



Subject:	Smart Belfast: Immersive technology initiatives
Date:	24 May 2024
Reporting Officer:	Sharon McNicholl, Director of Corporate Services
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Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?		
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Call-in		
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To update Members on a number of Immersive technology initiative currently being designed and delivered by the City Innovation Office.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The Committee is asked to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Note progress on the City Hall exhibition immersive experience and plans to present these at the next Members' City Hall and Grounds Installations Working Group.2. Note progress on the Augment the City challenge competition for SMEs and innovators.3. Note the delivery of the Maritime Mile Innovation Fund.
3.0	Main report
3.1	The Smart Belfast urban innovation programme encourages collaboration on digital innovation projects between government (both local and regional), industry, SMEs, academia and communities. Immersive digital technology (such as virtual reality and augmented reality) is one

of the digital technologies that the programme has prioritised, as it is recognised as having an important role in driving innovation in many disparate areas including planning, healthcare, advanced manufacturing, tourism and entertainment.

3.2 While immersive technologies are still at an early stage of maturity, they already generate £1.4 billion in turnover for over 2,000 companies nationally. Locally, a recent report by The Data City noted that the region has many of the characteristics necessary to establish a significant immersive ecosystem, with the sector already supporting over 200 local jobs.

3.3 Building on such potential, the City Innovation Office is taking forward three initiatives that aim to encourage greater investment in Immersive R&D by local companies, while at the same time helping to demonstrate the application of such technologies in the tourism sector. These initiatives are:

3.4 **(1) City Hall exhibition immersive experience**

Following Member approval, the Council and BT(NI) signed a collaborative agreement to work together on an experimental project called the 'Belfast City Hall Immersive experience'. Its aim is to explore the role of immersive tech and advanced connectivity in visitor locations such as City Hall, Belfast Stories and elsewhere, while at the same time offering a world-class visitor experience as part of the Belfast 2024 programme.

3.5 BT appointed the nationally renowned agency, Jam Creative Studios, to develop the concepts and content behind the experience. The team has worked closely with council officers over the past twelve months – particularly the Functions & Exhibition and Belfast 2024 teams - to develop an approach that is sensitive to the themes of the existing exhibition.

3.6 The immersive experience will focus on three rooms on the east side of City Hall (7, 8, and 9) which make up the 'City Speech' and 'City Streets' exhibitions themes. The new experience will use this existing content as a jumping-off point for an experience that allows visitors to explore these rooms in novel ways.

3.7 Each room will be equipped with iPads (while also offering the option for visitors to use their own mobile devices). This will be a magical experience, guiding visitors through the rooms with immersive, augmented reality moments. Room 7 will mainly concentrate on the Belfast accent, our turns of phrase, and the unique sound of local voices. Room 8 will explore the changing physical shape of the city in the past, present and future. For example, visitors will be immersed in virtual vignettes that explore the role of the city's now-hidden rivers. We're also asking young people from all over Belfast to give us their ideas of Belfast of the future. We'll recreate their

	<p>designs in 3D and add them to a virtual city model. Room 9, is a more playful room and we want to enable visitors to have some fun with interactive games and Instagram-able wall art.</p>
3.8	<p>These high-level concepts will be presented to the next meeting of the Members' City Hall and Grounds Installations Working Group. Following engagement with Members, the creative team will begin detail work on detailed-design and coding with the aim of opening to the public by mid-September.</p>
3.9	<p>(2) Augment the City SME Challenge</p> <p>Following Department of the Economy approval of a Belfast Region City Deal business case, the City Innovation Office opened the Augment the City challenge competition for applications in April 2024.</p>
3.10	<p>This £575,000 competition will provide R&D funding to up ten organisations (including individuals, start-ups and SMEs) to work with the team from Belfast Stories to explore the role of immersive technologies in supporting individuals to contribute their stories to future Belfast Stories collection.</p>
3.11	<p>Thirty-two organisations applied to the competition. The ten winners will commence in June 2024 working with Belfast Stories, Digital Catapult and the City Innovation Office to develop their ideas over the next eighteen months. The best of these will be tested and show-cased in City Hall alongside the immersive experience.</p>
3.12	<p>(3) Maritime Mile Challenge Fund</p> <p>With funding from Horizon 2020, the City Innovation Office, working with Belfast Maritime Trust, awarded £120,000 to six local creative businesses, artists and innovators to create experimental projects aimed at animating and enriching the local heritage of the Maritime Mile.</p>
3.13	<p>The winning projects were powered by a range of technologies including AI, 3D film, augmented reality and virtual reality. Each ran co-creation sessions with local partners and communities, gathering stories, artwork, and artefacts that shaped their individual prototypes. The projects were open to the public in April and May, encouraging increased footfall, dwell-time and local spend.</p>
3.14	<p>Projects included: an interactive experience with an AI 'Salmon of Knowledge' (ie, the 'Big Fish'); a joint project with the Public Records Office and local communities to develop interactive 3D/virtual reality rooms; an AI 'Voyage to the Past', that brought local historical figures to life; a project with Sailortown Regeneration Group to explore new ways to preserve heritage and local</p>

	<p>stories through interactive digital sculpture and storytelling; an immersive experience along the Yardman’s Trail; and an augmented reality experience highlighting HMS Caroline’s heritage.</p>
3.15	<p>A follow-up survey found that the participating companies were overwhelming positive about their experience and its contribution to their own R&D work. While three-quarters of local participants reported that the programme greatly enhanced their knowledge of local history.</p>
	<p>Financial & Resource Implications</p>
3.16	<p>Budgets for the initiatives noted above are funded via third-party sources, with any Council contributions identified within the existing City Innovation Office and Belfast Region City Deal budgets.</p>
3.17	<p>Under the terms of the collaborative R&D agreement Belfast City Council are bringing managed access to the City Hall location, creative content, promotion, and access to the new small cell network in City Hall – which is funded as part of the Augment the City Challenge. BT are bringing substantial technology and development support.</p>
	<p>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</p>
3.18	<p>None.</p>
4.0	<p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p>
	<p>None</p>