



<b>Subject:</b>	City Innovation programme update
<b>Date:</b>	23 August 2024
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Sharon McNicholl, Director of Corporate Services
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Mark McCann, City Innovation manager (Acting)

<b>Is this report restricted?</b>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?</b>		
<b>After Committee Decision</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>After Council Decision</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Sometime in the future</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Never</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

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

<b>1.0</b>	<b>Purpose of Report</b>
1.1	To update Members on City Innovation initiatives and to seek approval on a number of key projects developing over the next few months.
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	The Committee is asked to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Note the launch of the £277,000 Belfast 5G competition call aimed at businesses across the Belfast Region.</li><li>2. Note plans to test and launch the Immersive experience within the City Hall Exhibition in late September – and the invitation to Members to attend a preview on 20 September.</li><li>3. Note the launch of the Augment the City Phase Two funding call in September with approx. £50,000 available to up to five companies.</li><li>4. Note ongoing discussions to support an ‘meanwhile use’ inclusive innovation hub at Weaver's Cross.</li></ol>

	<p>5. To approve the development of a collaborative area-based inclusive innovation project with Queen’s University’s Communities and Place team</p> <p>6. To note the request to work with Connected Places Catapult on forthcoming Horizon Europe inclusive innovation calls.</p>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	The Smart Belfast urban innovation programme encourages innovative collaboration between government, industry, SMEs, academia and communities. The aim is to harness digital innovation to address public policy challenges, while at the same time encouraging greater investment in innovation to stimulate economic growth. The following initiatives seek to contribute to both these aims:
3.2	<p><b>(1) Belfast 5G Innovation Regions competition</b></p> <p>As part of the Belfast 5G Innovation Regions programme, funded by the Dept for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Belfast City Council has launched a £277,000 competition aimed at businesses across the Belfast City Deal region.</p>
3.3	The competition is designed to encourage the early commercial adoption of advanced wireless connectivity. The Council published full guidance on 20 August and the competition has already received 50 expressions of interest. Funded projects will run from October until March 2025 (when the main Belfast IR programme is due to end).
3.4	<p><b>(2) Belfast City Hall Immersive experience</b></p> <p>Work is almost complete on the augmented reality immersive experience within the existing City Hall exhibition (located in three rooms on the east side of City Hall). This is a significant collaborative R&amp;D project with BT Northern Ireland.</p>
3.5	Work is also underway on arrangements to manage the experience which is expected to go live in late September and run for six months. Officers are planning a Members preview on the afternoon of 20 September following the next SPR meeting. (An invite will be issued to Members once details are confirmed).
3.6	<p><b>(3) Augment the City Challenge competition</b></p> <p>This City Deal funded competition is providing £575,000 across three phases to up ten organisations to work directly 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. The aim is to inform the future procurement and design of digital solutions for managing the story-collection aspects of Belfast Stories.</p>

3.7

Ten organisations received £10,000 each in phase one to develop concepts initial which were presented to a panel at a stakeholder workshop in June. The audience included representatives from the region's Tourism sector and other local councils.

3.8

Work is now underway for the launch of Phase 2 which will open in September. Up to five of the original 10 organisations will receive further funding to develop Proofs of Concepts that are more tailored to the specific needs of Belfast Stories. A third phase will follow with final working proto-types solutions being developed early in winter 2025.

3.9

#### **(4) Inclusive innovation**

At the June SPR committee, Members asked for an update on the Council's work on inclusive innovation. The following sets out the current status of this work.

3.10

In developing its Smart Belfast framework, Belfast City Council recognised the importance of integrating an inclusive approach to its urban innovation programme. The national Innovation Agency, NESTA, was commissioned in 2023 to engage with local innovation partners to identify opportunities for integrating such an approach into the activities, not only of Belfast City Council, but other innovation partners including Innovation City Belfast and the Belfast Region City Deal.

3.11

The Nesta work identified two main drivers for inclusive innovation in Belfast:

- A commitment to a place-based, challenge-led approach that requires the ability of citizens and communities to collaborate with government, universities and industry to better understand and address complex urban problems. (and likewise the capacity of these other sectors to collaborate effectively with communities.) This includes a commitment to direct citizen participation and co-design in developing and delivering innovative solutions.
- A commitment to building core competencies and skills with residents and communities to maximise the benefits of living in a society increasingly shaped by digital technology. This is not just about providing a pathway to training and employment but about supporting communities to address issues of data privacy, disinformation, and access to services.

Nesta indicated that forthcoming UK and EU funding for research and innovation will be increasingly predicated on the capacity of cities and institutions to integrate inclusive innovation into their approaches.

3.12	Nesta noted that Belfast's existing community development infrastructure provides an important foundation on which to develop an inclusive innovation programme. And that the development of a core city programme would add significant value to existing approaches.
3.13	In parallel with the Nesta work, the City Innovation Office has led on a number of inclusive innovation projects including the £2m Homes for Healthy Ageing project which brought together health companies and university researchers, to work with older people in the Market area to test medical technologies that sought to address issues of stress, anxiety and loneliness. Feedback from the people taking part in the project was extremely positive, while a number of the companies involved went on to develop successful products.
3.14	The Office has also led on the three-year €675,000 'Hubs of Innovation' programme in partnership with the Belfast Maritime Trust. This EU funded project brought together communities along the city's waterfront, with tech innovators and creatives, to develop new ways to explore local cultural and heritage as part of the wider regeneration of the maritime mile.
3.15	Lately, the City Innovation Office has been engaging with Ormeau Labs, Young Social Innovators, Queen's University and Ulster University on joint opportunities to take forward inclusive innovation projects.
3.16	Professor Joan Condell from Ulster University is developing a programme similar in nature to Homes for Healthy Ageing that would work with carers, GPs and med tech companies. Professor Condell is awaiting a funding decision for the initiative and if successful is keen to work with Belfast City Council on accessing a city centre managed location close to inner city communities.
3.17	With funding from Invest NI, Ormeau Labs and other partners, wish to develop a Tech for Good programme based in Belfast that would work with young people to develop entrepreneurial skills and opportunities to grow new businesses that address social issues such as climate change and health issues.
3.18	Young Social Innovators (YSI) recently received €2.2 million from Peace Plus to deliver the IGNITE programme. This is aimed at 16 to 24 year olds across Northern Ireland and border counties and is designed to build innovation skills with people who are not in traditional education or skills pathways. IGNITE will build competencies in problem-solving, group work, leadership and the use of tech. While the programme covers all of Northern Ireland YSI are keen to have a city centre location to allow it to focus on cohorts in inner city

	<p>communities. YSI are working with Council officers to develop onward opportunities for people who take part in the IGNITE programme including training and apprenticeships.</p>
3.19	<p>The Council has also been approached by Translink and their master developer, MRP, about the potential of making available a shared innovation space as part of a 'meanwhile use' social value programme at Great Victoria Street bus station (which is due to permanently close this autumn). They are currently in discussion with partners (including those above) to determine if such a space could add value to inclusive innovation projects and generate specific opportunities for communities close to Weaver's Cross. An update on this will be brought to Members in the coming months.</p>
3.20	<p>Finally, the City Innovation Office has been engaging with Queen's University's Communities and Place (QCAP<sup>1</sup>) team. With funding from Queen's and the Dept of Communities, QCAP have been working with the Market Development Association to establish an inclusive innovation programme that provides local people with the research, tech, data and training necessary to harness digital innovation to understand and address local issues.</p>
3.21	<p>Ultimately QCAP are interested in scaling their model across the entire city. As a next step they are keen to collaborate with Belfast City Council on a pilot, similar in nature to the Market project, but based in another inner-city community to explore local issues of climate and urban health. This would allow both QCAP and the Council to better understand how this unique approach can inform planning and service delivery within the Council and the public sector more broadly. Queen's have costed a one-year project at £64,000 and have asked Council to consider providing joint funding.</p>
3.22	<p>Members are asked to approve the development of a such collaborative project with QCAP. Following approval, the QCAP team and council officers will engage with local Members and community organisations on the merits and focus of such a project to determine how the existing Market model could be best adapted for another context. Officers would then engage with the relevant Area Working Group and bring a final proposal back to committee in the coming months for approval.</p>
3.23	<p>Finally, it was noted above that inclusive innovation forms a major strand of several EU funding programmes including Horizon Europe. For example, there are two current calls each to the value of €90 million aimed at supporting work between government, industry, universities and the citizen. Belfast City Council has been approached by Connected Places Catapult which is engaging with other European cities to consider a joint bid to these or</p>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/qcap/>

	similar competitions. Work such as that undertaken by QCAP, YSI, Ormeau Labs and others would provide important foundations for Belfast's participation in such competitions.
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</b>
4.1	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. Members have also approved £29,500 for an inclusive innovation pilot.
<b>5.0</b>	<b>Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment</b>
5.1	None.
<b>6.0</b>	<b>Appendices – Documents Attached</b>
6.1	None