

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 9th October, 2024

HYBRID MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Nelson (Chairperson);
Alderman Lawlor;
Councillors Black, De Faoite, D. Douglas, Duffy,
Harvey, Kelly, Lyons, Maskey, F. McAteer, McCabe
McDonough-Brown, McDowell, I. McLaughlin,
R. McLaughlin, McKay, O'Neill and Smyth.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development;
Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy;
Ms. L. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Ms. E. Clark, Programme Manager;
Mr. A. Ferguson, Senior Development Manager; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services and Governance
Coordinator.

Apologies

An apology was received on behalf of the Deputy Lord Mayor, Councillor McCormick.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 11th September 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 October, subject to an addendum to the decision under the heading 'Night-time Economy Notice of Motion Update' in that the Council agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure, John O'Dowd, requesting that he review the decision to put on hold consideration of the pedestrianisation of Hill Street.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor McCabe declared an interest in item 4. (a) 'Major Events Update' in that she worked for an organisation that was associated with event funding.

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.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the press and public from the meeting during discussion of the following items as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of

exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Members were also reminded that the content of 'restricted' reports and any discussion which took place during closed session must be treated as 'confidential information' and that no such information should be disclosed to the public as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Code of Conduct.

Vacant to Vibrant Update

The Committee was provided with an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and the associated recommendations from the assessment panel.

During discussion, in response to a Member's concern in relation to the type of private sector applications which had been received, such as private health care, the Director of City Regeneration and Development undertook to consider the matter further.

Proposal

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

Resolved – That the Committee agrees that the current arrangements for reporting all recommended grant awards under Grant 1 and 2 on the Committee would remain.

After discussion, the Committee agreed also to:

- note the update in relation to the city centre Vacant to Vibrant Programme which was currently supporting up to 32 businesses to locate or expand into long-term vacant city centre units;
- agree to the recommended grant awards; and
- note the update in relation to the position of external funding applications to progress the proposed city-wide Vacant to Vibrant scheme.

Housing-Led Regeneration Update

The Committee was provided with an update on a number of strands of the Housing-Led Regeneration programme of work as agreed within the Committee Plan.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor McAteer,
Seconded by Councillor Hanvey and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees that a report be submitted to a future meeting in relation to the impact that the lack of adequate water infrastructure has had on housing development across the city, including

the impact that it might have on the environment, economy and the Belfast Agenda's growth targets.

During discussion on the public procurement exercise to appoint a partner to work with the Council on the delivery of housing-led regeneration, the Director of City Regeneration and Development responded to Members' queries regarding the approach and mechanism utilised in delivering social value. The Committee expressed support for the work which had been undertaken to date and a Member requested that work be carried out to support the Council in developing mechanisms that would help to address the viability issues associated with progressing housing regeneration and city centre living in a similar manner as had been used in other UK regions.

After discussion, the Committee agreed also to:

- note that the Director of City Regeneration and Development would provide party briefings, if requested, in relation to the Housing Led Regeneration.
- note that the public procurement exercise to appoint a Private Sector Partner (PSP) for the delivery of housing-led regeneration at scale had concluded and that a report would be submitted to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee October with a recommendation for an appointment being made in November, following Council ratification;
- note the update in respect of the Inner North-West Development Brief and the ongoing evaluation process;
- note the update in relation to the city-wide Strategic Site Assessments and the next steps to be taken, including referral to the forthcoming All-Party Roundtable on Housing-Led Regeneration and the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee regarding options for the disposal/development of various sites; and
- to write to the Minister for Infrastructure highlighting the impact the aforementioned issue had on housing delivery, particularly in light of the current housing crisis, and to seek additional funding for water infrastructure.

Belfast 2024

The Committee considered an update which outlined the success of the Belfast 2024 Programme to date, which included both quantitative and qualitative feedback from the evaluation process and outlined the next stages of the programme and engagement work.

The Committee noted the progress of the Belfast 2024 programme to date.

Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy 10-Year Stocktake Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the 10 - year stock take of Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy, as agreed as an in-year deliverable in the City Growth & Regeneration Committee Plan 24/25.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 The Committee are asked to note:

- The emerging findings from the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) 10 - year stock take, in the context of the existing strategy.
- The proposed BCCRIS Summit event to launch the key messaging.
- Request for Members to provide any further comments to inform the final stocktake report.

3.0 Background

3.1 As Members will be aware the Committee agreed as part of the Committee Plan for 24/25 *‘to take forward a ten-year review of the Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) building on the work of the recent Regeneration Trackers to inform city and Council priorities going forward’*.

3.2 By way of background, BCCRIS launched in 2015 and is the adopted regeneration policy for the city centre. BCCRIS recognised that the city centre is one of the most important places in the Region, where investment impact can be maximised, where rates are generated and where momentum can be built to support growth in the surrounding neighbourhoods and wider region. Belfast as the capital city, and regional economic driver generates £16.2bn GVA with 14.3% of Northern Ireland’s business base and accounts for 30% of total employee jobs. The stocktake has evidenced that this is very much the case today, it is clear that Belfast is everyone’s main city and has an important role to play as a centre for commerce, culture, tourist attractions, recreation, entertainment, learning and employment. Its core centre

area needs to ensure collective efforts are intensified to ensure it can continue to perform these important roles for all areas of the city and the region to derive benefit.

3.3 The Strategy sets out the context for developing the city centre and outlines collective aspirations for the continued growth and regeneration of the city core and its surrounding areas. The Strategy is based on the following core principles, which are referred to as the policy areas:

- Increase the Employment Population
- Increase the Residential Population
- Manage the Retail Offer
- Maximise the Tourism Opportunity
- Create Regional Learning and Innovation Centres
- Create a Green, Walkable, Cyclable Centre
- Connect to the City Around
- Shared Space and Social Impact

3.4 To facilitate the implementation of these policies the strategy also identified a series of projects and a number of opportunities. The projects were intended to focus efforts on discrete initiatives which will help to achieve the policies and create a liveable and economically thriving city. Five Special Action Areas were identified for parts of the centre where it recommended that more intensive local plans should be prepared.

3.5 At the time of publication of BCCRIS and as part of Local Government Reform in 2015 the Council were preparing for the planned transfer of regeneration powers; however, these did not transfer to Councils. In 2016, the Department for Social Development (predecessor of Department for Communities) agreed a joint working arrangement with Belfast City Council, where they adopted BCCRIS going forward as their regeneration policy, although noting that as DSD were considering the evaluation of its area-based Neighbourhood Renewal Programme they could not specifically adopt the 5 Special Action Areas within the Strategy at that time.

3.6 The stocktake involves looking back at what was envisaged through BCCRIS and taking stock in order to assist in a focus to looking forward. The stocktake is not intended to be an in-depth analysis of all the elements of the strategy but rather an overview of progress over the 10- year period and a consideration of the high-level priority areas going forward in the context of what was contained within the existing strategy. It is not seeking to rewrite the strategy, which was subject to extensive consultation at the time of its development including cross party-political support from the Council Party Group Leaders and adopted by DSD (DfC)

as their regeneration policy for the city centre. The stocktake has provided an opportunity to look at progress to date and identify future opportunities through the lens of how the city centre has evolved, and the role of the city centre for all users. It builds on existing agreed principles as set out in our Inclusive Growth Strategy, the Belfast Agenda and A Bolder Vision, all key aspects which have come forward since the launch of the strategy in 2015.

3.7 Importantly, when BCCRIS was published in 2015, it was recognised that in order to deliver on the collective ambition collective and collaborative working would be required across the public sector, third sector and private sector, and this is still very much the case today. Given the comprehensive nature of BCCRIS and recognising that the ambition is collective and would require significant partnership working it has been important that the stocktake be shaped not only by the information contained in the annual regeneration and development trackers (which charts physical development activity and previously reported to Committee), but by engagement across all sectors and partners.

4.0 Main Report

4.1 Shaping the stocktake

The stocktake has been shaped by a programme of engagement, revisiting the extensive engagement which was carried out in 2015. Joe Berridge (Urban Strategies) worked with the Council to develop BCCRIS back in 2015 and he has played a key part in the current stocktake exercise. This stocktake exercise has included:

- Party Group Leaders Engagement
- Two online focused community workshops.
- Facilitated community and public in person evening workshop.
- Internal cross departmental engagement.
- Industry conversations (Business & Development).
- Central Government Departments including DfI and DfC.
- City centre site visits.
- Desk based research, including taking cognisance of the breadth of engagement undertaken by the Council in recent years with relevance to the city centre.

4.2

Members are asked to note the emerging stocktake summary points below, which are in the context of the existing strategy, noting that there is also reference to policy landscape change since 2015 in terms of Local Government Reform; including transfer of planning powers, development of the LDP and the publication of the Belfast Agenda: A couple of overarching comments include:

- The Role of the City Centre: In 2015, it was recognised that the city centre is one of the most important places in the region. City centres are where investment impact can be maximised, where rates are generated and where momentum can be built to support growth in the surrounding neighbourhoods and wider region. Importantly for Council this enables the redistribution of growth, to ensure inclusive growth across our city. The generation of rates income from the city centre also supports the delivery of our vital services and our significant physical programme across the city, bringing much needed investment into communities. The findings of the stocktake evidence that this is very much the case today, and that Belfast, as the regional economic driver is the regional centre for commerce, culture, tourism, recreation, entertainment, learning and employment, and contributes £47million in non-domestic district rates (2022/23). City centre jobs represent c.37% of all Belfast jobs and 11% of all jobs in Northern Ireland. The emerging messaging from the stocktake reinforces the need to set out the role of Belfast, our city centre and support needed to strengthen its role in positioning the wider region for inclusive investment and innovation.
- Much has been achieved since 2015, and there is still room and the to grow – sustainably: The stocktake review underscores a very positive trajectory of development over the period from 2015, recognising also the significant impact that Covid has had on the city centre, and highlights areas where further focus is required. Engagement feedback from across a broad spectrum of stakeholders recognises that there has been significant regeneration progress across a number of sectors which has been very positive, but also an opportunity now (in the context of the existing strategy) to take stock on what our collective priorities are as a city going forward and seek to address the challenges that exist. This is particularly important given the return of the Executive and publication of draft Programme for Government, coupled with a continued interest in development in the city, the

changing nature of how the city centre is used and the need to ensure the existing residential and business communities continue to play an important role in the future sustainable development of the city centre.

- **A Number of Game Changers have taken place since 2015:**

The stocktake highlighted the positive progress over the last decade, completed game changing developments including Ulster University relocation, Belfast Grand Central Station, Waterfront Hall extension, the introduction of the first phase of the Belfast Rapid Transit, development along the waterfront area (including Titanic Quarter and City Quays). There has also been significant levels of development across a range of asset classes, particularly offices, tourism / hospitality and student accommodation. The stocktake also highlighted a degree of frustration at the slow pace of progress in other areas including city centre living, improved connectivity, public realm and public and green spaces. The importance of connectivity and public transport, as well as the city centre 'hours of activity' are emerging strongly as key findings. Whilst good placemaking has been identified as being critical, city management, 'place keeping' and the importance of the city centre as a safe, clean, compassionate and inclusive space have also been highlighted.

- **Emerging Key Points in relation to the 8 policy areas:**

4.3

- **Increase the Employment Population: BCCRIS** focused on the need to increase Grade A offices given the lack of new city centre office development at that time, coupled with a significant marketing programme for occupiers and investors, and consideration as to how BCC could de-risk private sector investment in Grade A office accommodation. Over the BCCRIS period to date there has been significant investment in office space and increases in employment targets set. In 2015 BCCRIS set a target of 1.5m sq ft of new office space to be delivered by 2030, by 2024 over 2m sq ft of new office space had been delivered. The number of employee jobs in the city centre increased by 12% (above the regional average) from 77,255 in 2015 to 86,427 in 2024. The stocktake did however highlight that vacant secondary office accommodation will be a challenge going forward.

4.4

- **Increase the Residential Population:** In 2015 BCCRIS noted the low overall city centre residential population and that a significant residential population is highly important for the successful functioning of the city centre, referencing knowledge workers, younger newcomers to the city, and empty nesters, and recognised the importance of existing communities bordering the city centre. It also highlighted the opportunity for student housing development, recognising the importance of students and with a need for a balanced approach to student housing development. Opportunities for market and private rented sector housing were noted, including identification of key residential sites, marketing of publicly owned sites and if necessary, preparation of financial models to underpin and support funding applications. It highlighted that city centre living is not a case of ‘build it and they will come’ and that a compelling attractive and secure environment is essential. Improvements to open space, public realm, food and entertainment offerings, connectivity and ‘buzz’ are as important as ensuring availability of appropriate sites.

The 2021 Census indicates a city centre residential population of 13,654 which has increased to an estimated 14,793 people live in the city centre today (2022 Mid-Year Estimates). By early 2024, 5,223 student beds had been completed (with more than 1000 beds under construction), with a recognition that students represent an important source of city centre housing demand not only whilst studying but after they graduate and commence their careers. BCCRIS had set a target of at least 6,000 new homes by 2030, however by 2024 there has been limited development, with less than 500 new homes completed. Although c1,000 are currently under construction and a number of recent planning approvals granted across various tenures including Build To Rent and social which suggests a degree of progress. However, there are a number of residential units in the city centre that have received planning approval, but development has not progressed. City centre living has emerged as one of the most important priorities going forward. Viability issues and lack of specific regeneration and housing funding to unlock housing development comparative to other UK cities have been identified as significant barriers. Council’s approach to securing a Private Sector Partner to deliver a significant programme of

Housing Led Regeneration on city centre lands was noted as a positive step.

However, a key theme from the stocktake is a need to address funding, viability and water infrastructure issues to help unlock the delivery of city centre living. Members will also recall recent reports brought to Committee on a Place Based Growth Proposition for the city which provides insight into the economic growth potential for the city on foot of increased regeneration and housing development. The proposition also highlights the significant gap in specific regeneration and housing related funding streams in Northern Ireland / Belfast compared to other UK cities (e.g. High Street Fund, Brownfield Infrastructure Levy Fund etc) which arguably puts Belfast at a distinct disadvantage in terms of city competitiveness and the ability to drive forward city regeneration priorities such as increased city centre living.

4.5

- **Manage the Retail Offer:** BCCRIS noted the fundamental changes to retail across the UK, including online shopping and out of town retail. Reference was made to ensuring a viable future for the North East Quarter (North St /Royal Ave area), as well as the opportunity to re-brand the centre as a retail and leisure destination and develop policies to support speciality and artisanal shopping. The stocktake noted that vacancy rates have decreased over the past few years (eg decrease from 23% in 2022 to 21% in 2024), although still above the UK average, it is recognised that a significant proportion of this is due to vacancy in stalled regeneration schemes. Unlocking stalled regeneration schemes and particularly the Tribeca site, given its scale and location in the heart of the city core and with significant dereliction and vacancy in this area, was noted as a key priority in the stocktake.

BCCRIS had highlighted that given Belfast's regional role there was the potential to attract a greater number of multinational retailers, as well as the benefit of increasing the number of independent retailers to create a point in difference. The stocktake shows that 57% of the city centre retailers are independent versus 43% in 2015. There is also evidence of confidence in Belfast from multinational brands, with a number of recent new to market entrants and first to island brands. Over the time period other major retailers have also expanded or located flagship

stores. BCCRIS had identified opportunities for schemes that encouraged start-ups and attracting new businesses to the city centre. To date, Council's £1m Vacant to Vibrant Pilot Capital Grant Scheme has incentivised a large number of property owners and occupiers to bring vacant space back into use for independents and SME's, supporting the city centre's revitalisation, including reuse of heritage buildings. The stocktake has shown however that retail, in line with other UK cities, remains challenging and stakeholder feedback also highlights that 'place keeping', cleansing, social and environmental issues are a priority in order to create a safe, welcoming and clean environment for customers, coupled also with events, animation and programming to attract people to come into the city. Having people living in the city centre will also be key to supply the retail sector.

4.6

- **Maximise the Tourism Opportunity:** BCCRIS had noted the positive trajectory of tourism indicators in 2015, but with great untapped potential remaining. It referenced the need for more hotel rooms as well as the opportunity for a new major tourist attraction; concerted tourism marketing to build on Belfast is unique brand; increasing events and working with local organisations to amplify the food, music and cultural events. The stocktake highlighted that the vision for tourism proposed in BCCRIS in 2015 has been exceeded, with a very positive progress in increasing hospitality, food & beverage and tourism facilities. By early 2024, 1,928 hotel rooms were completed (with over 300 rooms under construction and c 1,250 rooms with planning approval and others pending). It also noted the successful and ongoing promotion of Belfast as a tourism and cultural destination including increased business tourism; the completion of the extension at Belfast Waterfront/ICC; significant increase in cruise tourism and the wide ranging cultural and tourism events programme, the Cultural Strategy 'A City Imagining' as well as the ongoing Belfast 2024 programme of activities. In 2015, BCCRIS had highlighted potential for a significant new tourism destination within the city centre, and suggested use of heritage buildings on offer. The progress of Belfast Stories as one of the flagship City projects is noted in the stocktake as being catalytic for the city centre.

4.7

- **Create Regional Learning and Innovation Centres:** BCCRIS references the importance of the University of Ulster development and city centre linkages; increasing skills base and innovation as positive developments since 2015. The stocktake has found the Belfast Region City Deal has significantly advanced innovation and learning and noted there are now 40,000 students across two universities and further education campuses. One of the main game changers for city centre has been the Ulster University Campus relocation- £364m development which has delivered £1.4bn in regeneration impact.

4.8

- **Create a Green, Walkable, Cyclable Centre:** BCCRIS had noted the lack of green space; the need to rebalance the scales between tarmac and soft landscaping, the need for transformation of the inner ring road; developing a transformative vision for the river corridor, progressing cycle and bike rental and parking facilities and developing key bike routes. The stocktake has found that whilst some progress has been made, there are opportunities which have not. Positives include Belfast Bikes, Cathedral Gardens proposed redevelopment, various public realm improvements being progressed (Little York Street; 5C's; Blackstaff Square etc), pedestrianisation of Union Street, BRT Phase 1, City Quays Gardens, the Entries Programme etc are all positive signs. However, there was a strong desire to see significantly enhanced public realm, open space and cycling facilities. Delivery of priority schemes from the emerging Eastern Transport Plan (ETP) City Centre Chapter and alignment with A Bolder Vision are seen as critical going forward.

4.9

- **Connect to the City Around:** BCCRIS had highlighted how the hard boundaries of the river and the arterial roads contribute to lack of connectivity with surrounding neighbourhoods and the river. A range of enhanced connectivity measures and improvements were recommended. It was felt that commitment to what BCCRIS envisaged has come forward through A Bolder Vision. This is an ambitious blue print to explore a shared approach to creating a more attractive and connected city. This includes a collective commitment to a number of priority thematic areas and proposals where there is an opportunity to intervene to transform critical parts of

the city to create a green, people focused, connected city centre. Four key priorities were agreed, including a strong civic spine, reimagining the inner ring road, infrastructure to support city centre living and embracing the River Lagan. It is clear from the stocktake that whilst A Bolder Vision provides the blue print for this alongside the Eastern Transport Plan, there is the need now to see delivery on key schemes and interventions. On completion of the ETP for the city centre (envisaged early 2025) there is an opportunity to make this and the outworkings of A Bolder Vision a priority for the city centre will be subject to funding and resources.

4.10

- **Shared Space and Social Impact:** BCCRIS highlighted that the city centre needed to be a place for everyone, with design and management fostering that sense of space for everyone, focusing on what appeals and attracts all citizens. It recommended making public spaces friendly for all ages; informal leisure and sports uses; increased water activity on the river etc and ensuring social benefit is an integral element of city investments. There have been positives on this including for example use of 2 Royal Avenue as a civic and cultural space and opening up of the rear area into Bank Square; Cathedral Gardens pop up park and current redevelopment; incorporation of public space within designs for Belfast Stories; diversification of some retail space for leisure uses (e.g. Castlecourt); various place making schemes, parklets, pavement cafes etc as well as cultural and animation programming. There remains a need to continue to embed this within future development and activity.

4.11

- **Additional Levers for Change (Post BCCRIS 2015)**
 - **Belfast Region City Deal:** A £1 billion programme of co - investment across central and local government and regional partners.
 - **Local Development Plan:** In 2023 Belfast formally adopted the Local Development Plan Strategy, which will shape the physical future of the city. The Plan Strategy provides a statutory basis for the eight policy areas of the BCCRIS to be part of decisions made on development in the city. The LDP provides a 15-year planning framework, and following adoption of the Plan Strategy, work is now underway on the Local Policies Plan which will include the local policies,

allocations and site-specific proposals to deliver the vision and objectives as set out in the Plan Strategy.

- **Community Planning**: BCCRIS was developed in the context of council's new responsibility to produce a Community Plan for the city, the Belfast Agenda, which was launched in 2017 and underwent a statutory refresh in 2024 with delivery of focused action plans. The development of the city centre is a priority area in the Belfast Agenda.
- **A Bolder Vision**: An ambitious blueprint brought forward by BCC/DfI/DfC to help shape how spaces and places are used with a people focus. Priorities include a strong Civic Spine; Inner Ring Road; Waterfront and City Centre Living. Alignment with the emerging ETP is key.
- **Climate Change**: Belfast declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 with a Climate Commission and Carbon Roadmap in place in 2020, which includes a key focus on the built environment and transport and the need to decarbonise, upgrade and retrofit. Local Area Energy Plan was recently launched. Belfast Agenda has 'Our Planet' as a key priority including resilience and sustainability of built environment.

4.12 Emerging Areas of Focus from Stocktake for the next 5 – 10 years (within context of existing strategy):

- Increasing city centre living and addressing viability, funding, policy and water infrastructure issues, noting the economic and social benefits which come from having a bustling lived in city centre. This is also in the context of the recent Place Based Growth Proposition report that was brought to Committee highlighting the growth potential of the city but noting the lack of specific regeneration funding (including for city centre living) comparative to other UK cities to help unlock this.
- Unlocking major regeneration opportunities and particularly the Tribeca site; given its scale and location in the heart of the city core and with significant dereliction and vacancy in this area.
- Delivery of A Bolder Vision priority projects including public realm development, open space, capital infrastructure (inc major junctions) proposals and inclusive placemaking, recognising that the Eastern Transport Plan Belfast City Centre Chapter provides an opportunity to give focus and direction to this. This also includes removing severance and barriers to movement between the centre of Belfast and the surrounding communities, the waterfront and Titanic Quarter.

- Continuing the transformation of the Waterfront area through the vision of the Belfast Waterfront Promenade Framework and ensuring communities are fully engaged.
- Support to existing retailers and businesses, as well as attracting new businesses and retailers, SME's and social enterprises.
- Belfast Region City Deal and the delivery of transformative, catalytic projects including Belfast Stories and BRT 2.
- Consideration on the future use of secondary vacant office space
- A multi-agency approach required in the management and 'place keeping' of the city centre to ensure it is clean, safe, compassionate and inclusive.
- The importance of climate considerations in the development of the built environment including the protection and preservation of our built heritage
- Ensuring the city centre is vibrant, unique and thriving through animation, shared space and diversification of uses– capitalising on Belfast's distinct draw which will support hospitality, retail, SMEs, social enterprises, tourism and night-time economy. A specific focus on Night-Time Economy and the opportunities and challenges, including transport.
- The importance of developing family friendly, shared and safe spaces with diversification of uses to attract a range of users.

4.13 Key Levers & Ways of Working:

- On the basis that BCCRIS is a collective vision for the city centre and its surrounding areas, as relevant in 2015 as it is today, there is a need for continued partnership working, across public, private and third sectors to properly leverage the ambition and further potential of the city centre for the benefit of the city as a whole and the wider region.
- A collective approach to the recommendations set out in the Place Based Growth Proposition that seek to help address the institutional, physical and market issues that contribute towards barriers to future inclusive growth and development. To include Belfast seeking parity with the core cities in other policy areas including capacity (revenue) funding, place based financial incentives and specific regeneration funding.
- Increased collaborative ways of working, and importantly models which ensure the people of Belfast are part of this process. It is estimated that to

deliver on the inclusive growth ambitions of the Belfast Agenda, with the city centre identified as a priority, it is likely to require investment of c£7.5bn, which will require private sector funding alongside public / third sector and collaborative working being critical.

- Prioritisation across public sectors, working alongside private / third sector of catalytic regeneration and infrastructure projects that will deliver optimal outcomes for the city.
- The need to look at funding models to deliver on key priorities and help address viability, infrastructure and placemaking challenges.
- Importance of inclusion of city centre communities (inc those that bound the city centre) in regeneration activities and ensuring that the social impact from development of the built environment is maximised.
- Recognising that the development and management of the built environment and transportation and infrastructure development should be people focused.

4.14 Proposed Launch Event – BCCRIS Summit

It is proposed to hold an event to consider the stocktake findings i.e. a BCCRIS Summit on 25 November, in Belfast City Hall. It is proposed that the event will bring together representatives from the public, private and third sectors to celebrate the key BCCRIS achievements delivered over the past decade whilst providing an opportunity to consider the challenges and opportunities going forward. It will provide an opportunity to discuss collective areas of focus and priorities to support the continued inclusive growth and regeneration of the city core and its surrounding areas to 2030. Proposed participants include political representation; original author of BCCRIS Joe Berridge, together with public sector, business and community representation.

4.15 Moving Forward:

As noted above this stocktake is not a re-write of the existing strategy for the city centre and the emerging areas of focus are based on the current strategy and the feedback from the stocktake. Deliverability will require a continued collaborative approach across public, private and third-party sectors. From a Council perspective, many of these emerging areas of focus are incorporated within the Belfast Agenda Action Plans, the Corporate Plan, CG&R Committee Plan, A Bolder Vision and with a further policy context via the

LDP and emerging Local Policies Plan for the city centre. Members will also recall the recent report brought to committee on a Place Based Growth Proposition for Belfast which highlighted the potential for significant enhanced economic growth of the city but with a disparity of funding and powers currently comparative to other city regions. A further report will be brought back to Members on proposed next steps for the Place Based Growth Proposition.

- 4.16 Members are asked to provide any further comments on the emerging findings of the stocktake and which can be reflected in the final stocktake report. Following the proposed BCCRIS summit and finalisation of the stocktake report, further updates will be brought back to Committee as appropriate.

5.0 Financial and Resource Implications

Met within existing and approved budget.

6.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/
Rural Needs Assessment

There are no Equality, Good Relations or Rural Needs implications associated with this report.”

During discussion, the Committee provided feedback for inclusion within the 10-year stocktake, as set out hereunder:

- A range of Members acknowledged that the stocktake had been a positive exercise and that many policy areas had exceeded original targets which had been set in 2015 for offices, hospitality and hotels, student accommodation and major developments, including the Ulster University and Grand Central Station. It was noted that a focus on addressing the number of homes delivered in the city centre needed to be addressed. In addition, it was noted that issues of viability needed to be considered to meet the ambition and scale of the strategy. As such, Housing-Led Regeneration needed to be progressed at scale and more levers were required at a local and regional level to incentivise residential development and to overcome a viability gap.
- The Committee noted that Sustainable and Active Travel needed to be prioritised and noted further that the Eastern Transport Plan for the city centre chapter was almost complete. Projects needed to come forward rapidly, underpinned by quality public realm and place-making interventions; funding and delivery mechanisms would be critical. It was noted also that powers, such as the Dilapidations Legislation, should be used to address dereliction and dangerous buildings and to preserve built heritage and there should be a degree of consideration of rates reform in relation to vacant properties.

- Several Members suggested that there should be a greater degree of pace and flexibility in development delivery and that a review of Local Authority Statutory Powers should be undertaken to address the devolution of regeneration to enable more efficient and effective decision-making and delivery. In addition, it was noted that consideration needed to be given to the impacts of large development sites within local residential areas. Several Members emphasised the importance which local communities would play in terms of inputting into the future of the city centre and the importance which the River Lagan would play in future regeneration.
- The Committee noted the details in respect of the summit event to be held to launch the stocktake findings, which would be led by Council and would include input from across the political, public, private and community sectors. The event would highlight key areas of focus for the city with key asks to support continued growth.

The Committee welcomed the forthcoming launch event of the stocktake findings at the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) summit on 25th November.

After further discussion, the Committee agreed:

- to note the emerging findings from the Belfast City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy (BCCRIS) 10-year stocktake, within the context of the existing strategy;
- the details regarding the proposed BCCRIS which would launch the key messaging; and
- to note that the comments from the Committee would be considered for inclusion in the final report.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

Major Events Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the Christmas Programme and the bid for the Fleadh Cheoil.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 Committee is asked to:

- **Note the contents of this report.**

- Approve attendance of the Lord Mayor and senior officials at the 2025 US Comhaltas Convention and the early release of budget to Ards CCE to allow early booking of flights and accommodation.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Christmas Programme Update:

Background:

The Christmas Lights Switch On event will take place on Saturday November 16th and will be a free of charge ticketed event. With the stage providing family-oriented entertainment including local musicians and performers culminating in the switch on of the lights by our Lord Mayor.

As in recent years, 2RA will provide a programme of Christmas - themed activities across the six weeks of Christmas to supplement the Switch On and provide a focus throughout the festive period.

Members will be aware that a report to committee in June 2023 recommended several adjustments to the Christmas light switch on to mitigate identified health and safety risks - these included:

- Event build in the early hours involving staggered road and lane closures.
- The careful co-ordination of deliveries of equipment and stock of the Christmas market to facilitate an appropriate cut off to allow for the build of the stage and rig.
- The stage and all associated equipment and infrastructure should remain in situ following the event to allow roads to reopen immediately after the event. This will allow of a de-rig to take place on Sunday morning during a less busy period.

Members should be aware that the mitigation outlined above has increased some costs related to both equipment rental and security. Any expenditure will be found from existing corporate budgets.

Planning is very well advanced, with temporary road closure applications submitted in August and many performers contracted.

Proposed Event Programme 2024:

The wider event schedule will consist of a range of elements including:

- The Official Switch - On event
- 2 Royal Avenue
- Christmas Market
- Festive Lighting Scheme
- Marketing and Communications Activity

Belfast's Christmas celebrations will officially begin on Saturday 16th November with the Switch- On. This event will take place from approximately 6:30pm to 7:30pm. The stage programme will consist of:

- Walkabout performers entertaining the audience at each three entrances, Donegall Place & Donegall Square East & West.
- Proposed stage programme: a variety of short acts celebrating the best of Belfast performers both professional companies and community organisations, all supported by Council. This will include:
 - Compered by a media partner with 'switch-on' of the lights by the Lord Mayor.
 - Young musician to open the event (bagpipes)
 - A local singer with live band, sourced from the Oh Yeah Music Centre, a Lord Mayor's Charity.
 - Musical excerpt from Christmas Performance.
 - A Christmas Theatre excerpt
 - A special Circus performance
 - Rock Choir – carols and uplifting rock songs.
 - A primary school choir.

2 Royal Avenue Programme:

Following the success over the last two years, there will be an allocation of the Christmas programming budget allocated to the 'Winter's Den' activity in 2 Royal Avenue, beginning on Saturday 16th November and running throughout the Christmas period. The programme will be delivered by the operators of the venue- MayWe Events.

The 2RA Christmas programme will also include a variety of sustainable festive workshops, festive Christmas carolling and musical sing – a longs, Jazz afternoons for seniors, family theatre and performances, celebrations from around the world including art, storytelling and dance, baby sensory

sessions, autism and disability friendly events such as sensory workshops, activities and storytelling.

Additionally, the programme launch will support the Christmas Light Switch -On at City Hall on Saturday 16th November by offering a sensory space for families with a dedicated sensory area, sensory decoration making workshop, a relaxed silent disco and walk about characters. An 'alternative tree lighting' ceremony will also take place in the venue for those unable to manage the crowds at City Hall.

This event programme will be supported by external events including, Santa's Post Office, Christmas tea dances, choir performances, a festive Ceilidh, traditional performances and markets including the Potters market and Twilight markets.

MayWe will also work with the Lord Mayor's chosen charities where appropriate.

The Maywe budget allocation also includes all staffing, branding and decoration, technical support and late - nights openings.

Christmas Market:

The Christmas Market will run this year from Saturday 16th November to Sunday 22 December. Market Place Europe Limited (MPEL) currently hold the Continental Markets contract and this year will be celebrating 20 years of the Belfast Christmas Market and hope to have some Dickensian themed weekends and additional activities.

There will be over 100 stalls and the new contract also sets out the requirement for 40% local traders and 60% continental traders. There will be a Santa's Grotto supporting the Lord Mayors Charity and a return of free school educational tours. MPEL also ran the 'Jolly Big Business Boost' offering a free chalet to a young business. When the Continental Market trades at the front of the city hall the footfall increases into St Georges Market and throughout the city Centre. The Christmas Market and the local Christmas offer in St George's trade side by side very successfully. MPEL has offered a free pitch to St Georges Market traders this year and in previous years to further enhance trade for the local traders.

Marketing and Communications Activity:

Council will operate a digital campaign with pulse screens and online advertising to promote the fact that there is an event taking place on 16th November, as well as weekend

entertainment thereafter and seasonal activities in 2 Royal Avenue. Council will be directing people to www.belfastcity.gov.uk/christmas URL, where the switch on event information will be displayed prominently on the page. As information is finalised on the event schedule, online messaging will be strengthened.

Promotion will take place across digital platforms and via key partners including BID One and Visit Belfast. City Matters went to print before event details were confirmed, but a generic update was provided to highlight the Switch On date and 2 Royal Avenue in addition to be circulated to just under 160k homes in early November. A press release will also be issued to promote the ticket release and the confirmed details of the event schedule.

2024 Approach to Ticketing:

As with 2023, our approach to ticketing involves a number of strands, for which we have engaged Visit Belfast due to their service offering. The site capacity is for 10,000 in a comfortable manner. Therefore, the ticket allocation will be slightly above this figure to allow for a percentage of 'no shows'- normal industry practice even for paid for events. There will be a staggered release (both a morning and evening release) as per 2023, to accommodate working parents.

There will be a further allocation of tickets held back for those with no access to computers, tablets and smart phones, to call in to collect tickets. Each year, there is an accessible platform erected, with spaces booked by telephoning Visit Belfast. Tickets will be capped to 5 per booking. Furthermore, Visit Belfast will provide visitor servicing and support staff on the evening of the event to assist with ticket queries and the scanner technology used to expediate entrancing on to the site.

Christmas Lighting Scheme:

2024 will be year 5th and final year of the existing Christmas Lighting Scheme which will begin on the 16th of November and run until the 2nd January.

The installation, storage and maintenance of our festive lighting scheme is managed through a third party that was appointed via a public procurement process. This contract is currently in its final year and due for renewal from 2025

onwards, The supplier has seen significant cost increases relating to insurance, energy costs and labour costs.

The budget for the Christmas Festive Lighting Scheme was unchanged in the previous 4 years and has historically been supported through additional non- recurrent budgets. Whilst there has been an uplift allocated to lighting for 2024, this has covered increasing costs outlined above, repairs to previously damaged sites, a small number of new additional sites and the offset of previous non recurrent funding.

The provision of festive lights covers the city centre with a combination of cross - street and pole mounted features. New sites included in the scheme this year are;

Church Lane, Anne Steet and 2 Royal Avenue. Officers are currently conducting final site visits at the Belfast Stories site, Berry Street and Lower Garfield Steet to provide additional lighting on the Royal Avenue area.

Officers are also investigating alternatives for Arthur Street and Anne Street due to ongoing building works. Officers are currently developing the new tender terms to be progressed for provision from 2025 onwards.

Lighting on Arterial Routes:

Council previously received funding from DfC revitalisation funding which allowed Officers to distribute monies via a funding programme to business clusters on arterial routes for them to produce some Christmas related activity. Given reduced levels of budget within Executive Department budgets funding has not been provided for any additional activity on arterial routes. It should be noted that there would also be significant cost and the lead time required to secure the wayleave agreements and install the mounting infrastructure.

Existing Funding Mechanisms:

Members should note there is a pre-existing mechanism for groups to secure funding to programme activity during the festive period. The 'Community Festivals Fund' is administered via Culture and the Central Grants Unit. This funding scheme is accessible by community groups but not council. Those groups can apply for funding between £2,500 - £10,000, and this is for arts and heritage activities and/or other cultural events that contribute to the cultural identity of an area or group and celebrates the uniqueness of that area or group.

The fund is currently supporting the following Christmas activities:

- Féile An Phobail - Féile na Nollaig 2024
- Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich - Fleadh Feirste 2024 – Christmas festival
- Shankill Winter Festival

Other 'Winter Festival' activities include would be:

- Forward South Partnership - Holyland Winter Festival
- EastSide Partnership - CS Lewis Winter Fest 2024 Belfast
- 'Bring a Little Light lantern festival' from Wandsworth Community Centre.

The current scheme is closed. Any festival must take place between November and March. Council receives applications from a range of community groups and arts organisations.

Shared Prosperity Fund:

At the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on the 20th September, Members agreed to include opportunities for additional animation, lighting enhancements and marketing in a bid for Shared Prosperity Funding. Officers are speaking with BIDS on the potential for provision of additional lighting / dressing in the city centre to address areas where lighting is poor, this work will be ongoing to ensure appropriate provision of wayleaves and eyebolts. Additional marketing and promotion could also be commissioned but all of the above would be subject to receipt of a letter of offer in relation to Shared Prosperity Funding.

3.2 Update on Bid for Fleadh Cheoil

Bid Submission

Council in partnership with Ards CCE continues to bid for the 2026 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. Our latest revision of the Bid Book has been delivered to Comhaltas HQ to meet the 30th August deadline for the 2026 iteration of the event, with an announcement expected during early March 2025.

Ongoing Engagement

Lord Mayor, Chief Executive and Senior BCC Officials attended the recent Fleadh Cheoil in Wexford from 7th to 9th August 2025 to participate in a series of engagement, networking and lobbying events with Members of Ards CCE, raising the profile of the Belfast bid.

Additionally, the Events Team attended an operational Familiarisation Day visit with internal and external colleagues on Friday 9th August to further consolidate operational learnings within a new ground footprint context in Wexford – this included observing Campsites, Visitor Servicing, Security, Ancillary and Volunteer provision. The Events Team have previously attended the two consecutive years of the event in Mullingar to scope operational requirements and have met with Sligo representatives, a previous host of Fleadh Cheoil.

Learnings have been considerable and this will further be consolidated by a follow up session with Members of the Wexford FEC scheduled for Friday 4th October. It is anticipated that this operational familiarisation will be further developed for next year, with invitations extended out and a closer shadowing role likely with members of the Wexford FEC.

Moving forward, it is anticipated that members of the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann will visit Belfast in the coming weeks, ahead of the final decision of the host city for 2025. The itinerary will be in-line with previous visits by the Ard-Chomhairle to Belfast.

Draft Governance

A draft governance structure in line the official fleadh guidance manual is being developed. Operational learnings from Sligo, Mullingar and Wexford have also helped to inform this governance model. This model will no doubt be altered over time to suit the needs of the organising team. However, the Terms of Reference have taken into consideration the plans outlined in our bid book and recognise the various considerations laid out in the manual. Similarly, attention is being given to the lessons learned from Fleadh visits and Executive feedback.

A dedicated Project Plan document has been developed by the Events Team and is now in place to commence 'Task and Finish' work on specific aspects of operational planning with both internal and external stakeholders.

Resource

Roll out of the governance structure, the 'standing up' of the working groups and implementation of the Project Plan is now very much dependent on Fleadh dedicated resource coming into post in the coming months. Work is currently being expedited to secure additional staff resource asap and a report will be presented on short-term staff requirements to SP&R later this month.

Ards CCE

Officer engagement with Ards CCE is ongoing - Officers are meeting with the branch regularly on attendance required at the various conventions across Ireland, the UK and the United States as part of ongoing lobbying and engagement. Ards CCE have also been working with the Events Team to map potential venues and programming content for Belfast Fleadh Cheoil.

On Tuesday 3rd September, the Lord Mayor hosted Ards CCE in the Lord Mayor's Parlour to celebrate their recent success of 4 All Ireland medals at the recent Fleadh Cheoil in Wexford.

Lord Mayor and Chief Executive will attend the Annual Comhaltas Christmas Dinner in Dublin and the GB convention in February as a final lobbying opportunity ahead of bid announcement.

The US Comhaltas Convention 2025 is to be held at the beginning of April 2025 inclusive. This is an important date in the Comhaltas calendar in terms of US votes and connecting with diaspora markets which will play a key role in securing visitors to Belfast for future event iterations. Under the conditions of the current in-year Funding Agreement with Ards CCE, the branch are responsible for making their own travel and accommodation arrangements. This includes for the US Convention at the beginning of April 2025.

To facilitate the early booking of flights and accommodation and ensure value for money, approval is sought to part release some of next years Ards CCE annual funding agreement early and within the financial year 2024 / 2025 (circa 25K). This is subject to drawn down and satisfactory verification of the current year Funding Agreement before

release of any additional monies. As per the last two years, it is proposed that Ards CCE will attend with Lord Mayor, Chief Executive and a senior Council Official.

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

4.1 The cost of delivering the programme is £300k for Christmas Lights and £153k for event delivery, This will be funded from existing budgets. As noted, subject to a timely letter of offer there is the potential for supplementing this with Shared Prosperity Funding.

4.2 Attendance at US Comhaltas Convention 2025 by Ards CCE will be forward funded from part release of next years Ards CCE annual funding agreement.

5.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

There are no Equality, Good Relations nor Rural Needs Implications associated with this paper.”

During discussion, several Members suggested that consideration be given to increasing financial support for financing Christmas lighting in future years, together with the provision of addition lighting on arterial routes as a means to support communities through the Shared Prosperity Fund. In response, the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, advised that the suggestion could be investigated together with purchasing stock options. She highlighted that various options would also be considered as part of any new tender.

In response to a Member’s request for information on the ‘One Million Trees Initiative’, which included the potential for an evergreen tree to be planted in neighbourhood locations and used at Christmas time, the Senior Manager advised that an update would be provided in due course.

In relation to Christmas activity programming at 2RA (2 Royal Avenue), a Member suggested that it be considered within the context of any future use of the ground floor.

In response to a Member’s request for an update on the forthcoming Oireachtas na Samhna 2025, the Senior Manager indicated that the site visits by officers with partners would be undertaken to this year’s event and that an update would be provided in due course.

After discussion, the Committee agreed to:

- note the contents of the report;
- approve the attendance of the Lord Mayor and senior officials at the 2025 US Comhaltas Convention and the early release of budget to Ards CCE to allow early booking of flights and accommodation; and

- note that officers would investigate funding options and support for Christmas lighting of arterial routes for future years and as part of the new tender.

International Relations – Future Approach

The Senior Manager, Economy, provided an update in relation to the Council's international relations approach. She reminded the Committee that, at its meeting in September, it had noted that a review would be undertaken of international opportunities and potential objectives and areas of interest aligned to city priorities and had agreed to receive a future report to consider how targeted international engagement activity could support and advance the Council's key ambitions.

The Senior Manger advised Members that, as a first step in this work, it had been agreed that officers would bring back a series of high-level considerations to shape the work and that, subject to agreement on the outline approach, a more detailed report setting out the framework would be brought back to a future meeting.

She stated that, in undertaking the initial review, officers had reflected on the previous International Relations Framework which had expired in 2021 and that the purpose set out in that framework remained broadly valid, namely: "*to ensure that Belfast is optimally positioned on the international stage to realise our ambitions, and that our resources and priorities are aligned with the overarching strategic vision for the city*". It had noted that the Council's approach should consider a wider international engagement approach at a regional level – as articulated through the Programme for Government, which was current subject to consultation.

The aforementioned Programme for Government comprised of three key missions, one of which was "*Prosperity*". One of the critical areas of action had been identified as "*building on our international relationships to advance our economic development and attract new investment opportunities*". It was understood that a new International Relations Strategy for Northern Ireland was currently being developed and would be presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly, which would reflect the approach set out above – and identify the opportunity to leverage the Executive's networks and resources to support the Council's international engagement work.

She highlighted that the previous International Framework had identified a number of priority areas of focus. These were broadly termed: Promoting trade and investment; and Attracting visitors and students.

She advised that these areas of focus should remain a priority in any new approach, however, taking account of changes in the operating environment since the original framework, the view on how this work may evolve included:

- **Promoting trade and investment:** likely to remain a top priority but balance of effort to move towards supporting local businesses to explore international markets rather than FDI (although the Council should continue to support Invest NI in this work). Another significant change since the last framework was our strong capital investment proposition and – in particular – the need to identify and access

international financing and profiling opportunities to bring forward critical development schemes;

- **Attracting visitors and students:** Tourism numbers had rallied significantly over the last year and were now back near pre-Covid numbers. The sector remained a key employer in the city and planned investments such as Belfast Stories and key international event opportunities such as Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann would increase the number of out-of-state visitors. The Council would need to work closely with Tourism Ireland through its international office network to tailor messaging and maximise coverage, in line with wider campaigns. Given the recent investment in culture through interventions such as Belfast 2024, it was likely that the cultural dimension of the tourism messaging would be profiled more significantly in the future. Increased investment in local tourism product should ensure a more authentic and unique local offer and would provide the opportunity for learning from international city partners and developing cultural relationships;
- **Supporting our universities and colleges to attract international students** was likely to remain an important part of the work given the significant ambitions in this field. Another aspect of this support to universities and colleges that had grown in recent years, was making connections and introductions for our Academic Institutions with respect to teacher/staff exchange and joint research partnerships; and
- **Supporting the work of Invest NI “attracting in” talent** to address some of the skills gaps in our growth sectors – potentially utilising the international students as part of our talent pool. This would obviously need to consider visa regulations and stipulations at the time and would complement rather than replace existing proposals to help Belfast residents into new or better jobs.

Other areas of engagement might include:

- **Innovation City and Smart Belfast:** with the appointment of a new Innovation Commissioner and the re-establishment of the Innovation City Belfast Board, there was likely to be an increased focus on promoting the city globally as a beacon for innovation– with a particular focus on inclusive innovation. The vision for ICB was that “Belfast was a place where global excellence in innovation supports inclusive economic growth, delivers more and better jobs, and had a sustainable positive impact on our city, its citizens and the wider region”. International partnerships, collaboration and profiling opportunities would be critical to ensure that this vision was realised;
- **Resilience/net zero:** since the launch of the Resilience Strategy in December 2020, the work to transition Belfast to an inclusive, zero-emissions, climate-resilient economy within a generation had stepped

up significantly. In this field, global networks were critical for learning and sharing of good practice and the regulatory frameworks often derived from international agreements. There were emerging opportunities for profiling investment opportunities from external markets for the pipeline for priority projects identified through interventions such as the Belfast Local Area Energy Plan; and

- **Supporting sustainable and inclusive growth:** this had been identified as a priority area of work within the Belfast Agenda. It was likely to be an underpinning pillar of engagement activities – and would drive workplans to ensure that sufficient consideration was given to this narrative when exploring investment opportunities.

In addition to matters which the Council should focus on, officers had also considered how this should work. Initial thinking on this included:

- While recognising the need for some flexibility as part of an overall framework, the Council needed to take a strategic approach to opportunity, building on the strengths of our existing city to city relationships. It was reported that the Council had a Sister City status with Nashville, Boston in the USA, and Shenyang in China, as well as the recently secured Memorandum of Understanding with Sejong in South Korea;
- Consider that this approach could be delivered through a multi-annual plan (aligned to the Belfast Agenda timelines) but with an annual action plan and review to take account of learning and new emerging opportunities;
- Need to focus on areas where the Council could add value: this might mean leveraging partner resources to maximise impact and/or taking the decision not to progress with some proposals or areas of work;
- Need to create an overall framework that was fully aligned to and supportive of ambitions and commitments set out in the Belfast Agenda – principally the “Our Economy” and “Our Place” themes – but might also be opportunities under “Our Planet”;
- Need to establish a mechanism for objectively assessing emerging opportunities in order to prioritise resources and focus effort – the Council would not be able to do everything and there were activities that would not advance the city ambitions so the Council should be clear in its analysis of these;
- Need to build on existing linkages – going stronger and deeper rather than spreading resources too thin;
- Need to work through strategic partners – making use of existing resources, and networks rather than duplicating effort;

- Reciprocity – value of focusing collaboration on willing and engaged partners;
- Need to consider appropriate metrics to assess impact of interventions and engagement, recognising that it could be difficult to directly attribute outputs and outcomes to single interventions and that the international engagement activity should be considered as a value-added element of an overall strategy;
- Need to ensure value for money – in line with all service delivery; and
- Need to keep the approach under review in line with the changing global context and changes in personnel/political mandate/policy within the market.

The Senior Manager advised that, following consideration of feedback from Members, officers planned to undertake a mapping exercise of existing linkages across the Council alongside a series of engagements with external partners to understand the current levels and nature of activity as well as building an understanding of resource commitments and future plans.

This initial review work would be critical in helping the Council to avoid duplication as well as maximise opportunities for synergy with external partners. It would also help consider internal resource allocations as part of the budget setting process. It was proposed that a more detailed framework would be brought back to the Committee in February/March 2025 in order to work towards an agreed approach for the new financial year onwards.

During discussion, the Committee provided the following feedback, that:

- engagement with Invest NI in relation to inward investment and regional balance on investment, for North and West Belfast in particular;
- work with universities and European partners on issues such as Climate and Resilience/Life Sciences, including engaging in activities such as Cities and Regions Week;
- explore opportunities for engagement by Members in the EU Stakeholder / US Stakeholder meetings;
- explore opportunities to build on connections to promote Arts and Culture and grass roots organisations;
- work with other stakeholders to develop and showcase tourism; and

- net zero and international best practice - learn from other organisations to ensure maximum benefit to Belfast.

A Member requested that the Committee agree to write to the Executive Office to request an indicative timescale for the introduction of the International Relations Strategy for Northern Ireland.

After discussion, the Committee:

- noted the planned review of international opportunities and potential objectives and areas of interest aligned to city priorities;
- agreed to receive a future report to consider how targeted international engagement activity can support and advance our key ambitions;
- noted that the feedback from the Committee would be considered under the review of the Council's international engagement activity; and
- agreed to write to the Executive Office to request an indicative timescale for the International Relations Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Growing Business and the Economy

Site Visit – Request from Belfast Chamber

The Committee considered a request from Belfast Chamber for a walk around the city centre followed by a brief meeting.

The Committee agreed that the request from Belfast Chamber be referred to the All-Party Working Group on the City Centre for consideration.

Strategic and Operational Issues

Request for Approval for 'Crafted with Pride' Markets

The Committee considered a request from organisers of two 'Crafted with Pride' proposed markets to take place in 2 Royal Avenue.

The Committee approved the issuing of a market license for Belfast Pride to hold markets on 8th December, 2024 and 20th July, 2025.

Special Committee Meeting Presentations

The Committee considered a request from the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC) to present at a future special Committee meeting. The Committee also considered the schedule for presentations at the forthcoming Special Committee meetings.

The Committee:

- Agreed that the MAC would present at a future special Committee meeting;
- Noted the schedule of presentations for October and November; and
- Noted that any questions/issues for representatives of Translink/the Department for Infrastructure (Roads) be forwarded to Democratic Services for compilation, in advance of the presentations.

Chairperson