to the budget allocation and an update on the delivery of the Cavehill/Limestone Road Cycle Lane.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- Noted the correspondence as set out in the report;
- Agreed to write to the Department for Infrastructure Roads, in response to its reply, to request a further update and more in-depth detail regarding the issues which had been raised by the Committee; and
- Agreed to write to the Permanent Secretary to request information on what the estimated £490K expenditure for the delivery of the Belfast Cycle Network had been spent on, to include details of what schemes, infrastructure, consultants. The Committee also agreed to request a timescale for the delivery of the Cavehill/Limestone Road Cycle Lane.

Belfast City Centre Regeneration Tracker

The Committee was provided with an update on the Belfast City Regeneration Tracker which captured regeneration and development activity which had taken place in the City during 2022, as aligned to the Belfast Agenda and the eight core policies of the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS).

The Senior Development Manager provided a presentation of the Regeneration Tracker with an overview of major regeneration and development activity which has taken place across Belfast during 2022 (1st January – 31st December).

It was reported that the Belfast Agenda sets out the growth aspirations for the city, including increasing the city population, supporting inclusive economic growth, improving health and well-being for all our citizens and addressing the Climate Emergency. This was further reflected in the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) which sets out our collective ambition for the continued growth and regeneration of the city core and its surrounding areas to 2030. It contained a road map of policies to guide city centre decision-making and key projects that translated those policies into action, aligned to the overarching ambitions outlined within the Belfast Agenda. BCCRIS sought to address the universal elements of a thriving city centre as well as challenges and conditions that were unique to Belfast.

The Senior Development Manager presented examples of regeneration underway across the city under the following eight core principles, identifying the progress that continues to be seen through the city in relation to delivering the Belfast Agenda, as well

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as key areas that further work is required and the measures that Council are implementing with delivery partners to address these:

1. **Increase the Employment Population** - such as The Ewart, Olympic House, the Shipmaker's House, CreateLab and Kainos;
2. **Increase the Residential Population** – *City Centre based* – such as Belfast Waterside, Weavers Cross, Pilot Street, McClure Street and College Square North; *Housing Led Regeneration* – such as the Inner North West and Dunbar Street; *Student Accommodation* – such as Aster House and Alma Place; *Outside City Centre* – such as Brookfield Mill, Glenmona and Beersbridge Road;
3. **Manage the Retail Offer** – *City Centre* – such as Primark, the Keep, the Avenue, Titanic Distillers; *Outside City Centre* – such as Giant's Park, Portview Trade Centre and Cityside Retail;
4. **Maximise the Tourism Opportunity**; *City Centre* – such as Belfast Stories, the Dean, War Memorial Building; *Outside City Centre* – such as Mountainview Hotel Eastside Hotel, St. Comgall's and Belfast City Airport;
5. **Create Regional Learning and Innovation Centres**; such as Ulster University, Global Innovation Institute, Loop Studios, iReach and W5 LIFE;
6. **Create a Green, Walkable, Cyclable Centre** - such as Adelaide Street, Little Patrick Street, Cathedral Gardens and City Quay Gardens;
7. **Connect to the City Around** - such as Belfast Grand Central, Glider Phase 2 and Belfast Bikes; and
8. **Shared space and social impact** - such as Loft lines, the Ewart and 2 Royal Avenue.

To facilitate the implementation of the eight policies for the city centre, BCCRIS had identified a series of projects aimed at creating a liveable and economically thriving city, alongside, identifying the following five Special Action Areas:

- Inner North;
- Inner West;
- North East Quarter;
- Transport Hub and South Centre; and
- Oxford Street and the Eastern Bank.

The Committee was reminded that various workstreams and programmes of work were underway to support the implementation of BCCRIS, including the Future City Centre Programme, A Bolder Vision, the Vacant to Vibrant Programme, Clean, Green, Safe and Inclusive, along with a programme of environmental improvement schemes across the city aimed at improving sustainable and active travel, improving safety and cleanliness, addressing dereliction and informing the emerging major public schemes coming forward within the city. These interventions had also formed a critical role in setting the future aspirations of the city as well as informing design and place-making objectives within developments as they come forward through design and delivery.

The Members were also briefed on the importance that occupiers, investors and delivery agents were putting on delivering Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) outcomes, with more of a focus on delivering BREAMM excellent buildings, with an

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expectation that in the future it was likely that future developments would see an increase in reusing existing building stock.

During discussion, Director of City Regeneration and Development and Senior Development Manager answered a range of questions in relation to city centre living, social and affordable housing in the city centre and clusters of student accommodation.

Noted.

Horizon Europe Urban Planning 2030 Update

The Committee was reminded that, it had been reported in November 2022, that the Climate Unit and City Regeneration and Development Division were working together to ensure an integrated approach between urban planning, achieving net zero and aspects of resilience such as supporting play and environmental sustainability through engagement with key stakeholders such as young people, families, and businesses, and the Council had been invited at short notice to participate in a Horizon Europe funding application from the UP2030 (Urban Planning 2030) fund. Belfast had been selected as one of the pilot cities and had received a Letter of Intent from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to participate as an associate member of the project. This letter provided €204,250 of revenue funding to support research, training and policy development and officers were working with UKRI to finalise the funding agreement.

The Senior Development Manager advised that, through the UP2030 funding, the Council would seek to create a scalable framework that would be applied to cross-cutting projects that integrated tree planting, green infrastructure, play and co-design with young people and supported the integration of play and environmental sustainability into city design. Strategically, this connected A Bolder Vision and the Net Zero Roadmap and would test adaptation and mitigation measures to support the emerging Climate Plan.

He reminded the Committee that, at its meeting in November, the Linen Quarter District was the proposed pilot area, however, the Committee had sought further clarification as to the rationale for choosing the proposed area, and whether it was something that could be further applied to other areas. Following further engagement and participation in the project launch event, approval is sought to enable the project work to commence in the proposed pilot area. He highlighted that, while this work would be undertaken within a defined boundary, the purpose was to produce a framework that could be adapted and used within all communities and districts to set forward net zero approaches, attract funding and deliver climate adaption plans tailored for the issues of that specific district.

To maintain alignment with A Bolder Vision, the Resilience Strategy and, following dialogue with the project organiser, UP2030, the optimal location was one that combined a mix of core city functions and uses. It was proposed to locate the project in a mixed-use environment that contained residential, hospitality, tourism, commercial, public transport corridors and large transport hubs to ensure adequate capture of a holistic concentration of issues to form a framework that can be easily adapted into any area within the city. The proposed pilot area included mixed functions and land uses, including residential and commercial areas with a focus on those communities that bound the city centre. This area

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encapsulated an area bounded by May Street and Shaftesbury Square, and the Gasworks and Great Victoria Street, and adjacent city centre communities in the Market, Donegall Pass and Sandy Row, providing a total approximate base of 9,000 residents. This would enable the Council to consider inter-related issues such as the severance and climate issues created by the road infrastructure and other factors such as poor public realm / open space / play provision, air quality and connectivity and specifically the impacts and mitigation measures on existing local communities, newer city centre residents, and mixed commercial uses including offices, hospitality and tourism.

The Senior Development Manager informed the Committee that the intention was to work across Council departments and with city stakeholders to elevate and embed the learning and approaches from this pilot and identify opportunities in other neighbourhoods to bring forward the concept of net-zero districts across the city.

He pointed out that, given that the UK was no longer within the EU, the status of the Council had been changed from to being a Partner to that of an Associate which meant that funding would be underwritten by the UK government (UK Research and Innovation, UKRI) fund rather than the EU. The funding was for revenue and did not include any capital costs. He advised that the Council was currently finalising the funding agreement with the UKRI, and project delivery would take place over a three-year period following the kick off meeting in February. Belfast had been assigned a liaison partner, an organisation called Mapping for Change, who would support Belfast throughout the project life span.

He confirmed that further reports would be brought to this Committee and the City and the Climate and City Resilience Committees as the project progressed.

During discussion, one Member highlighted the need to ensure the Divis Street area between the M1 and the Inner Ring was also included and the Senior Development Manager confirmed that this area would be included within the Framework.

After discussion, the Committee:

- Noted that Belfast, represented by Belfast City Council, was a pilot city within the Horizon Europe UP2030 project which would focus on the development of a net zero neighbourhood framework and toolkit and the use of climate tools to support analysis, mapping and engagement in city neighbourhoods. The project would entail the exchange of knowledge between cities, including site visits and meetings with partner cities and potentially hosting a visit to Belfast within the project lifetime.
- Noted that, following the report to the Committee on 9th November, 2022, an update was brought to the Climate and City Resilience Committee on 9th February that outlined progress, which included the project start meeting on 1st and 2nd February and provided an outline of the queries raised by the City Growth and Regeneration Committee in November in

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relation to the location of the project and proposed that the UP2030 included the Linen Quarter BID district and surrounding city centre neighbourhoods of Sandy Row, Markets and Donegall Pass.

- Agreed to the proposed geographical location of the UP2030 pilot as outlined in 3.5 of the report, namely, an area bounded by May Street and Shaftesbury Square, and the Gasworks and Great Victoria Street, and adjacent city centre communities in the Market, Donegall Pass and Sandy Row, and to include the area bounded by the M1, the Inner Ring and Divis Street, which would align with A Bolder Vision, Net Zero Roadmap, and provided a holistic mix of local communities, city centre living, commercial and tourism and hospitality.

Update on Department for Infrastructure Blue and Green Infrastructure Fund

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on elements of the Council’s capital funding applications via the DfI Green & Blue Infrastructure Fund and DfC Revitalisation Scheme.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- **Note the response from the DfI Permanent Secretary in relation to the Green & Blue Infrastructure Fund and longer-term strategic funding**
- **Note the update on the DfI 2022/23 Blue and Green Infrastructure Fund, DfC Revitalisation Fund and the South-West Quarter / Shaftesbury Square project.**

3.0 Main report

3.1 In June 2022, Council submitted proposals to the DfI for greenway and active travel projects that could potentially receive capital grant funding this financial year under the DfI Blue and Green Infrastructure Fund 2022/23 and Active Travel Projects. Subsequent to this a Letter of Intent to fund was received from the DfI Minister in September 2022 and the CG&R Committee provided approval for the business case applications to the 2022/23 DfI Blue and Green Infrastructure Fund (BGIF), and the DfC Revitalisation fund. The projects

approved at the October CG&R Committee included Active Travel Enablers, Grey to Green and the South-West Quarter/Shaftsbury Square projects under the DfI BGIF, and the South-West Qtr / Shaftsbury Square project under the DfC Revitalisation Fund.

- 3.2 At the October meeting the Committee agreed to write to the Department for Infrastructure to outline concerns in relation to the short timeframe for the delivery of the greenway and active travel projects under the DfI Blue and Green Infrastructure Fund 2022/23 and suggest the potential for multi - year funding in the future, so that opportunities for strategic alignment of such projects could be achieved. A copy of the letter issued to DfI is attached in Appendix A of this report, and the subsequent response from DfI Permanent secretary attached in Appendix B of this report. The response outlines the intention to issue Letters of Offer shortly subject to final approval of business cases, and a willingness to further discuss potential longer term funding opportunities subject to compliance with the parameters of public expenditure.

Capital Funding Application Updates

- 3.3 Further to this Officers have had ongoing engagement with DfI officials to proceed with these applications, and while a Letter of Offer is still pending it is expected to close these out prior to the middle of March. DfI officials have also conveyed that the funding will be required to be committed by the end of March 2023, however, spend will be carried over until March 2024. These Letters of Offer will be subject to review on receipt and subsequent SP&R approval. As outlined to the CG&R Committee in October 2022 Expressions of Interest for the Active Travel Enablers and Grey to Green projects were completed to establish deliver partners in advance of the Letter of Offer, however given the time lapse between that exercise and potential Letter of Offer it is intended to recommence these Expressions of Interest following approval of the Letters of Offer. A summary of these projects as below;

Active Travel Enablers;

- 3.4 It is understood that a Letter of Offer from the BGIF will be issued shortly for this element of the application. This element will include covered cycle stands and secure cycle units as reported to the CG&R meeting in October 2022

Grey to Green;

- 3.5 It is understood that a Letter of Offer from the BGIF will be issued shortly for this element of the application.**

Great Victoria St / Shaftsbury Sq;

- 3.6 This project was to bring together a number of funding opportunities to deliver on wider benefits in terms of addressing dereliction along this key connectivity and economic corridor. To this end a summary update on the various funding streams is included below;**

- **A Letter of Offer (£250k) has been received from DfC for the Revitalisation fund for this project and subject to final approval works will commence shortly.**
- **Under the Belfast City Council Business Cluster & Community Grant Programme three grant applications have been approved to undertake localised environmental improvement works and shop frontage improvements and work will commence shortly.**
- **Developer Contributions secured in the area were approved at the SP&R Committee in January 2023 to bring forward Public Realm Improvement Works and are currently under procurement.**
- **A number of land and building owners have reacted positively to the funding coming forward and have commenced, or committed to undertaking works to address issues within their frontages. This includes power washing, graffiti removal, and repairs to hoarding. In addition to this NIHE have commenced a project to replace the existing chain link boundary fence to the Hope St Car Park with a planted hedge to improve the visual impact of this key gateway site in the immediate term.**
- **The Linen Quarter have successfully completed their ballot for a second 5-year term and have gained support to increase their district area to include up to and including Shaftsbury Sq. Within their 5-year manifesto the BID have committed to undertaking enhanced cleansing and community safety within the area, and to work with BCC and other agencies to bring forward environmental improvement and public realm capital projects.**
- **Officers have also brought forward proposals for the DfI BGIF element of the Victoria St / Shaftsbury Sq however it has become evident that this work will require a substantial level of design and statutory**

approval work that will substantially increase the risk of delivery of the project within the permitted timeframes. In addition to this the works will require an increased level of liability for the Council to undertake on the public highway that outweighs the benefit that the scheme would bring forward. This liability would include an undertaking by Council to sign a License from DfI undertaking all liability for the areas involved until the subsequent removal and reinstatement of the pavements to the original surface treatment. To this end Officers are recommending to withdraw from this element of the 2022/23 BGIF fund application and to focus instead on the deliverable works and funding coming forward from other sources.

- 3.7 Further updates on the delivery of these proposals will be brought to this Committee as works progress.**
- 4.0 Financial & Resource Implications**
- 4.1 All costs associated with this paper are covered from within external funding applications or previously agreed and committed BCC programmes.**
- 5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment**
- 5.1 Officers are currently developing the Equality, Good Relations and Rural Needs Screening and will incorporate within the emerging proposals.”**

During discussion, one Member praised the work which had been undertaken in relation to the replacement of Browns Bridge in Lagan Valley Regional Park and suggested that the Physical Programme’s Department provided an update to the relevant Committee.

During further discussion, Members raised concerns in relation to the withdrawal of the DfI BGIF element of the Victoria St. / Shaftsbury Sq. proposal. The Director of City Regeneration and Development noted that the issues raised in relation to statutory approval timeframes would be raised by officers in their meeting with the Permanent Secretary.

After discussion, the Committee:

- Noted the response from the Permanent Secretary in relation to the Green and Blue Infrastructure Fund and the longer-term strategic funding;

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- Noted the update on the DfI 2022/23 Blue and Green Infrastructure Fund, Department for Communities Revitalisation Fund and the South-West Quarter / Shaftsbury Square project; and
- Noted that the issues raised in relation to statutory approval timeframes would be raised by officers in their meeting with the Permanent Secretary.

Lobbying/Advocacy Paper and Regeneration Framework

It was reported that it had been recognised that NI/Belfast did not benefit from the same regeneration and place based funding abilities as other UK Cities, for example Stronger Towns Fund; Future High Streets Fund; Homes England funding etc. which arguably placed Belfast at a disadvantage from a regeneration and economic growth perspective. Work was currently underway with Avison Young (strategic regeneration, finance and business consultancy) to consider this in more detail and explore the case for advocating that Belfast received the equivalent investment and funding powers available elsewhere.

In addition, in order to help bring forward regeneration schemes at scale and given the number of potential opportunities across the city, it had been agreed that there was a need to develop a Regeneration Framework and Prioritisation Process aligned to regeneration, economic, social and environmental outcomes. Other UK cities had deployed similar Regeneration Frameworks to help inform city priorities aligned to growth propositions and to prioritise funding bids.

In relation to the Lobby and Advocacy Paper, the Director of City Regeneration and Development advised that it centred around the case for devolving aspects of place based regeneration and funding to the Council. To include exploring the case for ensuring Belfast received the equivalent investment, funding powers and freedoms that were available in England. The focus should be on place based regeneration and include measures that might promote housing led regeneration (including city centre living), city centre and wider city regeneration and development and alignment with other strategic priorities. To include the socio and economic impact /outputs from such investment and regeneration aligned to our growth ambitions.

She advised that, subject to further engagement, it was envisaged that the work would have three main outputs:

1. An outward facing proposition for the NI executive focusing on the strategic, economic and financial case for amended place-based and regeneration funding abilities for Belfast;
2. An inward facing brief for Belfast stakeholders focusing on the specific benefits to wider communities and geographies derived from programmes and structures designed to regenerate the city; and
3. A wider public facing document providing the case for Place Based Regeneration in Belfast and the economic impact and social value of potential initiatives.

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The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided an overview of the development of a Regeneration Framework, A 'Regeneration Scheme Prioritisation and Audit Exercise' and 'Regeneration Scheme / Programme Level Business Case'. She highlighted that part of the Lobby and Advocacy work involved strategic consultation and engagement with relevant public and private sector stakeholders and a programme of engagement would be progressed, with initial engagement to include the following meetings, together with further engagement with a number of other stakeholders:

- 21st March – Meeting Permanent Secretaries of DfI, DoF, DfC, DfE (Avison Young and the Chief Executive)
- 30th March – Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

In relation to the Project Pipeline and Funding Opportunities, the Director of City Regeneration and Development advised that work was underway via the City and Organisational Services to collate a Project Pipeline and Funding Opportunities across Council for Members consideration and it would be important to consider how this would align to the Regeneration Framework and Project Prioritisation Process.

The Committee:

- Noted the work which was underway in relation to the commissioning of a Lobby and Advocacy Paper for Place Based Regeneration Funding and the development of a Regeneration Framework and Project Prioritisation Process;
- Noted the scheduled engagement with Party Group Leaders and Permanent Secretaries as part of a wider engagement plan; and
- Noted the alignment with ongoing work via City and Organisational Services to develop a project pipeline for Council aligned to funding opportunities and city priorities.

Growing Business and the Economy

Work Plan - 23-24 Enterprise and Business Growth

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on activity undertaken by the Enterprise and Business Growth team in 2022/2023 to support the development of new and existing businesses across the city. The report sets out key priority areas of work for the 2023/24 financial year, seeking approval areas of activity to support the delivery of the targets under the Our Economy pillar of the Belfast Agenda.**

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- **Agree the priority work areas presented for the 2023/24 financial year and approve the allocations from the existing 2023/2024 Enterprise and Business Growth budget as set out in section 3.8**
- **Note and agree a financial commitment of £140,000 to Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (LCCC) towards the Go for It programme**
- **Note and endorse the proposal to invest in the Way to Scale programme and extended support to innovation-focused businesses up to a maximum of £90,000 (work to be coordinated through Catalyst)**
- **Note and endorse the 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 £35,000**
- **Note and agree a financial contribution of £5,000 towards the New York, New Belfast event and agree the attendance of Lord Mayor, Chief Executive and Economic Development Director or their nominees at the event (budget set aside within existing International Relations budget).**

3.0 Main report

3.1 Members will be aware that within the 2022/23 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. This range of activity was approved at the meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee on the 6 April 2022.

3.2 As well as aligning with the Belfast Agenda, the actions also support and add value to work underway through the Belfast Region City Deal, Innovation City Belfast, Smart Belfast and the Innovation and Inclusive Growth Commission as well as the draft Economic Strategy for Belfast. The consultation on the draft Economic Strategy closed at the end of January 2023. Officers are currently analysing the responses in order to ensure that the revised version reflects key elements of commentary. This will be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee for endorsement. In the interim, the work plan

will take account of the likely priority action areas within the strategy.

- 3.3** Officers have been engaging with councils across the region to progress the enhanced approach to business start-up and growth support set out to this Committee in October 2022. Since the last update, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has made a commitment to support an 11-council Entrepreneurship Support Service (ESS), valued at up to £17million over 2 years from April 2023. This represents a significant scaling up in ambition of the councils' statutory remit around business start-up and targeted entrepreneurship support. At the 17 February meeting of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, members agreed that Belfast City Council will play the role of lead council on behalf of each of the 11 councils across the region. The new service will mobilise in September 2023 and, until such time, the Enterprise and Business Growth team will continue the delivery of existing services to support new and existing businesses, social enterprises and cooperatives across the city.
- 3.4** Since April 2022, 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 2022/23 include:
- **Enterprise awareness activity:** engaged 755 individuals, supporting them to progress to start a business. We continue to extend our reach to engage those individuals who are under-represented. This includes an increased focus on support for 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. 40 students and graduates also accessed support, 12 of whom are currently accessing salary support through Invest NI's Student to First Sale intervention. We also enabled test trading opportunities for 31 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
 - **Start a business activity:** 503 individuals engaged in business start-up activity, 476 of those individuals developed a business plan through the Go For It programme supporting the creation of 299 jobs.

We provided additional support to 70 individuals through 1-1 mentoring and access to financial support of up to £1,500 to help kick start their business

- **Support for Social Enterprises and Co-operatives:** 60 organisations were supported with one-to-one mentoring, advice and guidance. Four of these organisations were new co-operatives. Overall the Social Enterprise and Co-operative Support programme has facilitated 25 events/workshops with over 300 attendees including regional networking event, virtual global best practice visit and workshops. Our focused engagement with co-operative organisations has continued, and we organised 10 events, attracting 42 attendees. The Social Economy Incentive Fund launched in September 2022, with an available pot of almost £50,000 to support social economy businesses to bring forward their business growth plans. 46 applications for support were received, 17 of which were shortlisted to pitch and we chose 8 winners. We have been developing our outreach and engagement to increase awareness of the sector, including targeted engagement activity with more than 50 young people in community settings. In recognition of these efforts, Belfast City Council won 'Council of the Year' at the Social Enterprise Northern Ireland Awards in October 2022. In order to move forward on our plans for next year, we have recently completed a mapping piece of the sector to use as a baseline for current position and to explore key development needs. As part of this work, we undertook a benchmarking analysis with two well-performing social economy cities in the UK, Edinburgh and Plymouth
- **Business growth support:** through our business growth support, we have assigned mentors to over 246 businesses and delivered 20 workshops with over 265 attendees. Through one-to-one engagement we have helped them to implement growth strategies, become more resilient, enhance their digital and online presence, improve tendering skills and access specialist support for businesses with high growth potential. We delivered a large-scale Opportunity Export event for businesses on 28 February with over 70 attendees and speakers from Invest NI, DIT and Intertrade Ireland. We also launched the Digital Surge programme in partnership with the 10 other councils. This supports businesses by helping them develop an innovation and digital transformation plan covering areas such as artificial intelligence, data analytics and

immersive technology in order to drive business growth and productivity. 22 Belfast-based companies have benefitted from this support

- **City vibrancy:** in January 2022, we launched the Vibrant Business Destinations programme in partnership with DfC. This aims to support local business associations to develop and deliver interventions that will drive footfall and create vibrancy in areas outside of the city centre. Four associations have now been supported to develop area-based action plans, 2 of which have accessed funding through the scheme to deliver local marketing activity, events and small-scale environmental improvements. The Enterprise and Business Growth team have also worked with colleagues in the City Regeneration and Development Team to put in place support for local businesses to access the Vacant to Vibrant Scheme
- **Innovation Factory:** the centre is now at 77% occupancy (yearly average) and the operator has ambitious plans to increase those numbers in 2023/2024. It has seen a high level of interest from new firms in sectors including TV/film, digital, engineering and green tech. Over the year, 78 businesses engaged in masterclasses and events at the centre. As part of their social and economic regeneration activity, 38 work placements have been facilitated by IF customers, and a series of school engagement activities took place involving 223 young people
- **Scaling and growth:** in partnership with Catalyst and Invest NI, the Way to Scale programme supported 40 individuals to participate on a series of bootcamps to transform their businesses and support them to scale and grow to turnover of more than £3million. 10 were supported to participate in a one week residential at MIT and access a peer-to-peer workshop series with Catalyst. We also put in place support for businesses in creative and digital industries and financial services sectors to build capacity and access opportunities for finance to support the growth and development of their businesses. 90 new companies will be supported through these services
- **Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor work:** as previously reported to this Committee, the strategy and action plan to support this work have recently been finalised. The partnership members have agreed to jointly fund two staff resources to drive delivery against priority actions in 2023. €150,000 funding was secured from the Shared Island Fund to conduct a feasibility study on regional Innovation Hubs. This was complemented

by a successful joint application with Dublin City Council to the Shared Island Fund for a €250,000 award to conduct a feasibility study on circular economy facilities in both cities.

3.5 Building on these achievements, the proposed work programme for the next financial year will include a number of new work areas including:

- **Starting a Business:** One of the most significant areas of work in this coming year will be the establishment of the Entrepreneurship Support Service, with the associated transition into a delivery model that is more flexible and focused on client needs. This service aims to attract more people into the pipeline and to help more growth-focused 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. The planned go live date for the new service is September 2023. In the interim, the Go for It contract will remain in place, with a target of engaging 658 individuals in the first six months of the year. It is expected that this will support the creation of 163 new jobs. Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (LCCC) will remain the lead council for the duration of this programme. In order to support delivery of the numbers highlighted above, Belfast City Council will make a payment of £140,000 to LCCC.
- **Social Enterprise and Cooperative Development:** In the next financial year, we will finalise the refresh of our social economy action plan based on research and engagement with sector partners such as SENI, Cooperative Alternatives and Trademark. One new area of activity will be the development of a new financial incentive working alongside Community Finance Ireland (CFI). This will be a hybrid funding model (part loan; part grant funding) in order to improve the financial management skills of new and growing social enterprises. Belfast City Council will make an allocation of up to £60,000 towards the grant element (likely to be up to 25% of overall financial awards to social enterprises) while the remaining element 75% will come from CFI in the form of a loan. In addition to the new financial mechanism, a budget of £120,000 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

- **Growing a Business:** the new Entrepreneurship Support Service will include growth support for existing businesses. As with the start-up support, this will be more flexible and in keeping with business needs. Pending the introduction of the new service, we will continue to provide mentoring and guidance support to around 160 Belfast based businesses in the period to September 2023. We will also work to deliver a series of workshops and events on issues such as Website and SEO basics, E-commerce essentials, Sales and Marketing, Investment Readiness, Writing a Winning bid, Strategy and Business Planning and Introduction to Innovation. We will also have a range of support services to advice small businesses on critical issues such as environmental sustainability and cyber awareness. A key development area for us this year will be a commitment to increase the number of businesses engaging in export activity. We have set a target of achieving a 10% increase in the value of exports by Belfast-based businesses, bringing them up to the regional average. Through this work, we will engage with our partners such as InterTradelreland and Invest NI
- **Scaling Support and Innovation:** The Economic Strategy identifies the need to focus on key technologies and priority sectors. These include Fintech and Financial Services, Creative and Digital, Life and Health Sciences, and Advanced Manufacturing, as well as identifying opportunities as part of the green transition and a drive for more sustainable investment. Working with the City Innovation Team, we are delivering a new intervention to build capacity among local businesses, with a particular focus on helping them to access 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 Digital Catapult, Ulster University, Queen's University, Catalyst and Invest NI to increase the number of innovation driven enterprises and scaling businesses. This will include support for investment in the Way to Scale Programme. This is an MIT-based intervention that has been successful in significantly enhancing the growth and innovation ambitions of local businesses. It is reaping rewards in terms of fast-tracking growth and job creation plans for participating companies. Based on learning from the initial cohorts, we want to

increase the number of businesses engaging in this programme and to offer extended support from specialist mentors once they complete the programme. We are working with Catalyst and Invest NI to create a collective funding allocation to support delivery – with the expectation that participating businesses will also contribute towards programme costs. Final details of the overall programme are currently being worked through but it is expected that the Belfast City Council contribution will not exceed £90,000. Catalyst will act as the contract lead for this intervention and all expenditure will be managed through them

- **Investing in Belfast:** We will continue to build on our partnerships in London and Dublin to develop co-operation and investment promotion opportunities for mutual benefit. Following development of the strategy and action plan, the work on the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor will focus on delivery of key interventions within the plan, supported by the recruitment of dedicated support staff. Belfast City Council will contribute £35,000 towards the work, which is being led by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council who are acting as the chair and secretariat to the partnership. The partnership will also work to complete the feasibility studies on innovation and circular economy that have been funded through the Shared Island Unit
- **Supporting events:** 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 £62,000 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.

3.6 New York New Belfast (NYNB) 2023– request for financial support

Members will be aware that NYNB has been running for more than a decade. The event, which takes place in New York, brings together leaders from both cities to build business, community and cultural linkages. The 2023 event will take place on 22 June 2023. It will focus on innovation and key growth sectors, in particular financial technology. This is one of the priority technologies set out in the 10X Economic Vision and it is also reflected in the draft Belfast Economic Strategy.

3.7 The event will bring together a targeted audience of 180 of the top business leaders, investors, banks, Government and academia along the US East Coast. A number of key local partners will attend the event including Belfast Harbour; some of the major construction and consultancy businesses and a number of the major FDI businesses that have located and expanded in Belfast. Several partners have already committed sponsorship, including Invest NI, Tourism Ireland, KPMG and NI Bureau. Belfast City Council has been asked to participate in the event and provide a financial contribution of £5,000 towards the overall programme. Both the Lord Mayor and the Chief Executive have been invited to have speaking roles as part of the programme. In addition to the event itself, officers have been working collaboratively with Invest NI New York’s office to set up a series of follow-up meetings and new contacts within the Fintech and Net Zero sectors. Funding for attendance at the event has been set aside within the International Relations budget.

3.8 Financial & Resource Implications

The activities outlined within this report will be resourced through the existing Enterprise and Business Growth budget for 2023/24.

<u>Work area</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Starting a Business (Including Social Enterprise and Co-operatives)	£621,823
Growing a Business, Scaling and Innovation	£438,230

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Investing in Belfast (including DBEC and City of London engagement)	£78,300
Contribution to events and conferences	£62,000

3.9 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

The unit is currently undertaking an equality screening on the overall work programme. This will ensure that due consideration is given to equality and good relation impacts throughout the delivery of the collective workplan.”

The Committee adopted the recommendations.

Work Plan - 23-24 Employability and Skills

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“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 2022/23 to support skills development, economic engagement and job outcomes for key target groups and to set out the proposed workplan for the 2023/24 financial year.

1.2 The work programme supports the inclusive growth ambitions of the Council by targeting interventions on key cohorts, including:

- Residents out of work and experiencing barriers to employment/self-employment, including those who are long-term unemployed and economically inactive**
- Residents with low skills levels**
- Young people who do not have a baseline Level 2 equivalent qualification and/or at risk of dropping out of (or not in) education, employment or training.**
- In work, low earning residents.**
- Those living in areas of highest multiple deprivation.**

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the work undertaken in the financial year to date and the positive employability and jobs outcomes associated with this work**

- **Approve the priority interventions for the 2023/2024 financial year.**

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Labour market context

Having emerged from a period of significant volatility within the labour market due to the pandemic, ongoing challenges remain as a result of macroeconomic incidents and the associated cost of living crisis. Demand is hugely outstripping supply across a range of sectors such as tech and digital, logistics, business services as well as health and social care. On a more positive note, employers are now demonstrating a willingness to consider innovative and inclusive pathways to employment, particularly in strong growth sectors.

- 3.2** In terms of the wider employability and skills ecosystem in the city, Council interventions – particularly Employment Academies – are largely reliant on localised provision that can engage, support and prepare people to become ready for the final step into work that an Employment Academy can offer. The impending withdrawal of ESF funds will have a significant impact on the provision in this space, potentially reducing the ‘pipeline’ of candidates coming through.

3.3 Employment Academies

Members will be aware that Employment Academies are one of the key instruments that the Council’s Employability and Skills team utilises to support residents to secure a better job or a better job. While the content of Employment Academies varies from programme to programme, there are a number of consistent components, namely:

- Pre-academy matching and selection to ensure all individuals who participate have a meaningful chance of securing employment after successful completion
- Employer-led vocational skills, qualifications, licences and training related to the specific job role
- In-situ work sampling/work placements
- Provision of additional supports to undergo and complete the academy, from equipment and clothing through to childcare, travel and subsistence
- Employability support particularly focused on the final employment interview (all candidates are guaranteed a job interview).

3.4 Given the volatility in the labour market – and the limited financial resources available to undertake the work – our recommendations around the priority work plan have been driven by a number of factors including:

- The opportunity presented by a number of growth sectors (particularly tech and fibre) to support participants into roles with higher earning potential. In recognition of the additional skills support work required, these interventions tend to have a higher per capita cost for participants but offer a positive return on investment in terms of salary levels for those successful in finding work following programme completion
- Ongoing need to work with employers to convince them of the value of alternative approaches to finding talent other than pre-existing qualifications and/or experience. This is particularly the case for our work in new sectors – specifically those that have tended to think ‘degree first’ and have not considered alternative routes
- Employers with entry level and lower paid jobs – particularly in sectors such as hospitality and social care – continue to experience significant challenges in finding workers. Officers are working with these employers to consider issues such as terms and conditions and payment of the real living wage in order to attract and retain talent, aligned with the implementation of the Belfast Business Promise
- Opportunities to support existing employees who are in low-paid work and/or underemployed through upskilling interventions – supporting individuals to improve salary levels by progressing to a better job and thereby embedding a skills-escalator by creating additional entry-level roles.

3.5 Stakeholder and partner engagement

A vital element of our work is our engagement with employability and skills providers across the city. This underpins the ability of Employment Academies to successfully match people to the opportunities on offer. Officers have engaged with organisations such as EBM, GEMS, USDT, Shankill JAC, Ashton Centre, Women’s TEC, Action Mental Health, JBOs, GLOW, NOW Group, Community Sports Network, Harmoni Homeless Hostel, Shankill Women’s Centre, Walkways, City Life Projects, Revolution Youth, African Caribbean Society, Start 360, Orchardville, NIACRO, Disability Action etc. We have also engaged with and worked

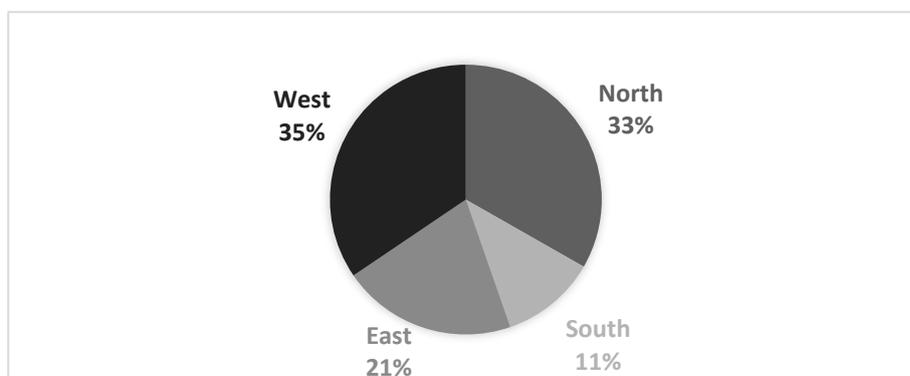
through existing networks such as Migrants' Forum and NIUSE.

- 3.6 In addition to this, officers have continued to expand and consolidate the Employability and Skills Provider Network, with 209 members from all across the city covering key target groups (disability, women, young people, justice leavers, care leavers etc.). The team has regular engagement and provides updates on future plans for Employment Academies, setting out details of employers, jobs, eligibility, pre-requisites, programme content, duration, additional support offered (childcare, sign-language interpreters, travel, subsistence etc.). We are also working closely with the Institute of Employability Professionals (IEP), facilitating continuous improvement and raising standards within the ecosystem in the city. We have provided access to IEP membership, shared learning and benchmarking, and the delivery of vocationally specific employability training for those working in the sector.

3.7 Participant engagement across the city

In addition to engaging directly with provision in local communities across the city, officers normally hold roadshows in a variety of venues to optimise engagement in every part of Belfast. Participation rates are tracked to ensure that they reflect geospatial disparities in relation to deprivation, unemployment and economic inactivity. Taking all of this into account, a working assumption would be that we would have one third of participants from North, one third from West and one third from South and East combined. While the geospatial balance is on track overall, the balance between East and South needs attention. This will be reflected in our engagement strategy for the coming year and, as a result, we expect to be able to see a correction of this over the course of the year.

Belfast City Council Employment Academies: % breakdown of participants



3.8 As an illustration of our commitment to ongoing evaluation of our work, officers have recently (since end 2022) taken a more nuanced engagement strategy to focus on targeting areas in South Belfast instead of traditional roadshows across the city. This has included building links with organisations working within Taughmonagh, Donegall Pass, Ormeau, the Markets etc. to ensure that residents here are aware of and prepared for the opportunities on offer, and to build stronger links with support organisations in those areas. Officers have also been undertaking more localised outreach in shopping centres in conjunction with JBOs, as well as collaborating on more localised jobfairs and roadshows.

3.9 Employment Academy 2022/23 Performance

Since April 2023, we have been able to make investments in over 700 places on Employment Academies, utilising our own resources and attracting additional resources through the Labour Market Partnership, Learning & Work Institute’s New Futures programme and the Community Renewal Fund. The availability of these additional resources as well as having a flexible, responsive commissioning model, means that we have been able to respond to opportunities, meeting employer demand and bringing forward solutions that benefit local businesses and residents.

3.10 Due to the pre-academy matching, screening and selection, attrition rates tend to be low with an average of 93% of those who start an Employment Academy successfully completing and with an average into-work rate of 75% for those who complete. The level of demand – both from employers as well as those looking for a job or a better job – remains high.

<u>Employment Academy</u>	<u>BCC resources</u>	<u>Other: LMP, LWI & CRF</u>	<u>Total</u>
Logistics & Bus Driving	54	100	154
Retrofit Academy*		97	
Construction & General Operatives	7	65	72
Fibre		30	30
Tech		17	17
Business Services	16	39	55
Classroom Assistant	52		52
Social Care and Childcare	29		29

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Childcare/HSC Upskilling: Level 3-5	68		68
Health & Social Care Upskilling: Level 3-5	65		65
Classroom Assistant Upskilling: Level 3	37		37
Customer Services: Leisure and Hospitality		40	40
TOTALS	328	388	716

*The purpose of this Academy is to create the skills infrastructure needed – numbers reflect training places.

3.11 In terms of volume, the most popular Employment Academies are within logistics, education, construction as well as upskilling academies in traditionally low-paid sectors such as social care, childcare and education for those wanting a better job. Sectors that we struggle to recruit for include hospitality and social care, where pay and conditions play a large factor in sector attractiveness.

3.12 **Employment Academy 2023/24 Workplan**

While LMP resources provided capacity to almost double Employment Academy participant numbers in 2022/23, this will reduce to 100 additional places in 2023/24 as the LMP begins to implement other interventions outlined in this report such as the Gateway Service and Bridges to Progression for Young People.

3.13 Across 2023/24, we expect that the Employment Academies – resourced through Council revenue as well as other sources – will engage around 500 participants with at least 70% expected to gain employment/self-employment in sectors such as:

- Practical sectors such as logistics, construction, utilities, fibre etc.
- Professional services such as administration, business and tech etc.
- Care and education sectors including classroom assistants, health and social care, childcare and playwork, with a focus on including recognised vocational qualifications between Level 2 and Level 5 to enable people to not only gain employment but also progress to a better job within these occupations
- Customer service sectors such as leisure and tourism.

3.14 We will also continue to work with public sector bodies such as:

- Individual schools and Education Authority to meet the increasing job demand for classroom assistants and, crucially, build in the Level 3 qualification required to secure permanent and better paid roles
- Queen's University, where planning is underway to deliver a bespoke Employment Academies for hard-to-fill posts within administration, with an in-built Level 2 qualification when people are in work that will lead to job progression within QUB
- Belfast HSC Trust, where planning is underway to deliver bespoke Employment Academies for nursing assistants and within health and social care roles
- Belfast City Council, where planning is underway to deliver Employment Academies for hard-to-fill vacancies within community services as well as driver posts and, potentially, Digital Services.

3.15 One growing area of work is our new pathways into the tech, digital and professional service sectors. While this sector has remained largely resilient throughout the pandemic, our research shows that there are limited pathways into the sector for those that do not have a degree. This challenge, identified through the work of the Innovation and Inclusive Growth Commission, has led to a pilot programme with 17 starters, two leaving early as they found employment and 11 of the 14 completers gaining a software development role with a starting salary range between £23,000-£28,000 per annum. We are now working intensively with these employers as well as across the tech sector to expand this in the coming year, bringing on additional employers and expanding the job roles. In expanding this activity, we propose to continue to work with the Learning and Work Institute through their New Futures programme. In recognition of the significant budget challenges, we are working with DfC to utilise Advisor Discretionary Fund (ADF) resources that blend with Employment Academy delivery – thereby making our resources go further and engaging more people.

3.16 Improving employability outcomes for young people

While a significant proportion of activity has focused on those already in the labour market or trying to find a job or move to a better job, we have delivered a number of smaller interventions for young people, both in the formal education setting and outside of the school environment. Our focus has been on improving educational attainment and helping young

people at risk to find positive employment and training outcomes.

- 3.17** Our GCSE support programme's delivery within the current academic year has been back to pre-Covid engagement and participation rates, with learning workshops/classes and revision support being delivered in both school-based and community-based settings. Since September 2022, 281 young people have been engaged on the programme. These young people have been identified as being unlikely to achieve at least Grade C in GCSE English and Maths, without the additional support of the programme. In the 2022/23 academic year, this programme is expected to support 365 young people, providing access to the learning and revision support on offer.
- 3.18** We are also supporting 170 young people through our Youth Support Programme. These participants either already have or are at risk of dropping out of the education system, employment or training. Of those young people currently participating, 87 have completed accredited training and 65 are undertaking essential skills qualifications. This programme is due to complete in summer 2024 with an expected 55% achieving a positive destination, either into training, education or employment.
- 3.19** A Summer Work Experience Programme was piloted in summer 2022 for young people aged 14-16 years at highest risk or who had already disengaged from the formal education system with 30 completing the programme and 28 moving into positive outcomes (14 continued in formal education at year 13 and the remainder moved into vocational training).
- 3.20** A review of our delivery within this workstream is currently concluding, and while the outcomes from our interventions in this space have been positive, there are a number of factors at play in recommending a reduced level of activity going forward:
- The dynamic policy environment in this space: the Fair Start and Reducing Education Disadvantage (RED) policy initiatives led by Department for Education are progressing, with new interventions currently being developed. We are working closely with both EA and DE to share the learning from our successful pilot activity with the expectation that Council delivery can be 'lifted and shifted' within the context of these new initiatives

- The reduced financial capacity within the team means that difficult decisions need to be made, with officers recommending that Belfast Employment Academies – as the flagship Council intervention in the employability space – are protected as far as possible.

3.21 Taking account of these factors, it is proposed that our work on 'Improving employability outcomes for young people' is prioritised on two key areas, namely:

- Continued support for the GCSE Support Programme for a final interim year, using this time to work with the Partnership Boards (who currently deliver this programme) as well as the Education Inequalities sub-group under the Jobs, Skills & Education Board to secure a longer-term future within the context of Community Planning and Fair Start/Reducing Educational Disadvantage policy initiatives
- Working with the Education Inequalities sub-group to consider alternative provision for those young people at risk of disengaging from formal education once the Youth Support Programme comes to an end.

3.22 Labour Market Partnership

Members will be aware that the Labour Market Partnership is an intervention supported by DfC within all 11 council areas. Each LMP is required to submit an annual action plan for agreement. The Belfast Labour Market Partnership has met on a number of occasions recently to finalise the plan for 2023/24. Priority work areas are:

- **Quickly back to work:** Ensuring a co-ordinated response to the substantial number of people in the city who have been or are risk of being made unemployed, especially as a consequence of the economic shocks
- **Increasing Opportunities:** Empowering those furthest from the labour market to succeed through quality support, especially those who will be considered long-term unemployed as well as the economically inactive
- **No-one Left Behind:** Targeting of those disadvantaged groups through the delivery of an integrated, comprehensive, inclusive, holistic and local employability approach
- **Catching Up:** Supporting access to careers pathways, re-skilling and upskilling for those unemployed as well as those on low incomes.

3.23 Resources from the Labour Market Partnership enable the Council to increase the range and scope of employability and skills activity. The Partnership also provides a platform for engagement with government departments, community partners and business organisations as a means of refocusing regional programmes more effectively within the Belfast area. The LMP action plan recognises that, while there are gaps that have been identified that will necessitate the creation of new interventions, not all activity need be new 'provision' or 'programmes'; sometimes it is equally important to profile and/or promote existing interventions. In addition to the extra support for Employment Academy places, the headline programme of work within the action plan includes the following:

- Gateway to Choices Service: a key issue that emerged in our engagement with the LMP partners was the need for independent advice and guidance outside of mainstream JBO support for those who are out of work and non-job ready such as long-term unemployed and the economically inactive. In our engagement with LMP members, they considered that these groups required enhanced support to navigate the existing provision and identify the right support, at the right time, to help move them towards positive job, skills and qualification outcomes. It is proposed that the Gateway will support up to 1200 people in the coming year. Participants will engage on a voluntary basis and the delivery model is being co-designed with key stakeholders such as the JBO Network, Careers Service, VCSE sector etc. Delivery will commence in April 2023**
- Labour Market Observatory: officers have completed scoping and preparatory work and secured additional resources from DfC to establish a Labour Market Observatory. When fully operational, this will provide the intelligence, data and evidence-base needed to underpin decision-making in through the prism of demand, supply, provision and policy. DfC resources will ensure that the insights are available for all council areas**
- RSA Cities of Learning: the number of people in Belfast with no or low formally-recognised skills is significantly above the NI and UK average. Officers have been working with the RSA to explore how a Digital Badges scheme could help recognise the non-accredited skills of these individuals. All Employment Academies are now digitally badged as an alternative validation of achievement, with 779 badges issued to**

participants. In addition to this, the Council has offered 22 organisations in the city access to Digital Badging for their own participants/employees. During 2023/24 officers will continue to work with RSA Cities of Learning, including their partners Badge Nation and Navigatr to expand Digital Badging to an additional 20 organisations/employers, including employability and skills providers – and support them in creating their own Digital Badges

- **Bridges to Progression targets young people 16-17 years who are at risk of disengaging from Training for Success/Skills for Life & Work due to their personal circumstances. Through this intervention, participants can access intensive personal support to help them progress in and complete their formal training, with the ambition of improving the levels of progression into employment or further training. At the December 2022 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, it was agreed that officers would seek expressions of interest from organisations delivering these programmes, outlining how they would use resources to add value to the core activity with the objective of improving outcomes for participants. It was also agreed that officers would ‘undertake assessment of the applications for funding in line with the approach detailed in this report...’ and that ‘A report will be presented at a future meeting of this committee outlining the outcomes and learning from this approach.’ Delivery partners were invited to submit applications outlining how they would use the resources. Following the application process, indicative funding awards have been issued to providers as detailed below. Officers will work with the organisations in the coming months to pick up on the learning from this pilot activity and to understand how the varying approaches across providers is making an impact on the young people. A more detailed report on findings will be shared with the Committee towards the end of the year.**

- **Workforce Training Services - £20,000**
- **Bryson - £18,750**
- **Impact Training - £15,000**
- **People 1st - £14,808**
- **Springboard Opportunities - £12,317**
- **Rutledge - £9,125.**

3.24 The LMP action plans are submitted on an annual basis at this point (due to the annual budget settlements in the government

departments). However, as part of the strategic assessment that underpins the plan, officers have identified a number of developmental areas where we consider that there is a need to undertake additional scoping work in order to understand the issues at play and consider whether the council might play an active delivery role in the future, or lobby government partners to do more in this space in order to improve outcomes for Belfast residents. Two of these areas relate to place-based and people-based targeted interventions. The strategic assessment identified a number of key groups that were under-represented in the labour market or that faced significant barriers to finding work. These groups include (among others) those with a disability and migrants. Likewise, the research identified that there are specific parts of the city where levels of LTU and economic inactivity are more than twice the city average. Government programmes over many years have tried different approaches to support these groups. We propose to explore some new models that are either target group-based and/or location-based in order to support incremental improvements in employment outcomes among the target populations.

3.25 Partnership, policy influence and guidance

In addition to direct delivery, officers will also continue to work with internal and external partners to use all tools at our disposal to address the key employability and skills challenges and to lever resources to support additional delivery, focusing on the council's inclusive growth ambitions. There are a number of key mechanisms through which this can be achieved:

- **Developer Contributions:** on a practical level, officers are supporting the Planning team in the development of the Developer Contributions Framework and are actively engaged with a number of emerging development schemes to ensure that relevant employability and skills interventions are incorporated and that compliance is ensured
- **Social Value Procurement Policy:** officers are working closely with Corporate Procurement Services to support the implementation of the policy, focusing on the employability and skills measures. This includes working with Council contracts – as well as contractors across the city where Social Value applies – to achieve their Social Value requirements in a meaningful way.

3.26 Finance and Resource Implications

The activities outlined in this report will be resourced from the 2023/24 budget for the Employability & Skills section of the Place and Economy departmental budget that was included as part of the 2023/24 estimates.

3.27 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

Each of the proposed projects referenced in this report is informed by statistical research, stakeholder engagement and complementary policies and strategies. New projects or service areas are equality screened and a rural needs assessment completed. Considerations given to equality and good relation impacts at the initial stages of project development. Officers will work closely with the Equality and Good Relations Team on this activity. A new CRM system has been established to enable officers to regularly review participant engagement and address any equality or good relations issues arising.”

During discussion, the Director of Economic Development explained further the work plan and the labour market context, together with the referral process for the employment academies.

In relation to queries raised by the Committee, the Employability and Skills Manager advised that she would liaise with Members in relation to promoting engagement with Outer South Belfast residents and would also contact Translink in relation to further employment events.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- Noted the work undertaken in the financial year to date and the positive employability and jobs outcomes associated with this work;
- Approved the priority interventions for the 2023/2024 financial year; and
- Noted that the Employability and Skills Manager would liaise with Members in relation to promoting engagement with Outer South Belfast residents; and
- Noted that the Employability and Skills Manager would contact Translink in relation to further employment events.

Positioning the City to Compete

Christmas Evaluation 2022

The Committee was reminded that, in 2021, officers had adopted a different approach to the Christmas 2021 programme which replaced the traditional switch - on ceremony. In the context of Covid, the challenge for officers was to design a programme that continued to be cognisant of safety considerations and have the ability to respond to

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a changing environment, whilst meeting the needs of city stakeholders including those businesses impacted by the pandemic.

The Director of Economic Development advised that feedback from city centre traders on the traditional light switch was not entirely positive, with many highlighting traffic, parking congestion and the event itself acting as a barrier to normal trading at a crucial time of year.

He informed the Committee that, as well as responding to the pandemic, the Christmas programme also aimed to meet the development objectives set out in the ten-year Cultural Strategy. As a consequence, in 2021, the Christmas programme consisted of a combination of creative initiatives such as street performance, projections, music, window dressing and lighting installations all inspired by the theme '*Once Upon a Time in Belfast*', utilising local artists, creatives and designers to create an authentic and engaging experience for all throughout the festive season.

In 2022, the 2021 model of Christmas animation and event delivery was further consolidated through a programme of seasonal animation in the city centre, which supported economic recovery in the city post pandemic and uplifted the city and visitors in the context of the current economic climate.

Benefits of the new approach included:

- Improving the cultural vibrancy of the city;
- Fostering civic pride;
- Positioning the Belfast brand;
- Supporting the local culture, arts and events sectors;
- Delivering direct economic benefits; and
- Supporting businesses.

The Director of Economic Development provided an overview of the Christmas Programme 2022. He pointed out that the Belfast's Christmas celebrations officially began on Saturday, 19th November with the 'Christmas in Belfast' opening day event, which took place from 6pm to 9pm. In 2022, the opening weekend activity was reduced from two nights to one and focused on Saturday night only. This decision was taken based on the findings of the independent evaluation and feedback from 2021, which evidenced that the opening evening (Saturday) was much better attended than the Sunday. By reprofiling the event and animation budget into the Saturday activity only, the programme was uplifted to enhance the visitor experience and increase impact. The event schedule consisted of a range of elements including:

- Christmas lighting scheme;
- Lighting projections;
- Music programme;
- Procession;
- Window animation;
- Street animation;
- 2 Royal Avenue;
- Christmas Market;

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- Lord Mayor Role; and
- Marketing and Communications Activity.

He highlighted that the Christmas Lighting Scheme in 2022 was year 3 of the existing Christmas Lighting Scheme which also began on the 19th November and ran until the 4th January. The scheme was identical to the 2021 programme, with the addition of icicles on Ann Street and the positioning and lighting on 12 additional trees on Donegall place. He advised that feedback on the scheme was positive, however, there continued to be requests for an extension of the scheme to include arterial routes. He advised that this also included lighting projections and additional illuminations across the city.

The Director of Economic Development provided an overview of the Christmas Music Programme and animation programme which had taken place across the city across a number of zones. He pointed out that a raised platform was in situ on the evening of the 19th (in front of 2 Royal Avenue) with a three-hour set from 6pm to 9pm showcasing local musicians. In addition, a music programme was curated across the Christmas period, including several music elements for the opening night including performances at Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church and music on Berry Street and Lower Garfield Street.

He described the 4 - week 'weekend programme' of Christmas Animation that was also delivered, together with details on the interactive 'White and Bright' Procession, which had been created by an external provider (Luxe) and included a cavalcade of props and performers which passed through Royal Avenue / Donegall Place on the evening of the event, together with a community engagement programme of choreographed costumed performances, creating a festive spectacle with up to 150 participants and 7,000 visitors across the evening.

He pointed out that Window Animation and Street Animation also formed part of the programme and there was a range of events in 2 Royal Avenue over the festive period. This included a Winter's Den, Up-cycling Christmas decoration programme, Sustainable Christmas Crackers, 'Swap - shop', Santa's Post Box, Teddy Bear Hospital and Toy repair café and a Sustainable Wrapping service (cash for Kids drop-off point), twilight pottery and art markets, Christmas carolling events, storytelling, music, festive jazz for seniors, family silent discos, sustainable arts and craft and workshops and a Crufty Christmas Fashion Show in aid of Guide Dogs NI.

He provided an overview of the statistics that had been recorded against 2 Royal Avenue Christmas Programming, which included Footfall of 48,639 between 19th November 2022 to 31st December 2022 (an average of 1,131 per day) with 30 Events/Workshops/Markets.

The Director of Economic Development summarised the Christmas Market activity which ran this year from Saturday 19th November to Thursday 22nd December. He highlighted that the total attendees were 1,015,565.

He outlined the role of Lord Mayor in leading the Christmas procession, as well as the official opening of the 2 Royal Avenue Christmas programme on 19th November, together with a video message to citizens and visitors to the city.

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In relation to marketing and communications activity, the Director of Economic Development advised that the Council operated a digital campaign with pulse screens and online advertising to promote the events and promotion also took place across digital platforms and via key partners.

He provided an overview of the Post Event Evaluation. He informed the Committee that the Council had commissioned an independent socio-economic survey for the Christmas in Belfast themed - event. Results included the following feedback:

- 55% of visitors were from the Belfast City Council area and a further 45% from elsewhere;
- 77% of visitors had previously attended the event with 23% attending for the first time;
- 69% of visitors agreed that it was a good event for the city to host with 19% views that it was one of the best events to take place in Belfast. 0% rated the event as a poor event;
- 81% of visitors preferred the current event format to the traditional switch on event; and
- 53% of visitors said that the event improved their view of the city.

The Director of Economic Development provided a summary of the stakeholder feedback which had been undertaken in relation to the current programme versus the traditional Christmas Lights Switch on Event:

- Translink was clear that the recent version of the Christmas event (2021 and 2022) was its preference. They stated that the older format caused major disruption, particularly to the Glider services, and had health and safety concerns around pedestrian footfall, particularly after the event.
- The Council contracted Production Management Company and external Health and Safety Advisor had very similar opinions when comparing the two formats - they cited a number of difficulties with delivering the old-style event; the open space itself was not conducive to the delivery of a public event. It was a busy City centre with live traffic and heavy pedestrian footfall. This provided not only a challenging environment in which to operate but significantly increased the safety risk for staff and pedestrians, and significant resources to manage. This risk was exacerbated by public non-compliance, particularly during the de-rig. Their preference was for the new style event, also highlighting that for the old style to be delivered safely, (which they acknowledged it could) it would require significant stakeholder buy-in, and it would require a longer build/de-rig (out of hours) which would have significant resource implications. Both also noted how the Market opening added further complexities.

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- An Eventsec manager with several years' experience of the event stated a preference for the new format, with the parade route amended.
- City Events Unit officers commented that the former 'traditional' lights switch on format held prior to the pandemic was undoubtedly the most challenging event to deliver annually. The city centre space on Donegall Square North was not suitable to host the build and de-rigging of a public event with live or partially live traffic. There were significant risks when live traffic mixed with staff building the event, and particularly with the heavy public pedestrian footfall in the area. Given the inconvenience of the structure build required, the public had been seen to take unnecessary risks in crossing the four lanes of traffic. This took place even with a considerable stewarding presence. This was also a challenge with the de-rig.
- There were also pressures to re-open the roads within an hour of the event ending, a period where many contractors were removing structures and equipment, yet the Donegall Square North was bustling with pedestrians. These issues had been consistent for more than a decade of delivering this format.
- Officer feedback had also indicated that the 2021/2022 event provided a much safer space within which to operate, and with less disruption of traffic and transport services within Donegall Place and Castle Junction, and less event equipment on site, the de-rig was more easily managed. The latter format had entertainment which was more varied in nature and catered for a wider audience than the previous format. There was more scope for using other spaces and buildings within the wider City Centre.
- Feedback from Belfast Chamber (circa 20 businesses) had indicated that retail did not necessarily view the switch on event as boosting trade, while the hospitality sector within the city had a converse opinion. Some businesses had expressed surprise that there was not a return to a normal 'switch on' in 2022. Feedback had also demonstrated a desire for an increased investment in Christmas lighting, strong Christmas marketing brand and drawing on best-practice examples from elsewhere. A meeting with the Belfast Chamber had been scheduled for February to further discuss this feedback in detail.
- Linen Quarter Bid Board feedback had indicated that organisations welcomed a diffuse approach to Christmas lighting with animation across the city centre. Linen Quarter BID welcomed a high profile family event to switch on the Christmas lights, as this would help kickstart the season and provide positive marketing for the city centre. However, the event would not necessarily deliver an

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immediate benefit, as many participants come for the switch-on and then depart again. Maintaining diverse areas of interest and activities across the city centre was therefore deemed important, as this encouraged greater dwell time throughout the day.'

- Officers had also conducted research into what format was deployed across other Local Authorities from a benchmarking perspective. Official Christmas Lights Switch On events varied from live performances in a dedicated public space (Newry, Lisburn, Bangor, Antrim, Ballyclare, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Glasgow and Liverpool) supplemented by family friendly activities. Other formats included processional parades taking place in Derry City and Strabane and across Causeway Coast and Glens Local Authorities.
- Further afield, Councils that decided to not have official Christmas Lights Switch-on events included Manchester, which was due to major construction works across the city; Brighton, Leeds and Inverness who cited budget pressures, and York who cited Covid concerns.
- Alternative approaches include Edinburgh Winter Festival and Cardiff, whose Christmas activity comprises markets, funfairs, ice rinks, and light installations and did not host a standalone lights switch-on event, but rather promoted when the lights would first be switched on, signalling the opening of Christmas markets and related activity.

The Director of Economic Development highlighted that a proposed solution could be found in taking some attributes of the old format, and hosting within the 2021/2022 event space. A 'switch on' element would take place on a small stage at Castle Junction/Donegall Place, allowing the audience within Donegall Place to view the lighting of the Tree and Festive Lighting within the immediate City Centre, without the requirement to close Donegall Square North. The entertainment throughout the City Centre could then be programmed. However, it was important to consider that the costs for a traditional light switch on was £96,300 in 2019. Within departmental estimates we currently have secured £122,864 for Christmas activities.

During discussion, in relation to planning the 2023 Christmas Programme, several Members suggested that the Christmas Tree Switch-on event be resumed and consideration be given to community engagement and local organisation involvement, choir competitions, a procession and the extension of the lighting schemes.

During further discussion, Members highlighted that details of the environmental impact and comparison of event feedback of recent Christmas event programmes would also be useful to assess the future Christmas Programme.

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Proposal

Moved by Councillor Beattie,
Seconded by Councillor T. Kelly,

Resolved – that the Christmas Tree Switch-on event, outside the City Hall, be resumed and included in the Christmas 2023 programme and that a report be submitted to a future Committee on the development of the Christmas 2023 programme to consider the suggestions raised.

Issues Raised in Advance by Members

Lifelong Learning Alliance (Cllr Spratt to raise)

Councillor Spratt outlined his request for the Committee to receive a presentation from the Lifelong Learning Alliance at a future meeting. He highlighted the importance of adults engaging with education as 34 per cent of adults in Northern Ireland had not engaged with education since leaving school.

The Committee acceded to the request.

Chairperson