

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 5th February, 2025

HYBRID MEETING OF THE CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Nelson (Chairperson);
The Deputy Lord Mayor, Councillor McCormick;
The High Sheriff, Councillor McAteer;
Alderman Lawlor; and
Councillors Black, de Faoite, D. Douglas, Duffy,
Hanvey, Kelly, Lyons, Maskey, McCabe,
McDonough-Brown, McDowell, McKay,
I. McLaughlin, R. McLaughlin, O'Neill and Smyth.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mrs. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration
and Development;
Mr. S. Dolan, Senior Development Manager;
Ms. L. O'Donnell, Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism;
Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy;
Mr. F. Grant, Assets Development Manager; and
Mr. C. Mealey, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

No apologies were reported.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 15th and 29th January were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 3rd February.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor R. McLaughlin declared an interest in item 3(a) Request to Present – Belfast Harbour Commissioners – Corporate Strategy 2025-2029, in that he was on the Board of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and left the meeting whilst the item was under consideration.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following seven 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.

Housing Led Regeneration Update

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Committee with an update on a number of strands within the Housing Led Regeneration programme of work, including phase 2 of the Strategic Site Assessments, potential delivery routes, cluster sites and placemaking plans, the Inner North West Development Brief and the appointment of a Private Sector Delivery Partner to work with the Council on the programme.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in respect of the Strategic Site Assessments Phase 2 – Citywide;
- ii. agreed that an initial tranche of 11 sites would be brought forward for consideration for housing led regeneration purposes;
- iii. noted that a report would be submitted to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 21st February, which would seek approval to progress further the programme of work, and that further updates would be brought back to the Committee as the work progressed;
- iv. noted that the detail in respect of the delivery route for individual sites would be subject to further consideration and Committee approval;
- v. noted the update in relation to the placemaking opportunities/plans through the work of the Housing Led Regeneration Group, and that further updates would be brought back to the Committee;
- vi. noted that the evaluation process had been completed for the Inner North West Development Brief and that a report, that included a recommendation to award a Preferred Housing Association Developer, would be submitted to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 21st February; and
- vii. noted the update in respect of the appointment of a Private Sector Partner to work in partnership with the Council and the next steps in respect of the finalisation of the Strategic Partnership Agreement and that further reports would be brought back to Committee in relation to governance and engagement.

Vacant to Vibrant Scheme

The Director of City Regeneration and Development provided the Committee with an update on the Vacant to Vibrant Programme which sought approval for a recommendation from the Vacant to Vibrant assessment panel following the recent receipt and assessment of applications.

The Committee:

- i. agreed the recommended grant award, as outlined within section 3.21 of the report; and
- ii. noted the update in relation to the Vacant to Vibrant Programme and that it would be supporting up to 41 businesses to locate or expand into long term vacant units.

Belfast Bikes Performance Update - Quarter 3

The Senior Manager, Economy, provided the Committee with an update on the performance of Belfast Bikes for Year 10, Quarter 3 (October to December 2024) of the financial year.

During discussion, the Senior Manager, Economy, and the Assets Development Manager answered a range of questions from the Members in relation to usage, docking stations and vandalism of the Belfast Bikes.

After discussion, the Committee noted the update on the Belfast Bikes performance for Quarter 3.

Belfast Zoo Performance Update - Quarter 3

The Senior Manager, Economy, provided the Committee with an update on the performance of Belfast Zoo for Quarter 3 (October to December 2024) of the financial year.

During discussion, the Senior Manager, Economy, and the Assets Development Manager answered a range of questions in relation to the financial performance, staffing and Avian Influenza.

After discussion, the Committee noted the update on Belfast Zoo's performance for Quarter 3.

Belfast Zoo Scale of Charges 2025/26

The Committee considered a report that provided an update on a proposed scale of charges for Belfast Zoo for 2025/26, and a proposed date of implementation.

The Committee considered a recommendation to include a new facilitation charge within the annual scale of charges.

The Committee:

- i. noted the price increases for existing categories of ticket types and products/services;
- ii. approved a new facilitation charge as outlined within section 3.5 of the report; and
- iii. agreed that all price increases would take effect from 1st April, 2025.

Neighbourhood Tourism Update

The Committee considered a report that provided an update on the development of the Neighbourhood Tourism Investment Programme which included recommendations for awards, findings and learnings.

The Committee was presented with several options to develop the programme further and Members highlighted the need to address North and South Belfast.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the updated findings of the Neighbourhood Tourism Investment Programme approach as contained within the report;
- ii. approved the recommended awards, as outlined within section 7.1 of the report and the associated next steps; and
- iii. agreed to proceed with further development of the Neighbourhood Tourism Programme as set out in Option 2, outlined within section 9.1 of the report.

Sandy Row Revitalisation Update

The Committee considered a report that provided an update on the ongoing work in respect of the Revitalisation Scheme for Sandy Row,

During discussion, a Member highlighted the need for engagement with all local representatives across the Botanic District Electoral Area. The Member also raised concerns in respect of consultation with local businesses, including ethnic minority owned businesses, and proposed that the issues raised be addressed through further engagement between the Council and local businesses.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted that the Department for Communities (DfC) was establishing a cross-departmental working group to bring forward collective actions to support businesses within the Sandy Row area;
- ii. noted and agreed the proposal for DfC to fund the Council to deliver a revitalisation scheme for the Sandy Row area;
- iii. agreed that the Council design and deliver a Small Business Grant Scheme Programme in line with the report, and in conjunction with additional business support delivered through the Go Succeed Programme and that, given the urgency in bringing the support package to the area, officers continued to design the Small Business Grant Scheme Programme in conjunction with local representatives and to open the scheme to businesses as soon as possible, with further details on the scheme to be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee; and
- iv. agreed to defer consideration in respect of a Member's proposal for further engagement with businesses, to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, so that legal advice could be provided on the matters raised.

Requests to Present

Request to Present - Belfast Harbour Commissioners – Corporate Strategy 2025-2029

The Committee considered a request from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners (BHC) to present its Corporate Strategy 2025-2029 at a future meeting of the Committee.

The Committee also considered an invitation from BHC to visit a cruise vessel while it was in port.

The Committee:

- i. agreed to receive a presentation from the BHC on its Corporate Strategy 2025-2029, at a future special meeting of the Committee; and
- ii. accepted an invitation from BHC to visit a cruise vessel while it was in port.

Request to Present - Department for Infrastructure - York Street Interchange: Placemaking and Active Travel Development

The Committee agreed to receive a presentation from the Department for Infrastructure in relation to the York Street Interchange at a future special meeting of the Committee.

**Request to Present - Visit Belfast –
Annual Business Plan 2025/26**

The Committee agreed to receive a presentation from Visit Belfast on its Annual Business Plan for 2025-26 at the Committee meeting on 12th March, 2025.

Regenerating Places and Improving Infrastructure

Active Travel Delivery Plan

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to highlight that the Active Travel Delivery Plan for NI is open for consultation until 28th February and to seek approval for the attached Council response to be submitted to the Department for Infrastructure. This paper also provides an update on the designs of the Island Street Active Travel and Traffic Calming Scheme that is being delivered as part of the Belfast Cycling Network and to seek approval for Council's response.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- i.** Note that the Department for Infrastructure is undertaking a public consultation on the NI Active Travel Delivery Plan and approve the draft consultation response provided in Appendix A of this report. The draft response will be submitted subject to Council ratification on the 3rd March 2025.
- ii.** Note the correspondence received from DfI as included within Appendix B1 of this report in relation to Island Street and the proposed designs for the scheme in Appendix B2.
- iii.** Agree the draft Council response to the designs for the Island Street Active Travel and Traffic Calming Scheme in Appendix B3 that is being delivered as part of the Belfast Cycling Network.

3.0 Background

The Department for Infrastructure has prepared a draft Active Travel Delivery Plan for Northern Ireland that will guide the delivery of active travel infrastructure for the next 10 years. A Consultation Event was held on the 13th November 2024 with provision for five BCC Members and Officers to attend, with the feedback incorporated within the draft response as attached in Appendix A of this report.

- 3.1 Since the Belfast Cycling Network (BCN) was already published in 2021, [Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan 2022 – 31 | Department for Infrastructure](#), and is currently being rolled out as per the phasing within the BCN Delivery Plan, the draft Active Travel Delivery Plan that is out for consultation does not include the Belfast area, but rather the surrounding council areas. Officers feel that a response is warranted given the cross-council boundary area connectivity needs, along with the potential implications for the Belfast Cycle Network.
- 3.2 As the Consultation closing date is the 28th February, a draft response has been prepared by officers for feedback and approval by this Committee. The draft response will be submitted subject to Council Ratification on the 3rd March. Members can also submit an individual or Party responses via Citizen Space on the DfI website until 28th February: [ACTIVE TRAVEL DELIVERY PLAN CONSULTATION - NI Direct - Citizen Space](#).
- 3.3 In line with delivery of the Belfast Cycling Network, DfI has shared the designs of the Island Street Active Travel and Traffic Calming Scheme for comment as has been done previously with other schemes. This notice has been shared on the Members' portal on receipt. This paper sets out the proposed Council response for agreement by this Committee and is found in Appendix B3.
- 4.0 **Main Report**
- 4.1 The draft Active Travel Delivery Plan for Northern Ireland sets out the health, environmental, economic and social benefits of active travel and reinforces the potential for modal change since over one third of journeys in NI are less than two miles long and two thirds are less than five miles long. This reinforces the possibility for increased active travel as an option for many people and the opportunity to embrace healthier alternatives and create the conditions for more vibrant places where streets feel safer and there is improved air quality and reduced congestion.
- 4.2 The Belfast Cycling Network (BCN) and the Strategic Plan for Greenways are already in place and the Active Travel Delivery Plan aims to add to these existing strategies by providing a plan for active travel infrastructure for the rest of NI. Specifically, it sets out how DfI will prioritise and deliver high-quality active travel infrastructure in the urban and rural settlements over the next ten years. Similar to the BCN, it aims to ensure that infrastructure is designed to be safe, accessible and interconnected, thus encouraging

people to build active travel into their travel choices. The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 is a key mechanism to support the delivery of the Active Travel Delivery Plan as well as the BCN and mandates the development of sectoral plans for transport which set a minimum spend of 10% on active travel from the overall transport budgets.

- 4.3 Given the importance of the provision of an Active Travel Network for Belfast, and for the wider region, along with the potential implications for the BCN contained within the Active Travel Delivery Plan it is important that Belfast City Council inputs into this consultation process. The draft consultation response is focused on a number of key points under the following headings that are summarised below, and the full response is in Appendix A.

- General comments
- Prioritisation: Connections to local schools, public transport and town centres
- Designing the Network
- Road space allocation and traffic management

4.4 General comments

In line with Belfast City Council's submission the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan, we continue to advocate for connected active travel infrastructure which encourages active travel as a means for commuting and leisure opportunities. We have an ongoing collaboration with DfI regarding the delivery of both the BCN and Strategic Plan for Greenways (Council response submitted to then Department for Regional Development in June 2016) and, as appropriate, we would like to see further engagement as the regional plan is rolled out. We would also like to stress that the delivery of the Active Travel Delivery Plan, in terms of budget and timing, cannot be to the detriment of the implementation of the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan (2022). Belfast City Council welcomes the progress to date on the short-term interventions of the BCN, however continue to stress the need to deliver high quality schemes quickly to address the level of underspend to date.

- 4.5 The Belfast Agenda (2024-2028) is the city's community plan and as part of the *Our Place* and *Our Planet* themes there is a priority focus on connectivity, active and sustainable travel and a strategic intent to support the production of sustainable forms of transport and low carbon innovation in transport solutions with collaborative action plans in place to help drive delivery. Central to this is the delivery of the

Eastern Transport Plan, the Local Development Plan and projects that support people to use sustainable travel and behavioural change projects that replace car journeys with active travel.

- 4.6 We note that this plan is NI-wide but want to reinforce the importance of connections across council areas, particularly concerning design, materials, routes and maintenance. The maintenance of the network is vital to ensure its continual usage and safety and the removal of debris, blockages and treatment during winter to support the free flow of use, especially on cycle routes.

4.7 Prioritisation: Connections to local schools, public transport and town centres

Council supports active travel connections to local schools, public transport and town centres and would highlight that the routes may need to vary in terms of potential users and the mix of travel modes. A mixed network of routes that offers choices for walking, wheeling, and cycling would cater to various abilities and provide options for commuting as well as leisure and recreation. We encourage consideration of interventions designed to prioritise the most vulnerable road users.

- 4.8 Regarding proposals for routes in our neighbouring councils (Antrim and Newtownabbey; Ards and North Down; and Lisburn and Castlereagh) the majority of routes connecting into Belfast are identified as *Future routes (10+ Years)*. Whilst we appreciate the need for prioritisation, connectivity across Council boundaries is vital to ensure seamless journeys and we would like to see the Department give more weight to those routes which would connect into the established Belfast active travel network, especially considering the significant potential user base that already exists in the populous Belfast Metropolitan Area.

4.9 Designing the Network

We support a people-centred design approach that is welcoming, accessible, inclusive and safe. Active travel routes have a role in place making; they are not only transport corridors but also focal points for communities that can stimulate social interaction and encourage investment. We welcome the commitment to high quality infrastructure that is appropriate to the situation and encourage the Department to ensure that the design includes climate resilience, incorporating green and blue infrastructure as possible that can absorb carbon emissions and offer biodiversity and habitat creation.

- 4.10 We acknowledge that there is no one size fits all approach, but it would be helpful if the Department could issue guidance in terms of the design of cycle infrastructure and clarify the use of LTN 1/20 as best practice. We also request that design proposals be site-specific, carefully considering the unique needs of urban routes and proposing thoughtful interventions for recreational paths that protect and enhance the existing landscape character.

Road space allocation and traffic management

- 4.11 We agree that the key principles, welcoming and accessible, people centred design and high-quality infrastructure are critical elements in delivering rebalanced road space and traffic management and this position is reflected in the Local Development Plan, the Belfast Agenda and A Bolder Vision for Belfast. These principles should enable flexibility while fundamentally placing people at the centre, supporting improved confidence in engaging in active travel through safe, connected, inclusive and well-designed infrastructure. We feel it would be helpful for the Department to produce a menu of potential options or guidance to rebalance the street, supporting future placemaking and mobility projects.

Belfast Cycling Network: Island Street Active Travel and Traffic Calming Scheme

- 4.12 On 3 June 2021, the Minister for Infrastructure published '*Planning for the Future of Transport – Time for Change*'. This document articulates the Minister's vision that active travel becomes a pillar of change within towns and cities to cut emissions, to improve health and wellbeing, and to better connect families and communities. It commits to the adoption of the sustainable transport hierarchy where prioritisation is given to sustainable travel by providing for walking and wheeling, then cycling, then public transport ahead of private vehicle use.
- 4.13 In March 2017 Committee agreed the Council response to the draft Belfast Cycling Network consultation for submission of DfI. In June 2021 the DfI Minister published *Making Belfast an Active City – Belfast Cycling Network 2021* that set out her ambition to make Belfast a more cycle-friendly city and provides a blueprint for the development and operation of the cycling infrastructure in the city for the next ten years and is supported by the BCN Delivery Plan 2022-31. The CG&R Committee received an update from DfI on the delivery of the BCN as a part of their Autumn Statement at the November 2024 Special Meeting of this Committee, with a follow up DfI responses to Members queries presented to the January 2025 meeting of the CG&R Committee.

4.14 The Department is undertaking the legislative process for the installation of new cycling and traffic calming measures on Island Street, Belfast. This also includes sections of Ballymacarrett Road, Belfast and Dee Street, Belfast. The scheme is identified as Scheme No10 within the short-term Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan. This scheme will include the installation of the following measures as listed below and proposed layout is found in Appendix B2.

- New Two-Way Cycle Lane on Ballymacarrett Road & Island Street.
- New Shared Footway on Dee Street & Island Street.
- New Disabled Parking Places on Ballymacarrett Road.
- Relocation of Toucan Crossing on Dee Street.
- Prohibition of Waiting - At Any Time – ‘Loading / Unloading Not Permitted’ on Ballymacarrett Road & Island Street. (Northern Sides).
- Prohibition of Waiting - At Any Time – ‘Loading / Unloading Permitted’ on
- Ballymacarrett Road & Island Street. (Southern Sides).
- 1 x flat top road hump, 12.5m long, kerb to kerb width, 80mm high.
- 1 x flat top road hump, 31m long, kerb to kerb width, 80mm high.
- 6 x flat top road humps tapered, 4.1m long, kerb to kerb width, 80mm high.

4.15 Officers have prepared a draft response to the scheme that is in Appendix B3 and highlighted a number of aspects:

We note that the proposed cycling infrastructure and traffic calming improvements on Island Street, includes the segregation from vehicular traffic, which enhances safety and inclusivity and could encourage more people to cycle with confidence. This provides better connectivity along the National Cycle Route 99, linking the Connswater Greenway, Titanic Quarter and Belfast City Centre, while also strengthening connections to the Comber Greenway, aligning with the Belfast Agenda and its commitment to delivering enhanced cycle infrastructure across the city.

4.16 To ensure local support and future usage we would encourage the Department to ensure that there is communication and engagement about the scheme with

local residents and users starting from this design stage. We also suggest that engagement should include information on the delivery timeframe and nature of the proposed works and outline how these are being delivered in line with best practice guidance.

4.17 The Council's Tree Officer in Planning's Trees & Landscape team has provided detailed feedback including:

- The proposal should be designed in a manner will seeks to avoid creating future stress and strain upon existing trees which could impact on future health, condition, and structural integrity of existing trees.
- Proposed landscaping should be included within the proposal to achieve a net gain in future tree cover within the context of the surrounding area.
- It may be an option to redesign the proposed cycle path at certain pinch points away from mature tree cover to prevent long-term damage from arising.

5.0 Financial and Resource Implications

There are no finance or resource implications associated with this report.

**6.0 Equality or Good Relations Implications/
Rural Needs Assessment**

There are no Equality or Good Relation Implications/Rural Needs Assessment requirements associated with this report.

During discussion, several Members highlighted the need for the delivery of the Belfast Cycling Network, connectivity across all Council areas in respect of sustainable and active travel, and travel routes that were accessible, inclusive, and safe. A Member also highlighted issues regarding current transport planning and the impact on traffic congestion and air quality.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Hanvey,
Seconded by Councillor Smyth and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to invite the Department for Infrastructure to a future meeting of the Committee to present on the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan.

Arising from discussion, it was also:

Moved by Councillor Smyth,
Seconded by Councillor de Faoite and

Resolved – That the Council response to the Northern Ireland Active Travel Delivery Plan consultation highlights the need for a joined-up approach in respect of transport planning to improve sustainable transport connectivity across all Council areas so as to increase sustainable travel, alleviate traffic congestion and improve air quality.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- i. noted that the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) was undertaking a public consultation on the Northern Ireland Active Travel Delivery Plan;
- ii. approved the draft Council response to the Northern Ireland Active Travel Delivery Plan consultation, contained within [Appendix A](#) of the report, subject to an addition that highlighted the need for a joined-up approach in respect of transport planning to improve sustainable transport connectivity across all Council areas so as to increase sustainable travel, alleviate traffic congestion and improve air quality;
- iii. noted that the draft response would be submitted, subject to Council ratification on the 3rd March 2025;
- iv. noted correspondence received from DfI, contained within [Appendix B1](#) of the report, in relation to the Island Street Active Travel and Traffic Calming Scheme and the proposed designs for the scheme, contained within [Appendix B2](#) of the report;
- v. approved the draft Council response to the designs for the Island Street Active Travel and Traffic Calming Scheme, contained within [Appendix B3](#) of the report, that is being delivered as part of the Belfast Cycling Network; and
- vi. agreed to invite the Department for Infrastructure to a future meeting of the Committee to present on the Belfast Cycling Network Delivery Plan.

Positioning Belfast to Compete

Major Events Update - Christmas Programme 2024

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 **The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on activity delivered as part of a Christmas programme in November - December 2024.**

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1** Members are asked to note the contents of this report on recent Christmas activity.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Christmas Programme 2024 Evaluation

Building on the success of the 2023 event, the Christmas Lights Switch-On in Donegall Square North, returned on Saturday 16th November 2024.

This particular event remains a key driver in animating and activating the city. The Switch-On has always been a specific milestone for City centre stakeholders as the official opening to the Christmas period.

Located in a busy, 'live' city centre with high pedestrian footfall, the Switch-On is an operationally multi-faceted event to deliver. Planning began in July 2024, with engagement of primary stakeholders such as Translink, Visit Belfast and delivery agents. There is significant multi stakeholder input involved in the early planning process, and as plans develop other city centre stakeholders are further engaged.

In line with the Cultural Strategy's themes of community and sectoral co-design, an exciting programme was developed. This included cultural sector, community and school groups and further details are within this report. Tickets were fully allocated, and on the evening the site was at full capacity.

In 2024, the Christmas Lights Switch-On followed the same format at the front of City Hall, taking place on Saturday 16th November. Due to the nature of the t-shaped event site comprising Donegall Square North and Donegall Place (Fountain Lane and Castle Lane cross), it was necessary to close roads to facilitate event infrastructure installation and de-rig.

The City Events Team engaged extensively with stakeholders such as Translink, MarketPlace Europe, DfI, public hire taxi and the business sector, as well as with internal council units, to coordinate the build, event delivery and de-rig with as minimal impact as possible to normal business. Various road closures and suspensions were in place 2am Saturday 16th through to 4am on Sunday 17th November.

Attendance:

In excess of 10,500 citizens and visitors gathered to enjoy the event. The event was free and ticketed via Visit Belfast. There was an initial ticket release on the morning of 5th November, with a second release to accommodate those who couldn't secure tickets during the morning release. The City Hall Christmas Market opened at 12 noon the same day. During this year's event, it was noticeable that there was a significant number of non-ticket holders attending the event. Officers are reviewing the current approach to ticketing and options aligned to potential reconfiguration of the site that are in line with health and safety requirements, need for access to retail and retaining a positive attendee experience.

Marketing and Communications Activity:

Council operated a digital campaign with online advertising to promote this year's Christmas Lights Switch-On event, as well as Winter's Den season in 2 Royal Avenue.

Council directed people to the Christmas Lights Switch-on event page on the BCC website as well as the /Christmas URL where it was displayed prominently on the page.

Bauer NI were the official media partner and offered a strong package across Cool FM and Downtown from 2nd November to 13th November, including promo trails, competition package, live reads, an interview with the Lord Mayor, and outdoor broadcast with Downtown's Neal McClelland. Pete, Paulo and Rebecca from Cool FM's Breakfast Team were comperes on stage at the event.

Visit Belfast offered box office and visitor servicing, as well as related marketing activity such as digital screen display and social and digital campaign.

The event was featured in City Matters, circulated to just under 160k homes w/c 6th November and full event details of the Switch-On and Winter's Den were highlighted on page 4 and in the What's On section.

A press release was issued 30th October to promote the event. From 30th October, media coverage was secured on Belfast Live, Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, News Letter, BBC, Belfast Media Group, Yahoo UK and 4NI. In addition, the media partnership with Bauer NI included coverage across Cool FM and Downtown.

Council took paid-for online advertising to raise general awareness, targeting Belfast and surrounding areas for a two week period in advance of the ticket release. This approach was light touch given the experience of tickets going quickly, and was across a small number of media – Facebook, Belfast Media Group, Belfast Telegraph online and Daily Mirror/Belfast Live.

The Visit Belfast Christmas Campaign began on 16th November and ran until 22nd December. This was a 2-phase campaign with the first phase targeted to the ROI market (70%) and the NI market (30%). In Phase 2, utilising additional funding secured by BCC, we were able to deliver upweighted activity to both the ROI and NI market with a 50/50 split. The objective of the campaign was to capture the ‘festive energy’ of the city and promote day trips and overnight stays using a targeted mix of Video on Demand, Outdoor, Radio and digital elements. Supporting this activity included both paid social media advertising and influencer activity.

This campaign resulted in a total of 63.5 million impacts across the entirety of the campaign.

3.2. Programming:

The ‘City Imagining Strategy’ approved by Council has a focus on supporting developing local arts and cultural organisations, through funding, commissioning and capacity building.

To this end, *Oh Yeah* were engaged to arrange a performance by *Sasha Samara*, who is a graduate of their creative talent development programme; the MAC were invited to show an extract of their upcoming Christmas production; *Tumble Circus* were engaged to choreograph a circus piece; and the *Rock Choir* were invited to produce a medley of singalong Christmas favourites. *The Belvoir Players* also performed, and by invitation of Lord Mayor, Finaghy Primary School choir sang. Meet and greet performers were also engaged from two local companies.

Every act participating in the 2024 switch on expressed very positive feedback on the experience, with the profile of taking part increasing publicity for those companies that had their own Christmas shows.

The Christmas Lights Switch on in 2023 and 2024 featured local acts. On both occasions, tickets sold out very quickly, and capacity was reached in 2024. In section 3.3.2, audience participating in the survey were asked if they supported council supporting local talent or if there was a preference

for the 'big name'. 61% opted for the current position with 31% preferring a big name.

Officers will continue to work on all levels to ensure the Christmas Programme of animation and activation continues to develop, grow and leverage all available civic and visitor opportunities for Belfast for 2025 within the budget available, aligned to the principles of the cultural strategy on providing support for the cultural sector and showcasing homegrown talent. A number of benchmarking exercises are underway to review approaches to festive lights switch on and will be brought back to committee in due course.

2 Royal Avenue:

Following on from 2023's model of uplifting the Christmas programme in 2 Royal Avenue, the Winter's Den opened on Saturday 16th November 2024. The Winter's Den season features a selection of free entry festive activities. The venue was dressed by *MayWe*, and included a living 12ft tree that will be replanted in January, art installation by local artist *Carla Hodgson* and reused Christmas décor from previous years.

- Total building footfall across Winter's Den (from Saturday 16th November to 31st December) was 49,434. This included an opening weekend footfall of 5,022 (Saturday 16th and Sunday 17th November)
- 36 funded workshops / events, supported by 17 external events / markets / performances and a further 35 community groups and 10 schools engaged including 14 community / school musical performances
- 5 markets including approximately 140 makers / groups / artists (Potters Markets, Social Enterprise Market, Christmas Queer Art Fair and Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful Market)
- Santa's Post Office (Belfast Bid One) opened 16th November – 24th December and remains very popular
- Sensory area provided on 16th November to compliment the City Hall Switch - on including sensory workshops, a snow dome, sensory silent disco, walk about characters and a quiet light switch on

- Most popular programmed events this year included festive film screenings, a *New Years Eve Ceili*, themed workshops and musical performances, family art workshops, *Jingle and Jazz* for seniors and storytelling. This was further enhanced by a popular community led programme including the Potters Market, Community carolling, Primary School traditional music concerts, Christmas Tea Dance and a concert by the *Ulster Sinfonia*.

3.3 Belfast Christmas Lights Switch-On 16th November - Socio-Economic Survey results

- A total of 115 face-to-face interviews were conducted with visitors to the Belfast Christmas Lights Switch-On event. A further 123 interviews were completed online by visitors who had booked tickets to the event. 238 interviews were completed in total.
- The overall estimated direct spend for the Belfast event was £195,585 (2023: £193,950)
- The total average spend per group was £76.93. (2023: £86.20) 79% ate out during the event.
- 52% of survey respondents were from the Belfast City Council area, and a further 40% were from elsewhere in Northern Ireland. A slightly higher than last year but small number of visitors were from GB (2%), ROI (4%) and outside the UK and Ireland (2%). 8% of survey respondents were staying in accommodation away from home.
- 62% of respondents said they had attended a Christmas event hosted by Belfast City Council previously and 38% were new
- 61% (2023:75%) of survey respondents attended the event with children
- 37% (2023:46%) said they had no preference on when tickets became available, with 30% preferring them to be released in the morning and 25% after work hours
- Two-thirds, (63%) said they were supportive of Belfast City Council's preference to source local talent for stage acts. Under one third (31%) would prefer a big-name act.

- 45% (2023:51%) gave the event an overall rating of between 8 and 10, including 17% who rated it as '10 - Extremely good'. At the other end of the scale, 13% gave it a rating between 1-3.
- 88% thought that events like these encourage people to come to Belfast, while 81% of those living in Belfast said that events like these improve their sense of well-being and community.
- 77% of visitors said the Belfast Christmas Lights Switch On event improves Belfast's reputation as a host for events like these; and 75% stated it improves the reputation of Belfast as a place to visit
- 42% (2023: 62%) of respondents living outside NI confirmed that the event makes them more likely to visit Belfast again, while 62% commented it makes them more likely to recommend friends and family to visit Belfast
- 90% agreed that there should be more events like this in Belfast.
- 93% said that they felt safe during the event.

3.4 Festive Lighting Scheme

The Switch On event marked the turning on of the festive lighting scheme throughout the city centre, comprising a number of cross street features and pole mount features. In liaison with Facilities Management, the lighting of the City Hall façade also took place the same evening.

2025 saw the final year of the existing Christmas lights contract. This year there were a number of new sites included. With projections on Church Lane, bank street and castle lane, lighting of Belfast Stories, repair and reinstalment of Anne Street icicles and Donegall Place trees.

There was some damage incurred to features on Castle Street as a result of Storm Darragh. The provider was engaged in emergency planning protocol and was on site to deal with issues as they occurred, ensuring that the features were removed in a safe and timely manner.

As part of the ongoing development aligned to the issue of the new festive lighting scheme tender officers are working closely with City Hall to ensure alignment in scheme designs and also with the BIDs on business engagement opportunities aligned to scheme development. The tender will run over a total 5 year period and will provide for ongoing development and agility within the scheme that is cognisant of the city lighting strategy and makes recommendations for additional infrastructure to support this.

Officers are currently working in partnership with the estates team on the development of new wayleave agreements to come into ownership of BCC as these were previously managed by BCCM.

Officers recognise the importance of a partnership approach with the successful appointee and look to developing a future festive lighting masterplan and associated infrastructure planning.

3.5 Christmas Market 2024

The Christmas Market was a huge success this year again and ran from Saturday 16th November to Sunday 22nd December. Markets Officers worked with BCC Events team on the opening of the market and the light switch-on which took place on the same day. Market Place Europe Limited (MPEL) has held the Continental Markets contract for the past 19 years and have been awarded the contract for in total 3+2 years.

This year the market attracted over a million visitors and was a celebration of 20 years of the Belfast Christmas Market, to celebrate there were a number of Dickensian themed weekends when all the staff and traders dressed up as Characters from Dickens novels.

This year there was a larger seating and food court area and an enhanced Christmas experience with themed and animated walkways. There were over 100 stalls, this included 40% local traders and 60% continental traders. As always there was 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 competition and offered a free chalet to a young business selling dog products. 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 gave a free pitch to St George's Market traders this year again.

3.6 Financial and Resource Implications

All expenditure was within existing departmental budgets and approvals.

3.7 Equality and Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

None.

During discussion, the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, answered a range of questions on the potential expansion of the Christmas Market and Festival Lighting Scheme, ticketing of the Christmas Lights Switch-On Event, the potential to extend a programme of events to New Year's Eve, and the potential economic benefit for Belfast of the Open Championship, to be held at Royal Portrush in July, 2025.

She advised the Committee, in response to a Member's question regarding the expansion of the Christmas programme events to local communities across the city, that the Council's Cultural Unit had supported a number of community events through the Community Festivals Fund.

In response to several Members questions in respect of the Festival Lighting Scheme, the Senior Manager, Culture and Tourism, advised that the contract period had ended and that a new tender was in development and would be issued imminently to deliver a new lighting scheme.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Kelly,
Seconded by Councillor de Faoite and

Resolved – That the Committee agrees that, as part of a future report on major events, information would be brought back to the Committee in respect of the feasibility for a New Year's Eve Event Programme for Belfast.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report; and
- ii. agreed that, as part of a future report on major events, information would be brought back to the Committee in respect of the feasibility for a New Year's Eve Event Programme for Belfast.

Bank of Ideas

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

- 1.1 To provide an update to the Committee on the proposed opening of Cultural Participatory Budgeting scheme – Bank of Ideas – as a core part of the engagement delivery for the Cultural Strategy *A City Imagining* workplan 2025/26.

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 It is recommended that Members:

- Note the contents of this report and agree to open the Cultural Participatory Budgeting scheme “*Bank of Ideas*” on 19th March 2025 as part of the core delivery of the cultural strategy workplan for 2025/26.

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Background and context

As part of Belfast 2024 Creative Me Programme, a participatory budgeting scheme was created to fund creative ideas from individuals and groups across the city. This scheme, called The Bank of Ideas, awarded £50,000, divided equally between ideas for North, South, East, West, and the City Centre. Residents within a community could submit their creative ideas for funding. The projects were then voted on by residents to allow the allocation of funding.

3.2 The rationale for the project

The pilot Bank of Ideas programme delivered on a range of priorities within the cultural strategy. These include:

- Providing a more accessible way for individuals and un-constituted groups to access funding and participate in cultural activity by proposing and delivering creative ideas in their local area.
- The funding provides a ‘stepping stones’ approach for those who do not have capacity yet to access grants, with a focus on capacity building to enable groups/individuals to build skills needed to develop creative work and access funding in the future. This grassroots approach allows for the avoidance of duplication whilst adding value to existing small grants ecosystem.
- The participatory nature of allocating the funds through a decision-making public vote meant that

residents of Belfast became co-curators of the Belfast 2024 programme. This increased ownership over the definition of 'creativity' and therefore enhanced sense of belonging, civic pride and agency.

3.3 Impact of the programme

The 2024 Bank of Ideas project funded 28 projects, with over 4,842 people involved in the total project number. Additionally, 2,253 people cast votes in the process. The average award under the Bank of Ideas was £2,000.

3.4 Capacity building and City-wide reach

The capacity building and idea generating phase of the fund involved 26 idea generating workshops and drop-in sessions across Belfast to help people come up with and develop their ideas. These sessions took place across the city in informal, approachable settings such as local cafes, community centres and arts centres. This led to an application process and then a voting date run in City Hall where citizens voted on the projects they wanted to see funded.

Post award the capacity building elements continued with additional sessions aimed to bringing people together and supporting capacity building, sharing information on other funding sources, how to become constituted, audience development and collaboration. This was available for all applicants and not just those who were successful.

3.5 The breakdown of voters across the city is detailed below:

Area of the City	Votes Cast
North	475
South	390
East	505
West	296
City Centre	587
Total	2,253

Recognition

3.6 There has been recognition for the success of the Bank of Ideas project, including:

- Belfast 2024 lead on Bank of Idea's is participating in the Design Team for the next phase of Belfast Health Development Unit's Participatory Budgeting on the theme of wellbeing.

- The Place and Tourism Manager in Fife Council, Scotland has approached Belfast 2024 team to share best practice and support the delivery of their own Participatory Budgeting fund based on the work we have developed.
- Belfast City Council have been shortlisted for 18th International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) Best Practice in Citizen Participation Award and are speaking at the IOPD Conference in October 2024. From that conference, officers from Reykjavik who were also presenting on Participatory Budgeting are planning to visit Belfast in early Spring to explore participatory democracy practices and intercultural projects.

3.7 Key learnings from the 2024 pilot

There are a number of key learnings from the original pilot which will be taken forward into phase 2 delivery in 2025/26. These include:

- Practical realisation of the Cultural Strategy delivery – voting and engagement fosters a sense of belonging, the ideas generation supports creativity and innovation. The programme is created, delivered, and decided by the people of Belfast enabling active participation and promoting active citizenship.
- Participatory budgeting as a method for decision making delivers increased transparency and supports active citizenship by giving residents the power to make decisions on the activity they want to see in the city.
- Viable grant making process, significant numbers of projects came forward ranging from small community-based events to skills and storytelling projects.
- The scheme has funded a range of groups across a number of diverse sectors; such as PUL (Spectrum Centre), disability-led groups (Black Moon), BAME groups (Belfast Massage Project)
- Ideas generation workshops facilitated the production of new work, building of new collaborations between groups and individuals and led to wide impact throughout the city.

- The Participatory Budgeting process builds trust in council while promoting the cultural strategy- this is an access point for communities and individuals who may not necessarily see themselves as being part of cultural activity in the city and to engage with culture and creativity - contributing to the realisation of the Cultural Strategy.
- Proportionality of process must be balanced with managing risk and prudent project delivery including eligibility, reputation, and financial management. Following feedback, this phase of the project will now include an additional eligibility check and declaration process as part of the project initiation process.
- To ensure the engagement and delivery is of the highest standard significant resource requirement in terms of staff time and capacity is needed and sufficient promotion including social media.

3.8 Contributions to council objectives

The projects during the first phase of Bank of Ideas contributed to a range of council objectives such as:

- Wellbeing - Chill with Gill Yoga with Suicide Awareness, Wonder Bubble Magic, Dreamer's Space GROW Community Garden & Cavehill Conservation
- Young people & Older People - Lower Oldpark Community Association Children's Community Library & Bookclub, The Meadow Heart Mosaic Project at Bog Meadows, Spectrum Centre Young People's Ausume Rascal's Art Explosion
- Good Relations – Cosmopolitan Cooking Club by Forward South, Cregagh and Woodstock Diversity Carnival, Ballynafest Community Fair
- Placemaking – Sailortown Regeneration: A Brush with History, East Belfast Late Night Art
- Climate outcomes - The Wee Swap event for children's clothes and toys, Bee Wildflowers seedbomb making

- Good Relations – Cosmopolitan Cooking Club by Forward South, Cregagh and Woodstock Diversity Carnival, Ballynafest Community Fair
- Accessibility – Black Moon Accessible Pop Up Picnic Party, Between Galaxies Theatre Show for Children with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities

3.9 Recommendation for 2025-26 Financial year

The delivery of Bank of Idea's 2024 closed in November 2024. It is recommended that the Bank of Idea's as a participatory budgeting model continues in 2025-2026 as part of the core delivery of the cultural strategy workplan and commitments to engagement with citizens via strategic priorities.

After consultation with the sector there is an evident appetite for the project and to see it continue. This was a new pilot project for Belfast 2024 and much of the work done this year was an investment in developing the process which can be replicated.

In order to implement a second run of the Bank of Ideas in 2025 to a similar timeline, the planning process would need to begin Spring 2025 (detail on timeline below). This aligns with how other small grants run on an annual basis – the planning, guidance and application stage is open before the new financial year, under the caveat that it is subject to budget approval by committee for the new financial year.

3.10 Proposed budget

The proposed budget for the programme is similar to the pilot programme delivered in 2024. The budget is broken down as follows:

Financial Year	Budget Heading	Budget Description	Amount
2025-26	Initiation of 2025 Bank of Idea's – Design phase	Design team, application development and Support Workshops for ideation in advance of process	£2,000
2025-26	Capacity building	Venue hire across city for yearlong workshops, accessibility and facilitation support for applicants and projects, consultation with external community and arts organisations city	£4,500

		wide, design work	
2025-26	Voting Day	Voting Day Event Costs – potential to do 2 events next year as current year was at capacity for City Hall	£7,000
2025-26	Final Evaluation and Celebration event	Exhibition creation and evaluation costs	£3,000
Total Design and Implementation Budget			£16,500
2025-26	Funding Pot	50,000 (10k per area, minimum 5 projects)	£50,000
Total funding			£66,500

3.11 Timeline

To ensure that funds would be received by awardees for delivery of projects in Summer/Autumn 2025, the following timeline would be required:

Date	Details
February 2025	Committee sign off in February 2025 Development of process to reopen including changes to application, schedule of workshops created and voting day event developed
19th March 2025	Applications Open – series of workshops delivered over these weeks to support idea generation
6th May 2025	Applications Close (After the bank holiday)
10th May 2025	Criteria Check and feedback to applicants
22nd June 2025	Voting Day – City Hall
26th June 2025	Secondary eligibility check carried out re Declaration Risk check; results sent out. This is an Additional element of the process following learnings from the pilot project.
2nd July 2025	Letters of offer issued.
4th August 2025	First Payments
August – October	Projects delivered
November	Celebration Event in November after all projects delivered

4.0 Financial and Resource Implications

Funding for this project will be met from the recurrent budget for Cultural Development subject to Committee

approval and confirmation of departmental budgets for 2025-26. Payments and costs won't be incurred until the new financial year.

**4.1 Equality or Good Relations Implications/
Rural Needs Assessment**

The Cultural Strategy - *A City Imagining* - carried out an extensive EQIA covering the duration of the strategy 2020-2030. The Council's Culture team have a dedicated, full time and permanent Engagement Officer focussed on accessing a wide range of marginalised groups to co-design an extensive Engagement Programme which has fed directly into the development and delivery of the Belfast 2024 programme.

The Committee:

- i. noted the contents of the report; and
- ii. agreed to open the Cultural Participatory Budgeting scheme "Bank of Ideas" on 19th March, 2025, as part of the core delivery of the cultural strategy workplan for 2025/26.

Issues Raised in Advance by Members

Bristol Music Fund (Councillor de Faoite to raise)

At the request of Councillor de Faoite, the Committee agreed that officers would engage with their counterparts in Bristol City Council in relation to the establishment of the Bristol Music Fund, and that a report would be brought back to the Committee in respect of the feasibility of establishing a similar fund for Belfast.

Chairperson