

Development Committee

Tuesday, 7th February, 2012

MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Alderman Stalford (Chairman);
Aldermen Ekin, Humphrey and Stoker;
Councillors Austin, Hartley, Hendron, Keenan,
Kelly, Kingston, Kyle, Mallon, Maskey, Mac Giolla Mhín,
Ó Muilleoir, Reynolds, Robinson and Spence.

In attendance: Mr. J. McGrillen, Director of Development;
Ms. S. McCay, Head of Economic Initiatives;
Ms. C. Taggart, Community Development Manager; and
Mr. B. Flynn, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors McVeigh and Webb.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 10th and 24th January were taken and read as signed and correct.

Declarations of Interest

The following declarations of interest were declared:

- In respect of item 6a, viz., St. Gallen Centenary, Councillor O'Muilleoir indicated that he was a member of the Board of Directors of Forbairt Feirste, which would be involved in an event to mark the aforementioned centenary; and
- Regarding item 4b, viz., European Match Funding Requests, Alderman Stoker indicated that he was associated with the Greater Village Regeneration Trust, but pointed out that there existed no pecuniary or material conflict within the report.

Noted.

Requests for Deputations

It was reported that no requests had been received.

Belfast City Masterplan - Update

The Director reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 26th January, it had agreed to defer, for a period of two weeks, consideration of the Council's draft Masterplan to enable Party briefings to be delivered to those Parties who so wished to receive them. The Director pointed out that it had been unfeasible to deliver such briefings and, accordingly, he indicated that it was intended to place the Masterplan on the Committee's agenda for consideration on 21st February.

After discussion, the Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Draft Northern Ireland Executive Economic Strategy - Consultation Response

The Committee was informed that the Northern Ireland Executive had launched for consultation its draft economic strategy entitled 'Priorities for Sustainable Growth'. The strategy had been issued for consultation together with the Executive's Programme for Government and its Investment Strategy. The Director reported that the principal aims of the strategy were to rebuild and rebalance the Northern Ireland economy. The Director outlined the principal aspects of the response and indicated that it had emphasised that Belfast's role as the key economic driver in the region should be central to government policy. He referred also to the Council's aspiration within the response that a ministerial working group should be established to examine issues associated with regeneration issues. Accordingly, the Committee considered the undernoted response to the consultation:

Council Response

- “1.1 Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the draft economic strategy for Northern Ireland ‘Priorities for sustainable growth and prosperity’. As the region’s capital city, Belfast is the driver of the regional economy. It is home to over 200,000 jobs, provides employment for 108,000 commuters, is the major location for Foreign Direct Investment and is home to the majority of the region’s creative industries and professional and financial services. Its success is critical to the success of the wider region.**
- 1.2 Belfast City Council recently launched its ‘Belfast Investment Programme’. This includes a capital investment of £150million for the period 2012-2015 aimed at putting in place the economic infrastructure necessary to support the Belfast economy. This will be accompanied by a range of programmes to encourage business start-up and growth within the city. It will also focus on employability and skills development.**
- 1.3 The investment programme is closely aligned to the draft strategy and the Council would ask that it is supported by the Northern Ireland Executive and specifically incorporated within the economic strategy.**

- 1.4 **Belfast City Council recognises the ambition set out within the action plan associated with the strategy. It also recognises, however, the challenges in delivering the projects identified. We support the creation of the proposed coordination unit but would go further to suggest that the Executive should create an interdepartmental delivery group specifically for Belfast, given the importance of the delivery of projects within the city to the economic wellbeing of the wider region.**
- 1.5 **Belfast City Council regards the planned relocation of the University of Ulster into the city centre as being one of the biggest economic development opportunities which the city is likely to see in a generation. Whilst the university is not due to open until 2018, we believe that it is imperative that the project is reflected within the economic strategy and that a cross departmental steering group is established to drive the project and maximise the economic and regenerative potential which it presents.**
- 1.6 **Belfast City Council welcomes the acknowledgement that Belfast and Derry have a specific role to play in the economic competitiveness of the region. It is globally accepted that cities are the economic engines upon which regions depend. We believe that this must be recognised in the new EU funding programmes for 2014-2020 through the inclusion of a specific urban development programme.**
- 1.7 **The Programme for Government contains the ambition of creating 25,000 new jobs over the next four years. The ability to achieve these targets will be dependent on attracting foreign direct investment which will require grade A accommodation with large floorplates. There is a limited supply of suitable accommodation in Belfast and this has the potential to limit Invest NI's ability to attract further investment within its targeted sectors. Belfast City Council believes that the Executive should commit to an urgent revision of future demand for grade A office accommodation and consider how future supply might be incentivised in the current climate.**
- 1.8 **We acknowledge that the tools available to support economic growth through Regional Aid are under threat at present and have responded strongly to the consultation on this to argue for the ongoing availability of this type of assistance. However, we acknowledge that it will be important to look at alternative forms of finance for major capital schemes. We have carried out some exploratory work on a range of financial instruments such as TIFs (Tax Incremental Financing schemes), LABVs (Local Asset-backed Vehicles) and joint ventures with the private sector. We would welcome further**

dialogue with government on these issues and consider that the Northern Ireland Executive should put in place the

necessary regulatory requirements to allow councils to explore these options as a way forward in the current era of funding restraint within the public sector. We would also welcome a discussion on how EU funding mechanisms such as JEREMIE and JESSICA could be levered in this context.

- 1.9 The recent report by Mary Portas into the review of the high street included a number of recommendations including actions to make high streets more accessible, attractive and safe; encouraging mixed-use city centres and addressing the short-term challenge of vacancy levels faced by most cities. We consider that vibrant town and city centres are critical to achieving the objectives set out in the economic strategy and to attracting inward investment, tourism and talent to a city. We believe that the Northern Ireland Executive should follow the lead set by the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in establishing a ministerial working group to address this issue and that there should be greater collaborative working across departments and other agencies to ensure that the broad spectrum of issues are addressed in a holistic manner and that the vibrancy of town and city centres is consolidated and enhanced.
- 1.10 We acknowledge and agree with the focus on a number of key sectors for the region's future economic competitiveness and support the work of MATRIX. We consider that there is significant potential within the renewables sector and feel that this requires a targeted strategy for the future development of the sector. There is an imperative to seize the opportunities to ensure that we can steal a lead and establish the city and wider region as a global centre of excellence in this growing sector. We have considerable assets which provide a stable basis from which to develop the sector and would encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to explore the opportunity to create an Enterprise Zone for renewables in the Belfast Harbour/North Foreshore area of Belfast.
- 1.11 We welcome the commitment to explore the implementation of social clauses for government capital schemes. We have had some experience of these through the Titanic Quarter and consider that there have been many lessons learned which should be disseminated across government. Consideration needs to be given to the content of the clauses as well as their management and monitoring. This needs to be done in the context of difficult market conditions for private sector employers and needs to include innovative approaches, for example, to help apprentices complete their apprenticeship across a number of schemes. Although the current focus is on capital schemes, we welcome proposals to extend social

clauses to all government contracts. We acknowledge that consideration is currently being given by the Department for Environment (DoE) to allowing councils to take account of non-commercial clauses in awarding contracts and are open to considering how this can be done in the context of our capital programme and wider partnership projects.

- 1.12 The planned capital investment set out in Belfast City Council's investment programme and in the Executive's economic strategy, Programme for Government and Investment Strategy includes a number of major schemes which have the potential to stimulate economic growth in the city and wider region. We would ask that these projects are given urgent attention by the relevant government departments and agencies and that efforts are focused on expediting their progress through the necessary administrative and statutory approvals processes.

Specific comments

Management and governance

- 2.1 We welcome the commitment to an implementation plan with regular reporting through the Executive Sub-Committee. This will support coordination across government and ensure alignment with agreed priorities. We would suggest that these updates need to happen on a regular basis, in order to allow for flexibility and to be able to respond to challenges as they emerge.
- 2.2 We support the creation of the 'coordinating unit' (1.19 of strategy) and would be keen to work closely with those involved in this. We consider, in particular, that additional intelligence is required on new growth sectors and their requirements to allow us to focus our strategy and determine what work we should prioritise in order to ensure maximum economic impact.
- 2.3 However, it is important to acknowledge that there are other public, private and community organisations involved in regeneration and economic development activity and it will be essential to lever the resources presented by their investment to make the step change required.
- 2.4 Belfast City Council had embraced its leadership role in its Investment Programme for the period 2012-2015. Central to the delivery of this programme is a commitment of more than £150million towards capital projects and £50million for revenue proposals to make Belfast a better place in which to live, work and invest. This document is premised on the need for partnership in delivery and its priority schemes will

help deliver on some of the priorities identified in this draft strategy.

- 2.5 In light of this and of the significance of Belfast in relation to the wider economic competitiveness of the region, we would encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to consider the potential for establishing an interdepartmental working group for Belfast. The purpose of this group would be to address cross-cutting issues impacting on key economic challenges and specific projects in the city in order to flag up potential difficulties, support holistic development and encourage greater coordination across government and its partners.
- 2.6 Our investment package recognises that there are a number of 'game changer' investments in the city in the coming years, and commits to maximising the impact of these for the citizens and the wider population. One such investment is the relocation to Belfast city centre of the University of Ulster. This represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to create a new community which will support greater population density in the city; encourage greater university-business collaboration; generate new business opportunities for local companies and support additional investment in the city. However projects of this scale require significant planning to ensure that they develop in a coordinated, holistic and sustainable manner and that the economic potential of the development is maximised.
- 2.7 We would encourage the Northern Ireland Executive and its department to consider its management and governance role in such schemes in order to support their progress where feasible, while ensuring compliance with all relevant regulatory issues. Belfast City Council is willing to work in a coordinating capacity in such projects and we have some successful examples of assuming this role. Our work on the Titanic Quarter sets in place a framework for discussion around the key challenges affecting the site and impacting on those living adjacent to the location, as well as those businesses already based there. The Memorandum of Understanding with the developer has enabled us address accessibility issues; identify and develop bespoke employability initiatives and create a comprehensive community engagement strategy. Such an approach is indicative of the multi-faceted nature of these key projects and illustrates the need for significant partnership working, in a structured manner.
- 2.8 The draft Programme for Government indicates a commitment to implementation of the Reform of Public Administration (RPA) in the region. Local government will need to play a key partnership role in the successful reform of public sector

service delivery in Northern Ireland. This is just one of a number of vital measures which will directly involve the local government sector and will be required in order to address the challenging economic climate in Northern Ireland over the next few years. Belfast City Council is committed to collaborating with partner organisations to help maximise the economic potential of the city.

- 2.9 The council already has productive working relationships with all government bodies and agencies and we would advocate for ongoing liaison at a senior level in order to progress key projects and to ensure maximum return on investment.
- 2.10 We note the reference in the draft strategy to 'related strategies' (5.14). On paper, all of these strategies appear to align. However, in practice, we consider that the reality is sometimes different. These are a number of reasons for this - different priorities; areas of focus; funding mechanisms etc. The high level targets and indicators established in this strategy should guide all other governmental initiatives and should dictate operating mechanisms and management structures, taking account of existing provision. This should lead to greater synergy, with organisations committed to the same, high-level objectives and thereby avoiding duplication and gaps in provision.
- 2.11 Previous governmental discussions have introduced the potential for new ways of working that may create a new dynamic between the public and private sectors. These include Business Improvement Districts, which were the subject of a Department for Social Development (DSD) consultation last year. Belfast City Council is supportive of the key principles behind the legislation, namely the need for partnership between the public and private sector; the need for BIDs to be business-led; the need for BIDs to target specific issues and to deliver specific, measurable benefits. However we accept that, in practice, significant engagement between DSD, Land and Property Services and the councils will be necessary to address the practicalities of the challenges presented and to create a workable solution for all parties.
- 2.12 We note the acknowledgement that Belfast and Derry have a specific role to play in the region's future economic competitiveness and are supportive of greater collaboration between the two localities. There is an opportunity to confirm this role through the new EU funding programmes from 2015, by supporting the creation of a specific urban initiative. This would provide a framework for a coordinated programme of economic development and social cohesion support which

could underpin both the rebuilding and the rebalancing priorities identified in this draft strategy.

Infrastructure and investment

- 3.1 We acknowledge the investment in economic infrastructure in recent years by the Northern Ireland Executive, particularly in the context of public spending constraints which are likely to be in place for the foreseeable future.
- 3.2 We would encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to maintain its commitment to key infrastructure schemes included in the draft strategy and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, not only for their direct impact on the economic development of the area but also on employment levels in the construction sector, which has been particularly badly affected by the downturn.
- 3.3 We welcome the acknowledgement that major urban centres provide the catalyst for growth across a regional economy (point 5.65 of the draft strategy). Research suggests that strong regional economies are predicated on an analysis of differentiation and specialisation, establishing clusters and focusing investment in agreed areas where impact can be greatest and where assets are strongest. Belfast – as the capital city – is the investment and business hub of the region and has a disproportionately large impact on economic development across Northern Ireland. Focusing investment on key assets is arguably even more important in a post-debt era where there is simply insufficient critical mass and demand to allow all areas to compete and attract the same range of economic activities.
- 3.4 Belfast plays a significant role in the Northern Ireland economy: almost 55% of those working in Belfast live outside the city boundaries; the city is home to one-third of all Northern Ireland service sector jobs, half of all the region's hi-tech manufacturing jobs, 3 in 5 computer and related service jobs and two-thirds of creative media and arts jobs; it is the transport hub for the region; a gateway for tourism and the focal point of specialist health services and unique cultural and entertainment offerings. It is home to two universities and one Further Education College and will, by 2018, provide the location for an expanded University of Ulster campus within the city centre. This critical mass of investment and potential investment provides a solid foundation for additional focused support to underpin regional growth.
- 3.5 Recent reports from property agents indicate a potential long-term supply issue for Grade A office accommodation. This could possible impact negatively on the proposals

contained within this draft strategy to increase the volume of FDI and indigenous business growth in targeted sectors across the region as a means of rebalancing the economy. We would welcome an open discussion with government on how this may be addressed.

- 3.6 The current available stock of Grade A and B office space on the market in Belfast totals 1,009,854 sq ft (Grade A -440,883 sq ft and Grade B - 568,971 sq ft) with 2million sq ft of approved schemes in the pipeline. Assuming indicative requirements of approximately 200,000 sq ft (annual take-up historically averaged approximately 300,000 sq ft), there is a current 5 year supply available, with an additional 10 year supply with planning permission. However if the stated requirements of 200,000 sq ft is for Grade A only, this reduces the current supply to 2 years (or 1 ½ years if the annual take-up increased to 300,000 sq ft).
- 3.7 Local agents have indicated that, following the recent lettings, supply has reduced further and there may be a shortage of Grade A space available in Belfast. The fundamental concern is the *type* of office space available and Lisney reported that much of the available office product in Belfast does not show corporate ambition for NI plc. The availability of larger floorplates is also an issue. In Belfast, a majority of the buildings around the city centre are older Grade B and C office blocks and are unlikely to be occupied again. Clearly, the era of speculative development has long since ceased. However it is considered that the future implications of current provision levels and the condition of available buildings require an in-depth assessment of potential demand and supply for new office space in the city which will impact on all agencies seeking to promote investment in Belfast.
- 3.8 We acknowledge that the tools available to support economic growth through Regional Aid are under threat at present and have responded strongly to the consultation on this to argue for the ongoing availability of this type of assistance. However, we acknowledge that it will be important to look at alternative forms of finance for major capital schemes. We have carried out some exploratory work on a range of financial instruments such as TIFs (Tax Incremental Financing schemes), LABVs (Local Asset-backed Vehicles) and joint ventures with the private sector. We would welcome further dialogue with government on these issues and would encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to put in place the necessary regulatory requirements to allow councils to explore these options as a way forward in the current era of funding restraint within the public sector. We would also welcome a discussion on how EU funding mechanisms such as JEREMIE and JESSICA could be levered in this context.

- 3.9 We recognise the impact of recent investments in the telecommunications and broadband infrastructure in the region and note the positive message that this presents to potential investors. We are currently exploring the potential for ultra-fast broadband in the city, alongside an extensive wireless network, as a means of transforming the business environment and enhancing social cohesion and access to public information for residents. We would like to work closely with our colleagues in DETI – given their experience of the previous broadband scheme – and with the private sector contractors to leverage maximum impact from the investment and address specific challenges at the development stage of this project. An application for support to DCMS is to be presented in February 2012 and we are hopeful of drawing down a significant amount of resources to secure the implementation of this scheme.
- 3.10 We see significant potential for businesses in this initiative and are considering the opportunity for a targeted capacity building initiative to ensure that companies are aware of the opportunities presented by the investment and are supported to make changes to their operating systems to capitalise on these.
- 3.11 We welcome the commitment within the draft strategy to reform the planning system and consider that this is essential in order to bring forward potential development schemes, while adhering to all relevant regulatory and legislative stipulations. We welcome the proposed partial transfer of planning powers to local government and the ongoing review of current operations. Councils are already working with the Department of Environment to ensure an efficient transition and to explore the potential for input into the delivery and decision making.
- 3.12 Whilst this change is welcomed, there are concerns regarding the capacity of the system to deliver effective decision-making in the short-term and the implications this might have for current and proposed planning applications.
- 3.13 As with other cities, we are concerned at the impact of vacancies in the city centre and in our neighbourhoods and we would welcome a dialogue with all relevant partners to identify a sustainable solution to this challenge. From a Belfast City Council perspective, this has a direct impact on our rates intake and – by default – our ability to deliver services.
- 3.14 The recent report by Mary Portas into the review of the high streets made a number of recommendations including actions to make high streets accessible, attractive and safe and

introducing measures to make it easier to change the uses of key properties to introduce a more balanced high street. We concur with many of the findings and would support a more coordinated approach to city and town regeneration across government to address the issues such as those identified in the report.

- 3.15 The draft strategy suggests that DoE's new approach to urban planning will 'help revitalise urban centres, making them more attractive places to live, work and invest'. We have some concerns that the current approach to urban regeneration is not focused or strategic and that there is no shared vision of the role of cities and urban areas in Northern Ireland. This is reflected in the recent plans to introduce a large retail levy which will have a disproportionate impact on Belfast and which risks adding to the considerable blight in the city centre.
- 3.16 We welcome the commitment to exploring more renewable energy sources, with gas, coal and oil accounting for 90% of power generation and spiralling costs having significant implications for all local residents and businesses. We are currently using methane gas generated from our former landfill site at North Foreshore to export electricity to the local grid for distribution. This is producing around 35000 megawatts per year at present. We are also exploring the potential for an anaerobic digestion point at this site which, if it progresses, will also allow renewable energy to be exported to the grid.

Key economic sectors

- 4.1 We support the analysis of the MATRIX panels regarding the key sectors that demonstrate the greatest potential for growth, namely:
- Telecommunications and IT
 - Life and health sciences
 - Agrifood
 - Advance materials
 - Advanced engineering.
- 4.2 We note that MATRIX is currently conducting further analysis into the market opportunities presented by the sustainable energy sector and the green economy. We concur with the consideration that this is one sector in which we could potentially have significant competitive advantage and consider that Belfast has a key role to play in the future development of this sector. We suggest that it should be given greater focus within this strategy.

- 4.3 We note that the research for this strategy points out that ‘small economies focus on innovation policy in sectors where they have competitive advantage or historical strengths’. We consider that the fledgling renewables sector in the city represents a combination of the two. It utilises the natural resources of the harbour and the available surrounding land; is driven by the technologies and expertise developed in the city’s traditional manufacturing base and is supported by the significant research expertise of the two universities and the local Further Education college.
- 4.4 In order to ensure the optimal development of the sector, we would support further analysis to identify key market drivers; infrastructure requirements and skills needs to ensure that we can become world class players in this global market. As part of our investment package, we are proposing the development of a ‘green business park’ at the city’s former landfill site at North Foreshore. This will provide an opportunity for clustering of secondary and tertiary companies to service the larger businesses in the adjacent area and beyond. We suggest that the Executive might explore the creation of an enterprise zone in this and the surrounding harbour area.
- 4.5 We agree that there is significant potential for the further development of the creative industries, as identified in the draft strategy. Recent infrastructural investments around the Titanic Quarter will help create a focal point for the further development of the film and television industry, capitalising on the success of recent projects such as ‘Game of Thrones.’ The drive for greater local commissioning will create a demand for the development of additional content and this represents a significant business opportunity for local companies, many of whom are developing a track record in this field. We welcome the commitment to an investment of £4million in the Creative Industries Innovation Fund to underpin further development in this field.
- 4.6 We are working closely with our colleagues in Invest NI to explore the potential for establishing a digital hub in the city. This will create a focal point not only for the digital media businesses but also represents an opportunity to support greater social inclusion by providing access to communal facilities and services within the hub for the use of local communities. This project therefore supports both the ‘rebuilding’ and the ‘rebalancing’ themes of the draft strategy.

- 4.7 The tourism industry in Belfast has seen significant growth in recent years. The gross value of Belfast tourism was estimated at £480million in 2010 – an increase in value of over 500% in 10 years. There is an aspiration that the current revenue figure can be doubled by 2020, capitalising on the stimulus presented by major events in the coming years (e.g. 2012 Titanic; 2013 World Police and Fire Games and 2015 Tall Ships).
- 4.8 There is significant work to do to ensure that these challenging targets are met and that investments are made in the quality of service delivery. Belfast City Council has established a Tourism Forum which brings together the sector's key stakeholders to ensure a coordinated and informed approach to the development of the sector. Although this is still in the early stages of development, it has been useful in ensuring policy and funding alignment to maximise the impact of investment and to ensure targeting of resources. We would encourage the relevant government departments to continue their engagement with this forum. The Forum is supporting a Council-led programme which will work with over 300 local tourism and hospitality providers over the coming three years to improve customer service, enhance product development and develop new markets.
- 4.9 The business tourism market represents a significant opportunity for growth in the coming years. The current facilities in the city are inadequate for many conferences of an international scale and the need for integrated conference and exhibition facilities has been identified. An application for support to extend the current provision at the Waterfront Hall has been made and it is hoped that this can be funded by central and local government. If this project is realised, it will be a significant contributor to the growth of this sector and will have an impact beyond its immediate location in terms of business and employment generated. We would urge the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that this and the other major capital schemes identified in our investment programme are given urgent attention by the relevant government departments and agencies and that efforts are focused on expediting their progress through the necessary administrative and statutory approvals processes.
- 4.10 The recent MTV event and the upcoming Titanic celebrations as well as the City of Culture, World Police and Fire Games and Tall Ships demonstrate the importance of event tourism to economic growth in the city and wider region. The MTV event and associated Belfast Music Week generated £22million of spend in the local economy. With these other major events in the pipeline, it is important to develop a coordinated approach to their promotion and development, in order to maximise the return to the local economy.

- 4.11 A report by Oxford Economics for Belfast City Council in 2008 suggested that there was an absence of a clear sectoral roadmap for the economic future of the region. We consider that this is still an important element in maximising economic growth: identifying key sectors where the region can compete globally and putting place the support services (skills, infrastructure) to allow these to be addressed.

Business development and growth

- 5.1 Belfast City Council is focused on increasing the rates base in the city. By this we mean growing both the resident and business populations. With regard to the latter, we will do so by investing in a range of capital and revenue schemes that create an environment in which businesses can set up and expand – both in terms of physical infrastructure and business support services.
- 5.2 As indicated in our response to the Northern Ireland Executive's Economic Strategy: Consultation on Priorities for Sustainable Growth and Prosperity in February 2011, we are broadly supportive of the approach taken around the rebuilding and rebalancing themes. In light of the volatility of the economy at present, we suggest that constant evaluation of the impact of agreed initiatives will be critical to ensure that the strategy remains effective.
- 5.3 We already work closely with Invest NI and play a key role in 'feeding through' potential client companies, as suggested by the Independent Review of Economic Policy. This is an important element of the 'rebuilding' theme – helping companies improve their competency in innovation, R&D and exports with a view to enhancing their overall competitiveness and productivity. We acknowledge that there are other organisations and bodies working in this field and would be supportive of greater collaboration in order to reduce duplication and make the business support arena easier for the customer to navigate.
- 5.4 We are also engaged with DEL and OFMDFM to look at supporting measures which will help promote accessible employment opportunities, particularly in areas of economic disadvantage. As a Council, we have committed to creating a number of new employment and placement opportunities and we will work with our partner organisations to consider how these can be made available
- 5.5 We also consider that it will be important to target resources to enhance the volume and value of start ups. Recognising the importance of prioritising resources in this challenging climate, we accept that it may be appropriate to have access to a menu of targeted support, to be focused on those

companies that demonstrate the most significant growth potential. The draft strategy acknowledges the challenge of creating more 'high-flying' companies (strategy reference 5.41). While there are structural and historical reasons for this, we support initiatives to raise the ambition of new starts and invest in the infrastructure to allow this to happen.

- 5.6 An important part of creating this aspiration is to establish a positive image of entrepreneurship as a career choice. Many organisations are working at making this happen and there are many innovative practices in place across Northern Ireland. Belfast City Council is working with our Further and Higher Education partners in the city to support the Belfast Enterprise Academy – helping final year students understand the mechanics of operating a business and helping them progress their business idea. Start-up rates from the early stages of this programme are significant with almost one in two students starting up their own business on completion of their degree.
- 5.7 The Northern Ireland Science Park has been critical in creating an innovation ecosystem through its workspace and support programmes. It is also leveraging significant social capital through member and partner organisations and this is helping create some critical mass in the system. We welcome the proposal to consider the establishment of an open innovation centre at the Science Park as a means of developing greater partnerships and collaboration to support an additional uptake in R&D.
- 5.8 Access to finance is a key issue impacting on business growth (2.13 of strategy) and this is borne out in a recent survey of companies in Belfast where almost half of companies surveyed (48%) indicated that they would need some support with managing business finance. We welcome the recent announcements by Invest NI regarding the initiatives under its Access to Capital strategy – particularly the micro business loan fund and the Invest NI growth fund – and would encourage speedy implementation of these in order to address the lack of provision at present.
- 5.9 We support the proposed focus on increasing exports as a means of promoting sustainable growth. However it is important to acknowledge that, given that the economy is dominated by micro-businesses, many local companies have difficulty in taking the leap from selling locally to selling into external markets. We are working closely with our partners in Invest NI to create a support framework for these businesses through our 'Exploring Exporting' programme and this will help achieve the targets set out in the draft strategy around first time exporters.

- 5.10 We support the consideration given within the draft strategy to the social economy and agree that there is significant potential within the sector to move organisations from a reliance on public funding towards a sustainable business model. We already include a target of 20% of participants in our business growth programmes to be social economy businesses and ensure that the mentoring support is tailored to meet their specific operating requirements. As indicated in our Investment Programme, we are currently exploring the potential for a targeted pre-enterprise social economy programme which will complement Invest NI's social economy programme and help 60 community-based organisations to explore the potential of becoming social economy enterprises.
- 5.11 With regard to the proposals around corporation tax, Belfast City Council supports further exploration of the potential for introduction of a variable rate of corporation tax. In our response to HM Treasury's consultation on rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy in June 2011, we commented that 'corporation tax could be effective if it was part of a basket of investments and incentives geared towards improving productivity and creating economic growth'. As such, we consider that it could represent an important offering to potential inward investors but acknowledge that this needs to be accompanied by further investment in skills development, innovation and R&D and infrastructure development. This approach is reflected in the draft strategy's proposals around the reduction in corporation tax (page 71).
- 5.12 We welcome the commitment to explore the implementation of social clauses for government capital schemes. We have had some experience of these through the Titanic Quarter and consider that there have been many lessons learned which should be disseminated across government. Consideration needs to be given to the content of the clauses as well as their management and monitoring. This needs to be done in the context of difficult market conditions for private sector employers and needs to include innovative approaches, for example, to help apprentices complete their apprenticeship across a number of schemes. Although the current focus is on capital schemes, we welcome proposals to extend social clauses to all government contracts. We acknowledge that consideration is currently being given by the Department for Environment (DoE) to allowing councils to take account of non-commercial clauses in awarding contracts and are open to considering how this can be done in the context of our capital programme and wider partnership projects.

Employability and skills development

- 6.1 **Belfast City Council agrees that in order to rebuild the economy, there is a need for a concerted focus on creating employment opportunities. As identified in the draft strategy, we recognise that these are likely to consist of a range of (sometimes) short-term interventions focused on job creation, improving employability and re-skilling/up-skilling.**

- 6.2 **As with other parts of the region, Belfast has experienced a significant increase in unemployment since 2008. In the decade to 2008, there were an estimated 30,000 new jobs created in the city – many of which were filled by those residing in adjacent council areas. A recent report by Oxford Economics suggests that Belfast’s residential employment rate has fallen back to 2006 levels and that it is unlikely to return to 2008 levels until 2017. This suggests a period of ‘jobless recovery’ and underlines the need to innovative employment creation initiatives to avoid permanent detachment from being in employment and to ensure that skilled employees are retained in the labour market.**

- 6.3 **The strong alignment between disadvantage and access to employment is highlighted in Belfast with the highest concentrations of unemployment and low skills levels found in those parts of the city where relative deprivation levels are greatest. Oxford Economics’ report suggested that 12 electoral wards – all of which are in the top 20 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland – are still expected to have employment rates of less than 50% in 2015. This represents a significant drag on the overall economic performance of the city and is the greatest inhibitor to economic competitiveness. In addition, it is clear that particular groups – including young people – are being adversely impacted by the downturn in terms of their ability to find a job. It is important to consider a range of targeted interventions for such groups, in order to ensure that they do not become long-term unemployed because statistics suggest that the amount of time spend out of the labour market can have an adverse impact on your ability to find a job.**

- 6.4 **A study undertaken by Oxford Economics on behalf of Belfast City Council in 2008 found that over half of net new jobs in Belfast over next decade will require graduate qualifications while less than 1 in 7 will require no qualifications. A similar report undertaken at Northern Ireland level sought to forecast future skills needs up to the period 2020. This report noted that, if Northern Ireland had equivalent UK concentrations in sectors, the following could be achieved:**

- 12,000 more people in employment with sub-degree, degree and post-graduate qualifications
- 30,000 more managers and 20,000 more professionals
- 4,000 more STEM degree holders
- 7,000 more creative and arts degree holders in the workforce.

- 6.5 In our response to the Northern Ireland Executive's Economic Strategy: Consultation on Priorities for Sustainable Growth and Prosperity in February 2011, we suggested that the most significant challenge in driving the long-term vision of the Northern Ireland economy was addressing the skills mismatch. We noted that this was, in our view, fundamental to building a sustainable, innovative, dynamic economy. At present, there appears to be a disjoint between skills training undertaken and those required by industry and this is illustrated by the statistics presented above. The implications of not addressing this are borne out in the missed employment opportunities. This issue cannot be overlooked – particularly at a time when employment creation is so difficult to achieve.
- 6.6 In addition to the technical skills noted above, the draft strategy suggests that there is likely to be a need for additional skills, such as high standards of literacy, numeracy and ICT as well as greater management and leadership competencies. This need will be magnified if the projected growth in FDI as a result of changes in the corporation tax regime is realised. This need is particularly acute in small businesses where investment in management and leadership training tends to fall behind investment in more technical skills. If local companies wish to develop supply chain linkages with international companies, it will be important for them to invest in this type of training and support activity. At present, the provision of personal development training and company development support is not aligned and is the responsibility of a number of organisations and government agencies. Greater collaboration will be required in order to ensure that this happens in more systematic manner.
- 6.7 We welcome the commitment to enhancing investment in STEM subjects and consider that this is fundamental to the ambitions to rebalancing the economy. These subjects are required for the growth areas in which there is the greatest potential for wealth creation and productivity growth – such as those identified by MATRIX.
- 6.8 In terms of the 'rebuilding' priority, we consider that there is merit in looking at employment opportunities within lower value added sectors as a means to supporting access to the labour market for those individuals with low skills levels. If

this is the case, there is the potential to look at a 'skills escalator' approach whereby progression paths are created, thus creating a continual churn of new vacancies coupled with the incentive provided to those who do find work. This is particularly important where the financial impact of returning to work is – on paper – marginal. Regardless of the wider benefits of accessing employment, the incentive of an opportunity to earn more money is a useful 'hook' to help people back into the labour market. It is important, however, to acknowledge that employers are having particular difficulty in affording to recruit staff at present so incentives such as the 'Jobs Fund' are welcome in this regard.

- 6.9 We welcome the proposals to work on a city strategy for employability and have already commenced work on this with DEL. We consider that this will address some of the challenges identified in the strategy and will allow for greater coordination of delivery, without the need to invest significant additional resources. We also welcome the proposals for a single point of contact for employers. We consider that this resource should be able to provide access to the wide range of business support services available to local companies from all partners as there is significant confusion at present as to what is available. We acknowledge the challenge that this presents and would be happy to work with DEL and Invest NI to ensure that this operates successfully.
- 6.10 We consider that there is a need for better skills planning for the future growth industries identified in the strategy, so that we can not only attract but also retain and grow these businesses. We agree with the commitment that 'more must be done to better anticipate and deliver the strategic skills and employability requirements and to respond to future economic challenges and opportunities' (strategy reference 5.33). We consider that the current approach is disjointed and are supportive of a more planned approach to skills supply and demand, including identifying the role that we can play in this regard."

After discussion, the Committee agreed to endorse the response, subject to certain aspects being revised to reflect the Council's views in a more cogent manner. In addition, it was agreed that the response would be strengthened to reflect the following:

- that consideration be given to establishing a co-ordinated strategy to enhance numeracy and literacy skills to assist individuals to access the workplace; and
- that, in light of the proposals contained within the Government's Welfare Reform agenda, provision be made by the Executive to address existing skills deficits amongst individuals who had

experienced long-term unemployment or those considered to have a disability.

In addition, it was agreed that a letter be forwarded to the Minister for Social Development, Mr. Nelson McCausland, M.L.A., requesting that the City be included within any pilot scheme formulated by his department to address economic regeneration in light of the publication of the Mary Portas Review of High Streets in the United Kingdom.

European Social Fund - Match Funding Requests

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1 Relevant Background Information

- 1.1 The European Social Fund (ESF) Priority One provides financial support to promote training and other activities to assist long term unemployed people obtain sustainable employment.**
- 1.2 Funding is awarded through an open call for projects. Successful applicants are allocated funding on condition that they can provide 35% match funding from another public sector source.**
- 1.3 At the July 2011 meeting of the Development Committee, Members agreed to provide match funding for five European Social Fund (ESF) Priority One projects. Four of these projects were being delivered by community-based organisations – namely Stepping Stones; Upper Springfield Development Trust (USDT); Time Associates and Greater Village Regeneration Trust (GVRT). The fifth was being developed and managed by Belfast City Council, with Lisburn City Council as a project partner.**
- 1.4 The ESF projects are funded through Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) and are of a three years' duration. Match funding must be secured on an annual basis.**
- 1.5 Three of the community based projects have approached Belfast City Council for match funding for the year 2012-2013 (East Belfast Mission, Upper Springfield Development Trust and Time Associates). To continue the HARTE programme (managed by Belfast City Council) a commitment for match funding for 2012-2013 is also required.**

- 1.6 Although the Development Committee approved a commitment of £20,000 towards a project being managed by Greater Village Regeneration Trust, they had already been successful in securing match funding from another source (Belfast Regeneration Office - BRO). The Belfast City Council funding therefore was not required as it would have meant that BRO would have reduced their commitment to GVRT and the net effect would have been no greater for the project. BRO have once again committed the full amount of match funding required for the programme in the 2012-2013 period and therefore GVRT have confirmed that they are not seeking Belfast City Council match-funding for this project.

2 Key Issues

- 2.1 Appendix 1 (attached) provides a summary of performance to date and forecasts for year end from the four applicant projects, including financial amounts requested relating to the period 2012-2013.
- 2.2 The performance data for the three community based projects relates to April-December as the projects were able to commence at the start of the financial year as they already had some match funding in place from other sources.
- 2.3 The HARTE programme 2008-2011 has been nominated as finalist in the best European Funded Project category by the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). The contract for the current HARTE programme was awarded late September 2011, following a public procurement process, and the first training programmes began in mid-November 2011.

2.4 HARTE

To date, 41 participants have completed the programme gaining a total of 221 Level 2 qualifications in industry recognised fields such as customer care, health and safety, food hygiene and team leadership. Five participants have obtained employment and eighteen are awaiting further interviews or are going through the selection process being conducted by Titanic Belfast and Fitzer's (the catering contractor for Titanic Belfast). Arrangements have also been made for HARTE participants to have a guaranteed interview for employment opportunities at the MAC, due to open in April 2012. A new programme commenced on 30 January 2012 involving 20 participants and an additional programme will take place before the end of the financial year. In addition, the first ever HARTE programme will take place in the Lisburn City Council area in January 2012, to coincide with the extension of the Premier Inn in the city.

2.5 It is planned that there will be 7 HARTE programmes in 2012-2013, involving 84 long term unemployed people. Participants will be provided with accredited training and will be given dedicated pre-employment support and mentoring to help them find a job within the relevant field. The project has a target of 34 people into employment in the 2012-2013 financial year.

2.6 In the application made to DEL the estimated total project expenditure for the coming year will be £186,416. European Social Fund (ESF) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) will provide £122,656 of the costs and Lisburn City Council will contribute £9,000. To continue the

HARTE programme it is therefore anticipated that a match funding contribution of £54,760 will be required from Belfast City Council. The reason for the significant uplift in funding is the 40% increase in participant numbers for this financial year and represents full 12 month costs as opposed to anticipated 9 month costs requested for 2011-2012. It was always intended that the 2012-2013 year would be the most significant for this project, given its linkages to the tourism opportunities in this year.

2.7 Upper Springfield Development Trust (USDT) – Jobs on the Move

The progress report received from USDT indicates that the project is achieving results above target in terms of engaging with individuals and placing them into employment. 406 individuals engaged with the project to date this year with 40 obtaining employment against targets of 300 individuals engaged with the project and 30 to gain employment.

2.8 In 2011-2012, Belfast City Council committed £25,000 of match funding to an overall budget of £257,853. For the forthcoming year, 2012-2013 USDT are seeking match funding of £30,000 towards a total expenditure of £245,151. The DEL/ESF contribution will be £159,348 and USDT will provide £55,803 in match funding.

2.9 In 2011-2012, USDT received a one off grant of £5,000 from the Ireland Fund to provide extra support within the programme to engage with and find employment for political ex- prisoners from republican and loyalist communities. Currently 15% of the USDT caseload falls into this category.

2.10 USDT are requesting that the Council increases its match funding contribution by £5,000 from last year to replace this reduction in funding. The match funding from the council is currently used to contribute to the salary costs of employment advisers, working directly with clients. If further funding is approved it will also be used for this purpose. The project aims to engage with 300 clients and help 30 people find employment this year.

2.11 East Belfast Mission (EBM) - Jobs4U Project

The progress report received from EBM shows that the project is engaging with more people than originally forecast (168 against 150). 48 individuals have progressed to employment against a target of 37.

2.12 In 2011-2012, Belfast City Council committed £7,636 match funding as a contribution of 15% towards the costs of an

Employment Mentor. EBM are requesting support of £9,988 this year – a contribution of 20% towards the cost of an Employment Mentor. The overall project costs are £142,692. ESF will provide £92,750, EBM £27,705 and DEL £12,250. The project aims to engage with 175 clients and enable 44 people gain employment.

2.13 Time Associates/Belfast Metropolitan College – Learn to Earn

The target for the year 2011-2012 was to recruit 30 people onto the programme. By December, 24 people had been engaged. 10 of the participants have obtained employment or started the process of becoming self-employed.

2.14 Belfast City Council provided £5,000 of match funding towards overall project costs of £69,766 in the financial year 2011-2012. Time Associates are requesting a further contribution of £5,000 for the period 2012-2013 towards overall project costs of £71,324. ESF will contribute £46,360, BMC £9,000 and Time Associates £10,063. The project aims to engage with 24 clients and enable 8 gain employment or become self employed.

3 Resource Implications

3.1 The total match funding requests for the four projects in the coming financial year are £99,748.

4 Equality and Good Relations Considerations

- 4.1 All applications will be equality impact assessed by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) as part of their decision-making process.**

5 Recommendations

5.1 Members are asked to:

- **Note the match funding requests received by ESF project applicants**
- **Approve the match funding requests for the coming financial year, subject to targets being met.”**

After discussion, the Committee agreed to award the match funding in respect of the applications which had been submitted by the Upper Springfield Development Trust and the East Belfast Mission and agreed to defer consideration of the applications in respect of the HARTE Project and 'Learn to Earn' to enable further information to be provided on the projects.

Destination Belfast Project

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1 Relevant Background Information

- 1.1 Members will be aware that there is a significant volume of investment being made by the Council and its partner organisations to maximise the economic potential of 2012 and the additional opportunities that will be presented in 2013 through the World Police and Fire Games and other events.**
- 1.2 Through the Belfast Tourism Forum (BTF), representatives have identified for the industry to engage in a programme of quality and service improvement activities in order to enhance the quality and to develop new product and packages of activity.**
- 1.3 In June 2011, an application for financial support was submitted to Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) through the European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for a programme of activities under the heading of Destination Belfast. A decision on the funding application is to be made in early February 2012 and, if successful, it is proposed that the programme will be formally launched on 28 February 2012.**

2 **Key Issues**

2.1 The aim of the Destination Belfast programme is to drive the competitiveness of our local hospitality and service sector through capacity and skills development, in order to maximise the unprecedented opportunities – principally the investment into capital infrastructure and major events – being brought to the local and international markets from 2012 onwards.

2.2 Destination Belfast is aimed at the hospitality and sector including accommodation providers, attractions, restaurants, cafes, pubs, tour companies and transport providers across Belfast.

2.3 The programme incorporates three strands including:

The ‘Champions’ programme: this will be open to key contacts in the tourism industry across the city (participation to be advertised publicly). The aim of the initiative is to create a number of ‘ambassadors’ for the Belfast Tourism Framework and to provide them with key information on upcoming events as well as industry insights to inspire and engage them to improve the quality of their own product and to cascade the information locally or to other sectoral partners. Through this programme, we will encourage the development of new products and will provide mentoring and financial support to help test the concept and bring these forward.

Customer Service programme: we will put in place a comprehensive customer care programme, based on the ‘World Host’ model, as adopted by Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). We will supplement the standard training with a toolkit that allows the user to present a bespoke Belfast experience. We will also organise a number of customer service masterclasses with leading industry experts.

Market and sales development programme: this programme will help participants look at their current sales plan and marketing strategy and identify how these can be adapted to generate increased business and revenue. This programme will be accompanied by a number of ‘meet the buyer’ days where businesses will be able to meet with tour operators and other providers to develop new packages and understand how they can collaborate more effectively.

2.4 The programme will be promoted through the Belfast Tourism Forum and local tourism contacts. It will run for a period of around two and a half years. NITB is a partner in this programme and we will be working closely with them to understand how we can add value to and complement their offering and support in this field.

3 Resource Implications

- 3.1 The overall programme budget is around £400,000, half of which will be supported by DETI. Belfast City Council will contribute £200,000 over the lifetime of the programme. This has been accounted for in unit estimates through Economic Development Unit and Tourism and Culture and Arts Unit. NITB will also support individual events and initiatives to supplement this programme.
- 3.2 Part of the programme budget includes costs for a programme manager and part-time administrative support, up to a total cost of £50,000 per annum. 50% of these costs will be met by DETI while Belfast City Council will be expected to contribute up to £25,000 towards staff costs. It is anticipated that this project will require a full-time, dedicated project lead to ensure industry buy-in and to engage with potential participants.
- 3.3 Members are therefore asked to approve the recruitment of a fixed-term project manager and part-time administrative staff to deliver the Destination Belfast programme. The staff costs will be part-funded (50%) by DETI and will cost Belfast City Council a maximum of £25,000 per annum. This has been included with the Departmental estimates already agreed by Committee.

5 Recommendations

- 5.1 Members are asked to:
- Note the proposed 'Destination Belfast' programme and its individual initiatives;
 - Note the proposed programme launch date of 28 February 2012;
 - Approve the creation of additional temporary posts for a full-time project manager and a part-time administrative assistant."

The Committee adopted the recommendations and approved the associated costs.

INTERREG Funding Letter of Offer Approval

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

"1 Relevant Background Information

- 1.1 Members will be aware that the European Unit within the Development Department hosts a small 2.5 staffed INTERREG Unit. This resource exists to support the Greater Belfast (known as COMET Councils of Belfast, Castlereagh, Carrickfergus, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, and North Down) area to draw down EU funding from the INTERREG IVA

Programme. This is administered by the SEUPB, and since 2005, the greater Belfast region has become eligible for the first time to access this Cross Border funding which is available at 100%.

- 1.2 Since 2005, COMET has existed as an INTERREG Cross Border Partnership alongside the North East, North West, ICBAN and East Border Partnerships. COMET is governed by a Board of 12 elected members, 2 per Council and in the case of Belfast, is attended by the Chair and Deputy Chair of Development.
- 1.3 In 2007, COMET, along with the other 4 INTERREG Partnerships submitted Multi Annual Plans containing cross border projects deemed relevant to the economic development of that region. These were subsequently deemed null and void in 2009, as SEUPB changed the administrative process and instead planned to issue thematic calls for project applications.
- 1.4 In March 2011, COMET via BCC's INTERREG/ EU Unit supported, developed and submitted 5 projects under the Enterprise Call. A summary of all 5 projects is attached as Appendix 1 of this report.
- 1.5 The 5 projects have been through the robust SEUPB and Government Department's economic appraisal process and decisions were made as follows:
 - CEED Creative Industries project remains in the system with SEUPB and a decision is expected before June 2012.
 - Square One project led by Queens University was rejected and Queens decided not to formally appeal.
 - Product Sourcing led by Lisburn City Council was rejected and although the Council decided not to appeal, they will re-develop and re-submit the project under the new call which is currently open.
 - Gateways To Growth led by the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce was approved to a value of £433,570. Work is now underway to put in place a legal agreement between BCC and the NI Chamber of Commerce, and to ensure the project commences as early as possible within the desired governance and procurement requirements.

- Business Boot Camp led by Advantage NI (a non profit making training company) was approved to a less than expected value of £831,205

1.6 With regard to future calls, SEUPB opened a final call on 3 January 2012, closing 17 February 2012 for Stage 1 Applications. The call seeks cross border projects around Public Sector collaboration and shared services around ICT, energy, health, enterprise, tourism, roads and transport. Projects must lead to greater public sector efficiencies across the border and/or with Western Scotland and also lead to direct economic impact in the eligible area. The European Unit is currently undertaking extensive work to encourage and support applications for the call from BCC, the other COMET Councils and external shareholders. A full report will be brought to Committee in due course.

2 Key Issues

2.1 Members should be aware that the 2 approved COMET INTERREG projects must now proceed to implementation with due completion by 31 March 2015. Arrangements are already underway to commence the NI Chamber of Commerce Gateways to Growth project.

2.2 However it is stated within the Business Boot Camp Letter of Offer to Comet as Lead Partner, that the named lead project promoter and authors of the application, Advantage NI, are not deemed by SEUPB and the Government Departments to have robust enough governance arrangements to qualify as an official project lead promoter and public sector body. Because of this, the project must be publicly tendered in the Official EU Journal and steps are underway to prepare for this.

2.3 Members are asked to:

- accept the two INTERREG letters of offer relating to Gateways To Growth and Business Boot Camp and
- approve the use of the Official EU Journal public tendering procedure to source a delivery agent for the Business Boot Camp.

3 Resource Implications

3.1 Both approved INTERREG funded projects will be funded at a full cost recovery rate of 100%, therefore at no cost to BCC or the COMET Councils.

3.2 Project support for the newly approved and developing projects is undertaken by the INTERREG staff who are fully funded under the INTERREG Programme

3.3 Costs for publicly tendering the Business Boot Camp by BCC on behalf of COMET can be eligibly covered within the project costs.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Members are asked to:

- **Accept the 2 INTERREG funding letters of offer - Gateways to Growth £433,570 and Business Boot Camp - £831,205.**
- **Agree to use of the EU Official Journal public tendering process with respect to the Business Boot Camp proposal.”**

The Committee adopted the recommendations.

**European Empowerment and Inclusion –
End of Project Event**

The Committee was reminded that the Department's European Unit had, over a three-year period, worked in conjunction with the Department of Employment and Learning and Proteus (Northern Ireland) Limited in the delivery of a programme as part of the European Learning Network on Inclusion and Empowerment. It was reported that the programme had assisted in the creation of 'empowering' work environments which enabled unemployed persons to gain the necessary skills to return to the workplace. In addition, the programme had received commendations on its success and the Council had been requested to develop an award for best practice employers who sought to create all-inclusive workplaces.

Accordingly, the Committee was requested to authorise expenditure in the sum of £3,500 for the hosting of an end of programme event in the City Hall in the autumn of 2012. It was anticipated that the event would be attended by 150 persons and would provide an opportunity to showcase the Council's involvement in workplace empowerment to a wider European audience. It was noted that sufficient resources to host the event existed within the European Unit's budget for 2012/2013.

After discussion, the Committee authorised the expenditure as outlined and agreed that an invitation to speak at the event be extended to the incoming Lord Mayor and that the Chairman, the Deputy Chairman and all Members of the Development Committee be invited to attend.

European Pipe Band Championships

(Mr. G. Copeland, City Events Manager, attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee was informed that the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association had invited the Council to bid to host the European Pipe Band Championships in July 2013, 2014 and 2015. The City Events Manager reported that the costs to the Council, per annum, would be in the region of £155,000 over a period of three years and that, if successful, the Championships would be held either in the Ormeau Park or the Civil Service's Sports Grounds at Stormont.

He outlined the estimated numbers which would attend the events and provided an overview of the economic benefits which the City would accrue. He then gave an indication of the other sources of funding which would be accessed to offset the Council's contribution towards the Championships and recommended that the Committee grant authority to bid to host the events and, if successful, stage the Championships on the terms outlined.

The Committee granted the authority sought and noted that, if successful, a further report would be submitted outlining the total estimated costs to the Council.

St. Gallen Monastery - 1400th Anniversary

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 10th January, a Member had requested that a report be submitted to a future meeting outlining the Council's options for marking, in October, 2012, the 1400th anniversary of the founding by St. Gall of the eponymous St. Gallen Monastery in Switzerland. Accordingly, the Committee considered a report which indicated that the 2012/2013 City Events Unit budget had been allocated towards the holding of a range of pre-agreed events. Consequently, there existed no specific resources for the St. Gallen celebrations, but it was pointed out that the organisers of associated events could access funding through the Council's City of Festivals and Community Festivals funds.

After discussion, the Committee agreed to the following:

- that officers from the Department would advise the organisers of the St. Gallen celebrations of the various Council funding streams which could be accessed to assist in the holding of events to mark the centenary; and
- that a letter to be forwarded to the Mayor of St. Gallen suggesting that consideration be given to strengthening business and educational linkages between Belfast and St Gallen.

Consultation - Taxi Fare and Taximeter Regulations

The Committee was informed that the Department for the Environment had issued for consultation a document which sought the views of a wide range of bodies and agencies on a proposed introduction of minimum fare tariffs which would apply to all types of taxis in Northern Ireland. The Department had proposed also that all taxis in Northern Ireland would be obliged to operate a standardised taximeter which would be calibrated to the standard set tariff.

The Director advised the Members that under the new proposals all taxis would charge a minimum fare of £3.00 from Monday to Thursday, with that cost rising to £3.40 after 8.00 p.m. However, it was proposed that minimum fares after 8.00 p.m. on Fridays would rise to £4.20, and that this charge would apply also on Saturday and Sunday evenings. Such proposals would represent a 40% increase on present minimum fares. It was pointed out that the aim of the changes was to protect customers from overcharging and the Committee was apprised also of additional charges which would be levied for the carrying of additional passengers and the scope for passengers to negotiate prices for longer journeys. Accordingly, the Committee considered the undernoted response to the consultation:

Council Response

“General comments

- The Council recognise that the introduction of a new maximum fare tariff for all taxis in Northern Ireland, along with the requirement to have a taximeter calibrated to this fare is intended to promote fair competition and enhance consumer protection however, the Council is concerned that the maximum set tariff proposed will make travel by taxis unaffordable for individuals and families on low income. In particular the Council would not support the premium flag drop tariff for what is termed ‘unsociable hours’ for providing a taxi service between 8pm – 6am during the week, at weekends and on bank holidays when there are reduced or no public transport services.
- The recent Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2008-2010 indicated that 43% of households in Belfast have no car ownership and therefore are dependent on other forms of transport to access jobs and services. The Council would be concerned that for economically or socially disadvantaged communities, the costs of travel by taxi could be a major barrier to participating in everyday activities in particular activities in the evenings, weekends and Bank Holidays.
- The Council considers that the flag drop tariff which is the fare showing on the meter at the beginning of the journey is not affordable in particular the premium drop flag tariff of £4.20 for providing a taxi service for unsociable hours at weekends and Bank holidays. The proposed premium could have an adverse impact on the evening economy at a time when businesses are struggling to attract users. Consideration should also be given to implications for community safety where individuals may opt to walk home at night time rather than pay the premium fare proposed.

Q1. Is there under supply of taxis at these times? Do you consider that provision of an unsociable hours premium is appropriate?

The Council does not consider the provision of an unsociable hours premium at the rate proposed as appropriate. Any additional charges in the evening during the week, weekends, bank holidays so called ‘unsociable hours’, may discourage people from travelling, given that public transport provision is reduced in evenings and during holidays or weekends. The Council considers the proposed maximum fare tariff of £4.20 for weekends and bank holidays could be unaffordable for lower income individuals and families. The proposed premium could also have an adverse impact on the evening economy and potential impacts on personal safety.

Q2. Do you agree with the proposals for the maximum Fare Tariff in Northern Ireland?

The Council agree that a maximum tariff may be beneficial to the users and prevent over charging but as previously stated there is concern at the high rate proposed for the maximum flag drop tariff by the Department may have adverse implications for the city. Although drivers would have the opportunity to agree a reduced fare, the Council believe this introduces uncertainty; may not be apparent to the user or offered by the drivers and may deter individuals from using taxis.

Q3. Do you agree that a taxi operating under regulated fare should have only one Taximeter fitted?

Yes

Q4. Do you agree that permitted taximeters should be held on a list controlled by DVA until October 2016 when all taximeters should be compliant with Measuring Instruments Directive (MID) standards?

Yes

Q5. Do you agree that taximeters should continue to be clock calendar type?

Yes

Q6. Do you agree that a taximeter should be designed to ensure clarity of fare for ease of use by passengers, including on screen display, position of the meter within the taxi, single currency display and verbal clarification from driver if required?

Yes

Q7. Do you agree that all taximeters must be capable of operating a receipt printer which has secure transmission from the taximeter?

Yes and it should be a requirement to offer a receipt to all passengers. The Council would request clarification if a receipt will be provided if a lower fare is agreed.

Q8. Do you agree with the proposed acceptable optional functionalities being permitted but not required for all taximeters?

Yes

Q9. Do you agree that DVA should be responsible for the approval of taximeter, including publication of a list documenting permitted taximeters, until full implementation of MID?

Yes

Q10. Do you agree with the Department making it an offence to forge alter break or use a seal with the intention to deceive?

Yes

Q11. Do you agree that it is the drivers' responsibility to report if the taximeter is broken, and that until the taximeter is fully repaired and sealed the taxi will not be used for Hire and Reward?

Yes

Q12. Do you agree that all taxis operating to a regulated fare should have an illuminated sign which is extinguished automatically when the Taximeter is turned on?

Yes

Q13. Do you agree Taxis operating within a regulated fare must display a 'fares board' which can be viewed clearly by all seated passengers?

Yes this will allow for a transparent fare charging scheme, however the display should include information that a reduced fare can be agreed.

Q14. Do you agree with the assumptions of the impact of the proposed changes? If not please can you explain why and provide any evidence which supports that view?

The Council agrees that the proposed changes will create a transparent fare charging regime which should reduce the risk to users from over charging. However there are concern that the high levels for the flag drop down charges are not affordable.

The recent Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2008-2010 indicated that 43% of households in Belfast have no car ownership and therefore are dependent on other forms of transport to access entertainment, jobs and services. The Council would have concerns that for economically or socially disadvantaged communities, the costs of travel by taxi could be an additional barrier to participating in everyday activities especially activities in the evenings, weekends and Bank Holidays when there are reduced or no public transport services."

After discussion, the Committee endorsed the response, subject to it emphasising the Members' opposition to the concept of double or triple charging by taxi companies and to the Committee's opposition to the introduction of minimum pricing policies which could impact on firms at a local or community level thus creating a monopoly within the City of two or three firms.

Population Decline in Belfast - Proposed Research

In accordance with notice on the Agenda, Councillor Reynolds reminded the Committee that the City had experienced a sustained decline in its population since the mid-1960s. It was pointed out that there were a range of factors which had contributed to this fall but that the numbers choosing to live within the greater Belfast Metropolitan Area had continued to grow during that period. More pointedly, it was noted that the Electoral Wards in the City which had seen the most acute decline in population were also considered to have the highest levels of need as measured by the indices of multiple deprivation.

Councillor Reynolds pointed out that the decline in the City's population had diminished the Council's rate base which, in turn, impacted on its competitiveness in economic terms. In order to address the decline, he suggested that it would be necessary to identify the underlying trends and to assess why people chose not to live within the Council boundary. He, therefore, proposed that the Committee authorise the undertaking of an attitudinal survey which would identify the factors that have led the marked decline in the City's population. This research would assess the attitudes of current and former residents, commuters and visitors on the attractiveness of the City. The results would provide the Council with an insight into population decline and enable it to develop plans to boost the City's viability as a place to live.

After discussion, during which the Committee agreed that the formulation of an associated action plan to address the City's falling population would be commissioned as part of the project, it was agreed that a sum of £25,000 be allocated towards the research.

Chairman