

Appendix 1

# **NI Executive - Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most - Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027**

## **Draft Belfast City Council Response**

**Consultation Deadline: 4 November 2024**

## 1.0 Introduction

Belfast City Council (“the Council”), welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Executive’s Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most, the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 (“PfG”).

The response is set out in two parts; the first is an overview of the key strategic and cross-cutting issues which the Council would recommend be considered when finalising the PfG. The second part sets out detailed comments in respect of immediate priorities, future commitments and missions set out by the NI Executive.

### (i) A time of challenge but also opportunity

The Council believes that the draft Programme for Government is presented at a time of both exciting opportunity and huge challenge for Northern Ireland. Given the growing trend towards greater globalisation and the uncertainties which exist, there is a need to develop new integrated approaches to ensuring the region remains competitive on a national and international scale, ensure we continue to attract investment and connect economic growth and social wellbeing.

There is little doubt that the scale and complexity of policy issues facing local government is ever increasing. The role of local government and councils as place-based representatives and civic leaders, require Councils to play key an active role in advocating for and influencing wider responses and solutions to these pervasive policy issues. There is no doubt of the improved effectiveness and positive impact of central and local government working together to deliver the level of public services are citizens deserve or in responding together in times of emergency.

### ii. Working together to deliver

By challenging the traditional ways of working and breaking through silos, the draft PfG provides an ideal platform to roll out a ‘whole system approach’, strengthening the relationship between regional and local government and creating an environment which facilitates the joint provision of services. The Council acknowledges the challenges embedded in this new way of working and the time it will take to successfully evolve as a ‘normal’ pattern of working. The Council welcomes the commitment made by the NI Executive in page 4 of the PfG that *‘Our Plan is an ambitious agenda for change for Northern Ireland. We will make it happen by working in partnership’*.

The Council is therefore fully committed to working alongside colleagues in the NI Executive, Voluntary and Community sector, our universities and academic institutions, businesses and the private sector to co-design and support the delivery of specific programmes of work required to achieve the ambitions set out in the PfG. The duty of community planning and local development planning has provided an overarching framework for Councils to work with statutory partners to enhance the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas and deliver sustainable improvements for all.

The Council believe that to deliver on the ambitions and priorities contained in the PfG it is essential that both tiers of government work together in partnership to develop the policy and delivery frameworks by which to address the major challenges being faced by our citizens. There is a real opportunity to maximise the synergies and linkages between regional and local outcomes and together design impactful programmes and initiatives which will help address many of the entrenched societal and economic issues impacting upon local communities across Northern Ireland.

The Council has a strong track record of working in partnership with the NI Executive to implement national and regional policies and programmes at a local level and delivering positive outcomes for local communities, including, for example, the Urban Villages programme, Labour Market Partnership, supporting vulnerable individuals in need through Complex Lives initiative as well as securing the transformational £850million Belfast City Region Deal (BRCD). The BRCD involves an integrated programme of investment that cuts across the responsibilities of local councils, the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government and will deliver 20,000 new jobs over the next decade.

Our intention to continue a genuine partnership approach is one that recognises that we are not solely seeking to deliver for Belfast, but the wider region, as in our view the two are mutually dependant.

Having reviewed the PfG the Council believe there are a number of key strategic opportunities for cross-cutting collaboration between The NI Executive and the Council in areas such as:

- **Developing a place-based approach to regeneration** which ensures that future investments and interventions into local areas is informed by an improved understanding of local assets, needs and priority outcomes.
- **Delivering housing programme at scale** – helping to unlock innovative funding models and land to deliver housing developments at scale as well as delivering wider environmental benefits including energy efficiency through development standards or retrofitting. Belfast has established a cross-sectoral Retrofit Hub to help move towards the goal of retrofitting housing stock in Belfast with more efficient energy usage, to reduce carbon emissions and energy demand.
- **Delivering critical infrastructure** – exploring and identifying innovative financing and/or delivery models to bring forward investment to unlock critical infrastructure challenges including Water and Waste.
- **Responding to the climate crisis** - the Council has been at the forefront of accelerating climate action through collaboration, blending research and intelligence with statutory and community action. The Council has appointed a Climate Commissioner and co-designed with partners an ambitious climate action plan and roadmap to net-zero. There are significant opportunities around Green Growth which we are seeking to realise through cross-sectoral delivery partnerships.

- **Proven delivery partnerships** - the Council would also be keen to use **Community Planning** in its broadest sense to support the delivery of the ambitions set out in the PfG on the basis of a proper partnership model approach, and believe this existing vehicle provides an opportunity which could be highlighted more within the PfG.
- Belfast City Council strongly advocates the need for informal and formal structures for effective dialogue and working between layers of government – including mechanisms like the Northern Ireland Political Partnership Panel.

### iii. Financing the Programme for Government

The Council recognises the **significant pressures on public finances** faced by the NI Executive and the challenges this presents on the deliverability and sequencing of implementing the commitments set out in the PfG. The Council would welcome further detail on the financial strategy which will support delivery of the PfG, and significant priorities contained therein (for the example water infrastructure, climate). The Council would commend that active consideration be given to exploring alternative financial models and/or delivery models and partnerships and would highlight the recent work on securing City Deals being a demonstrator of what is possible. We would welcome the opportunity to have further discussions with central government on any potential to **establish joint funds** that can be used to co-invest in shared priorities.

It is important to highlight some of the recent challenges experienced by local government in terms of delivering in partnership with NICS Departments resulting from budgetary pressures and absence of a multi-year funding model. Significant and high impact programmes, such as Good Relations, Animal Welfare and supporting people suffering from hardship have been developed and jointly funded with NIHE Departments. Yet after the initial success of such programmes of work funding has been either reduced or removed and the Council has had to seek to source alternative funding which has not always been possible. We are keen to see the introduction of a **long-term sustainable funding model** to deliver public services and the strategic priorities of both central and local government.

The Council welcomes the proposed **£235 million Transformation Fund** earmarked to support the Reform and Transformation of Public Services and would welcome further engagement with NI Executive colleagues on the role of local government in the design and implementation of this fund.

The Council would also welcome further details being included within the PfG as to how through partnership and collaboration, central and local government can work together to achieve better outcomes. Examples of positive collaboration include Complex Lives, Wider University and Lower Ormeau, City Deals, Seamless Pathways and Inclusive Pathways to Good Employment in Health and Social Care. The Council are keen to continue working on this multi-agency basis, and over and above funding being provided to deliver programmes of work, the Council would prefer to be involved in earlier interactions with partners during the co-design process, along with partners in the Community and Voluntary Sector to deliver a true co-design approach to addressing the often complex and inter connected challenges

that we face. The Council has recently designed a co-design model in conjunction with the Community and Voluntary Sector which can provide a basis for a new way of working which could help deliver the Programme for Government and transformation of Public Services.

So, whilst the Council are a willing partner to help deliver solutions to the complex and cross-cutting issues that we as a society face, we need to be fully involved in understanding and designing the delivery solutions to these issues.

#### **iv. Place-Based Regeneration**

As referred to above, the Council believe there is a real opportunity to work across government and with local communities to transform local places. Sustainable development and regeneration provide the basis for transformational change and wide-ranging benefits, inclusive opportunity, equality, and stronger links between people and places. A placed-based approach is needed to ensure buy-in, engagement and appropriate delivery of social value, economic and environmental benefits in a sustainable way for individual residents, communities and potential investors including central and local government and the private sector.

There is no doubt local government has a pivotal role in supporting a place-based approach and understanding the local challenges and opportunities which exist. It is important that councils are provided with the appropriate powers and resources to respond to and help unlock the potential of their places and communities. This resonates with the growing call from the Core Cities group which Belfast is a member.

In relation to further devolution of powers to local government. Belfast City Council still believes further powers should be provided to local government including regeneration related functions. These additional powers will provide councils with the tools required to serve the needs of their communities, reduce inequalities and provide a tailored place-based response to the major policy issues of the day.

Our view of the role of local government is illustrated in the City's community plan, the Belfast Agenda 2035, which is focused on inclusive economic growth and connecting neighbourhoods and people to the opportunities it creates. This Plan has also demonstrated that the city has huge potential to create resilience and sustainability in terms of the economy, jobs, skills, tourism, and culture, with a focus on using innovation to tackle the city's challenges including climate change, Brexit, legacy of conflict and economic inactivity.

#### **v. Role of Cities and Towns**

The Council would welcome the opportunity to engage further with central government regarding the potential of cities and towns across Northern Ireland to work together based on their unique set of strengths that make them worthy of focus in a plan to regenerate and transform our public services. The current approach to city deals across Northern Ireland is an excellent example of how cities and towns are more transformative as a collective as opposed to when operating within silos.

There are strengths that local cities and towns have in common, but also exhibit individually and which can be combined in complementary ways to operate as a regional collective or network. This approach aligns to established research undertaken by OECD and RSA for the Core Cities network which highlights the place-shaping strength of cities and towns to play a key role in delivering the ambitions of central government.

The Council believes that rebalancing the economy by encouraging private sector investment and supporting market diversification, as well as promoting inclusive growth, is essential for generating sustainable growth, increasing productivity and creating diverse and well-paid jobs not only in Belfast but across the region. Central to this is improving the skills and employability levels. It is important that as many people as possible benefit from growth and the city's success, extending well beyond the city boundaries.

Northern Ireland's cities and towns already have considerable strengths. The question is how these can be most effectively identified and deployed, including in complementary ways with other cities and towns. This is more complex when we look to the future and consider strengths that may still be emerging but offer significant promise for innovation and growth.

Beyond the usefulness of these insights for individual cities and towns, this approach can inform a more collaborative – rather than competitive – approach to unlocking the region's future opportunities. By working together to identify sources of investment and other enablers (such as skills), our local cities and towns can unlock benefits that are more than the sum of their parts.

## Immediate priorities, future commitments and missions

1. Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy	
<b>The Issue</b>	Our economy continues to grow, and we now boast a growing reputation on the world's economic stage, backed by our leadership in key sectors and underpinned by our skills and technology. But not everyone here is feeling the benefit of that growth and there is still a long way to go.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>Through a series of multi-million-pound committed investments, we will make this a more vibrant and inclusive place to live, work, invest and visit. Central to every part of our plan for a globally competitive and sustainable economy will be employers and workers. Supporting them to build the skills needed both now, and in the future, will be vital if we are to harness our economic potential. Focused on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Productivity</li> <li>• Good Jobs</li> <li>• Decarbonisation</li> <li>• Regional Balance</li> </ul>
Belfast City Council Response	
<p>Belfast City Council welcomes the inclusion of this priority and wishes to highlight the city's role as the regional economic driver, recognising that continued growth for Belfast and the wider city region has broader benefits for the entire region.</p> <p>The PfG recognises that our economy continues to grow, and we now boast a growing reputation on the world's economic stage. The Belfast economy has performed well over the last two decades, in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 30,000 net additional jobs since 2012 (BRES, NISRA) - almost 1 in 4 of all jobs created over that period.</li> <li>▪ Average annual economic growth rate of 5% between 2012 and 2022.</li> <li>▪ The Belfast economy has grown by £6.4 billion or 58% over the last decade (Regional GDP by all ITL regions, ONS 2024).</li> <li>▪ Unemployment sitting at a low of 2.4% (Labour Force Survey, NISRA 2023)</li> <li>▪ £16.1bn of GVA in 2022, 1/3 of the Northern Ireland economy (Regional gross domestic product all ITL regions, ONS)- £32.6 bn for the Belfast region, 2/3 of the NI economy.</li> <li>▪ 236,476 jobs in the city and 504,692 in the wider region, representing 30% and 64% of all NI jobs respectively.</li> </ul>	

- Business base – there are 11,300 active enterprises in the city and 40,015 enterprises in the Belfast region; 1 in every 7 NI businesses are based in Belfast and 1 in 2 in the Belfast region (Inter Departmental Business Register, NISRA 2023)
- Globally competitive location with well-established strengths in key growth sectors:
  - Number 1 inward investment globally location for US FDI cyber security projects (FDI Markets 2020).
  - Number 1 location globally for FinTech inward investment (FDI Markets 2023).
  - Number 1 location in Europe for new software development projects (FDI Markets 2023).

The council wishes to further emphasise that this strong economic performance drives growth across the whole region.

- Belfast is the region's key population centre: it has a population of 348,005, and the Belfast region (based on the TTW area) is home to a population of over 1.13 million people (around 60% of the total regional population).
- Belfast is a new job creator for all adjacent areas – particular those around the city. Almost half of those that work in Belfast do not live in the city and Belfast City Council residents account for only 53% of total workplace employment in the city. This is indicative of the City's role as an employment hub for NI, attracting a high proportion of in-commuters.
- Incomes in neighbouring council areas (Lisburn & Castlereagh, Ards & North Down, Antrim & Newtownabbey) are on average higher than for Belfast residents. Average earnings for residents in Lisburn & Castlereagh are 6% higher than Belfast citizens; Antrim & Newtownabbey residents have earnings 3.4% greater than Belfast (ASHE, NISRA 2023).

However, as the PfG identifies, not everyone is feeling the benefit of this growth and there is still a long way to go. This is particularly the case within the Belfast city council area, as evidenced by:

- Average earnings of Belfast residents lag behind that of its workforce: those living outside of Belfast but working in the city earn on average £3,474 a year more than Belfast residents.
- While Belfast supports proportionately more higher-level jobs than other areas, it also has a disproportionate level of deprivation in many neighbourhoods: 6 of the top 10 most deprived wards in NI are in Belfast while the top 15 most deprived wards for the Education, Skills and Training domain are all in Belfast.
- The employment rate in Belfast varies greatly by local area – and is significantly lower in areas of deprivation. The employment rate of those living in the most deprived areas of Belfast is 22 percentage points less than those living in the least deprived areas (55% v 77%)
- There is a significant gap in life expectancy between most and least deprived areas – this equates to 11 years for males and 8 years for females.
- A significant proportion (43%) of all Belfast residents have skills levels not higher than level 2 (5 GCSEs equivalent) – with 16.5% (1 in 6) of all residents having no formal qualifications (Qualification level by Local Government District, TblLFS2338, Labour Force Survey 2022). By contrast, the skills demand for the coming period shows that fewer than 1 in 10 jobs will



require skills levels below level 2. This suggests that future growth in Belfast will continue to be serviced by those living outside the city.

We welcome the Executive's plans to work with councils and local partners to deliver the Sub-Regional Economic Action Plan. While we understand the objective of regional balance this should not be at the cost of further developing the Belfast economy, which represents  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the Northern Ireland economy. Research also shows that cities drive productivity:

- In OECD countries, cities (which are home to 50% of total population) have contributed 60% of total employment creation and GDP growth in the past 15 years.
- OCO Global suggests that cities are magnets for FDI as they are home to 3 in 4 of all highly skilled jobs.
- Belfast and the wider region possess many of the assets that direct FDI decisions (The Productivity Institute) including its skilled workforce, universities and researchers, vibrant cultural scene, industry clusters and transport infrastructure.
- These assets are also critical in positioning the city as a base for fast-growing, globally focused businesses. We need to grow more innovation-focused businesses to drive our competitiveness. This also helps address a reliance on FDI – with local businesses more likely to “stick” to their home location – even when they ‘go global’.
- Regional productivity performance has been linked to investment in research and development (R&D) and other innovation activities (Cozza et al., 2012; Vieira et al., 2011). The Belfast Region City Deal presents a unique opportunity to develop clusters of high-growth industries and innovative businesses, providing agglomeration benefits and ‘knowledge spillover’ effects. Concentrating economic activity in a small city such as Belfast increases the productivity of that activity.
- Belfast came 5<sup>th</sup> overall in the FDI Intelligence Magazine's Top 10 mid-sized European Cities of the Future 2024
- The battle for investment is a global not a regional one: comparing only against adjacent districts is a zero-sum game. Whilst there has been much progress there continues to be significant areas for improvement in our productivity performance.

The challenge in Belfast is that we need to maintain focus on continued improvement and ensure more of our citizens benefit from good jobs.

- Haven't yet reached our potential – and the competition is strong. More than 41% of the working age population on the NI side of Dublin-Belfast economic corridor are skilled at level 2 and below: in ROI, this is 28%. (Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor Skills Research Project, UUEPC 2024)
- Belfast needs more new businesses – there were 29.7 business start-ups per 10,000 population in 2022 – the worst performance of all 63 urban areas in the UK (Core Cities)
- We accept the argument around the need for targeted investment – we have that at a micro level within our city. We need to maintain a focus on a growth agenda – while putting in place targeted activities to support inclusive and more sustainable growth.

- We have taken the lead on developing solutions that can drive productivity and support local economic growth across the wider region and city region e.g. BRCD and NIESS.
- In order to raise productivity, future policy should aim to help places achieve their productivity potential, which will differ from area to area, rather than trying to get every council area to achieve the same level of productivity.
- Investment decisions are taken on a global level: so, Belfast is not competing with its neighbouring towns and cities for FDI investment in particular – we are competing against other global cities, who are all continuing to invest.

The Council are keen to understand the outworkings of the Sub-Regional Economic Plan recently published by the Economy Minister and will work with partners to ensure that this Plan helps to promote economic growth for the city and wider region.

The Council support and welcome the focus on creating 'Good Jobs' and are willing through our economic development portfolio, to assist government partners and businesses to achieve jobs within a good jobs framework to support inclusive and sustainable economy.

The Council is also willing to share experiences in relation to tackling climate issues across the city and help identify and explore opportunities around Green Growth and the creation of job opportunities which will allow the green economy to grow and prosper.

The Council welcome the commitment of the NI Executive in relation to its £150 million investment to a new enhance Investment Zone. However, we would welcome further detail in terms of the Executive wishes to utilise this funding and how this proposed Investment Zone would operate in practice.

The Council wish to explore how we can work with partners to use the information we have to plan better around skills needs and training provision to meet these needs with the objective of supporting inclusive economic growth for all and in particularly pre-identified cohorts.

The Council believe that **Good Relations** enables people to be able to achieve their potential and access jobs wherever they are located. Thus, requiring Good Relations to be a key underpinning principle to a sustainable economy. Promoting Good Relations is key to improving the quality of life for everyone in the city and these are central to economic regeneration, attracting talent, sustaining inward investment, generating tourism and tackling poverty. As such, Good Relations is essential to growing a globally competitive and sustainable economy.

The Council believes that harnessing innovation can support future economic growth. At a city level we have established a new partnership, Innovation City Belfast, which brings together Belfast City Council, Belfast Harbour, Catalyst, Queen's University and Ulster University. Our Smart Belfast urban innovation programme stimulates collaborative innovation between businesses, industry, academia, public sector, private sector and communities, and provides a catalyst for a step change in the digital and innovation capabilities of our region. It will drive investment in research and development and help embed a culture of innovation to act as a driver for increased productivity.

## 2. Deliver More Affordable Childcare

<b>Issue</b>	We need to make childcare more affordable for parents to support employability and ease financial pressures. This must complement existing support available through Universal Credit and tax-free childcare. We also need to ensure that our childcare sector is stable and sustainable.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	We have already started to develop a long-term approach which will make childcare more affordable and help parents stay in or return to work. We know support cannot come soon enough, and that is why we are taking steps to introduce a balanced package of measures this year. This has the interests of children at its core and will ease current financial pressures on providers and families. It will also lay the foundation for an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. Focused on the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Investing Today</li><li>• Early Learning and Childcare Strategy</li></ul>

### Belfast City Council Response

The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive's draft Programme for Government and is willing to engage and explore opportunities for supporting the NI Executive in achieving this PfG priority.

The Council as both an organisation led by elected representatives and as an employer recognises the financial burden and pressures faced by local families in relation to childcare places across the city and its staff.

The Council's interest in this area is illustrated by a number of Notices of Motion proposed by elected members in recent years, relating to Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, pressures of high costs of childcare, Childcare Provision and Childcare Strategy which highlights the understanding of elected members of the pressures in relation to this immediate priority.

Therefore, the Council commends the inclusion of this issue as an immediate priority for the NI Executive, and welcomes the Executive's commitments to:

- Invest up to £25 million this year
- Introducing a 15% childcare subsidy for parents in receipt of tax-free childcare who have children below primary school age
- Support existing childcare and early years programmes
- A standardised provision of 22.5 funded pre-school hours per week

- Build a skilled, valued and happy workforce including a new Skills Academy
- Develop an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

### 3. Cut Health Waiting Times

<b>Issue</b>	We have the longest hospital waiting times in the UK, with people struggling to get the treatment they need. In recent years, pressure has increased due to both a rise in demand but also the impact of the pandemic on the Health and Social Care system. These have combined adding to the backlog of patients awaiting care. This backlog is unacceptable.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>The need to improve performance, increase productivity, and improve the quality and consistency of care is well understood. We know that we need to accelerate the transformation and reconfiguration of services to deliver that, and progress has and is being made to tackle the backlog of patients waiting. For example, through the development of elective care centres, rapid diagnosis centres, service reviews, and mega clinics.</p> <p>In addition, officials are working with Trusts to increase productivity and efficiency through a wide range of best practice service improvements, and the Social Care Collaborative Forum is working across all social care sectors to reform the commissioning and delivery of adult social care.</p> <p>Focussing on reforming Health and Social Care will be instrumental in increasing efficiency to improve our waiting times. This coupled with actions that help people remain healthy and tackle health inequalities will improve the lives of all our citizens and relieve pressures on the Health and Social Care System.</p>

#### Belfast City Council Response

The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive's draft Programme for Government and is willing to engage and explore opportunities for supporting the NI Executive in achieving this PfG priority.

The Council recognises the significant scale of the challenge in relation to tackling waiting times and wider issues across the Health and Social Care system. The Council wish to offer our knowledge and local intelligence to provide local solutions which can help to reduce the current burdens being experienced in Health and Social Care.

One vehicle in which solutions can be explored is through the existing community planning system where local organisations including councils, departments and health trusts work together to address local issues and need. There are community plans in place across the 11 council areas and we believe this forum provides an opportunity to progress programmes and interventions to help address some of these issues.

The Council is surprised to note that the Integrated Care System Model is not referenced within the PfG and feel that this model and its relationship with community planning provides a mechanism to explore and address Health and Social Care issues at a local level and this should be explored further.

Currently the Council hosts a co-located team of staff from Council, PHA and BHSCT who work to address health inequalities. This approach recognises the importance of partnership working to align key approaches. We encourage the Executive to invest in health improvement, prevention and early intervention to reduce the pressures on primary care. We also commend this partnership model approach for addressing such issues as given the complexity and inter-connected nature of these issues these cannot be addressed in isolation.

The Council also are aware of the Health Minister’s announcement in the summer of the first strand of Live Better initiative which is designed to target health inequalities and bring targeted health support to those communities that need it most. The Council welcome this area-based approach to tackling health inequalities as we are aware that across the city health inequalities and outcomes can change for one community to the next, and would look forward to working with partners in Department of Health, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and Community and Voluntary sector to address these issues.

#### 4. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

<p><b>Issue</b></p>	<p>We must work together to end the epidemic of violence, abuse, and harm against women and girls.</p> <p>Despite the work undertaken to date, there have been over 20 domestic homicides with a female victim since January 2020 and these numbers continue to rise. Evidence shows that most women and girls here have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence, ranging from everyday misogyny and sexual harassment to extreme physical and sexual violence.</p>
<p><b>Proposed Action:</b></p>	<p>This year we will launch our first delivery plan. The delivery plan will strengthen existing, and mobilise new, partnerships and networks across government, and all sections of our society. It will drive and enable the necessary change, embracing the vital roles of our community and voluntary sector and grass roots organisations. Focused on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Raising Awareness</li> <li>● Change Fund</li> <li>● Challenge Fund</li> <li>● Joined-Up Approach</li> </ul>

**Belfast City Council Response**

The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive's draft Programme for Government, as this is a key priority for Elected Members and the city is willing to engage and explore opportunities for supporting the NI Executive in achieving this PfG priority.

The Council welcomed and strongly supported the development of the recently published Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Strategic Framework and associated action plan. The Council fully recognises, given the number of related incidents of death and violence against women and girls that has occurred in Belfast, the seriousness and systemic nature of this issue and the need for everyone to work together to tackle this blight on our society.

The Council is a willing partner in relation to these issues and will happily support colleagues in The Executive Office and across the public sector, to raise awareness of these issues through campaigns, and delivery programmes on behalf of central government at a local level to help provide appropriate interventions and programmes that will help to reduce and hopefully eradicate these issues.

Currently Council officers are engaged with TEO officials to bring forward proposals whereby councils would have a direct role in supporting the implementation of the EVAWG action plan on a phased basis:

- **Building momentum and readiness** - Intention for the Council to work with local community groups/partners to bring forward some capacity building interventions in-year potentially by expanding on existing good work by council and communities which can contribute to EVAWG during this current financial year.
- **Implementation** – the Council to establish and deliver a Change Fund (Local Grant Scheme) to equip community and voluntary sector organisations within Belfast to develop and implement interventions to prevent violence against women and girls.

As highlighted through current discussions with TEO in relation to rolling out programmes relating the EVAWG strategy the Council is demonstrating its willingness to work with government partners and local community partners to affect positive change in relation to this issue and welcome the opportunity to continued collaboration in this area.

However, the Council would recommend that continuing funding in this area of work is discussed to ensure that funding is allocated based on a strategic plan of delivery to ensure appropriate resources are in place longer-term.

## 5. Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

<b>Issue</b>	<p>Over the last decade, the number of children identified with Special Educational Needs (SEN) has risen steadily to almost one in five pupils alongside an increasing level of expenditure on SEN provision, not always matched by a demonstrable improvement to the outcomes for children and young people with SEN and disabilities.</p> <p>The current education system is struggling to keep pace with the changing pupil profile and the model of support for children and young people needs significant transformation which requires additional investment. Over 200 recommendations exist from various reports evidencing the need for systemic reform, a focus on early intervention, and prompt access to effective supports to improve the experience of children, their families, and the educational workforce.</p>
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>We will work to transform the Education system to provide high-quality, efficient and sustainable services for children with SEN and disability. Systemic transformation will take time, but it is vital that we respond meaningfully to make sure our education system works for all learners. Focused on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enabling Actions</li> <li>• The Right Support from the Right People, at the Right Time, in the Right Place</li> </ul>
<b>Belfast City Council Response</b>	
<p>The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive’s draft Programme for Government and would be keen to explore opportunities for supporting the NI Executive in achieving this PfG priority.</p> <p>As a Council we are fully aware of the pressures being faced by local families in getting the appropriate support for children and young people with special educational needs. We believe that opportunities exist within the community planning process for relevant organisations to work together in gathering local data and evidence which can help to inform the Department of Education in addressing these issues, and therefore helping to develop a successful transformation implementation plan which ensures the right support from the Right People, at the Right Time and in the Right Place.</p> <p>The Council recognises the increase in the number of children across local communities with Special Educational Needs and needs requiring additional support. The Council this year allocated additional funding to enable local enhanced provisions at summer schemes across the city to provide summer schemes for children with additional needs. Therefore, this is an issue that we are aware off and keen to provide any necessary support in bringing this priority forward.</p>	

## 6. Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing

<b>Issue</b>	Good housing is essential to our health and wellbeing. We want everybody to have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs within thriving and inclusive communities. The challenge we face is evidenced by the social housing waiting list, which currently stands at over 47,000 households, including 35,000 experiencing housing stress.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>We will unlock the combined skills and resources of government, the private and third sectors, finding solutions and creating opportunities to transform supply and improve quality across the whole housing system.</p> <p>We will ensure that the planning system supports the delivery of the appropriate supply of housing, creating sustainable and inclusive spaces, and work with NI Water to help facilitate housing growth.</p> <p>We will deliver a Northern Ireland Housing Supply Strategy to provide a long-term framework for the policies and actions required to increase the supply of homes across all tenures and reduce housing stress.</p>

### Belfast City Council Response

The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive's draft Programme for Government, as this is a key priority for Elected Members and the city, the Council is willing to engage and explore opportunities for supporting the NI Executive in achieving this PfG priority.

As outlined in the PfG document the Council, like the NI Executive, wants everybody to have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs within thriving and inclusive communities. However, the Council recognise that this ambition does not reflect the reality of the significant challenges being faced in terms of housing waiting lists, housing stress and lack of housing stock.

The total number of applicants on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) waiting list (with no existing NIHE/housing association tenancy) on 31 March 2024 was **47,312**. Of these applicants, **35,464** households were in 'housing stress'.

Belfast's social housing waiting list was at **12,726** households, with **10,307** of those households considered to be in housing stress. This is an increase of **243** households from the end of 2023. (DfC Northern Ireland Housing Bulletin - January - March 2024)



The Council welcomes the commitment of the NI Executive to unlock the combined skills and resources of government, the private and third sectors, finding solutions and creating opportunities to transform supply and improve quality across the whole housing system.

The Council also welcomes the commitment to ensure that the planning system supports the delivery of appropriate and sustainable supply of housing. Given Councils are the local planning authority we anticipate that the view of Councils will be sought in developing how the planning system can be used to deliver the housing needed, cognisant of the significant issues such as wastewater infrastructure challenges which is inhibiting much needed housing development across the city.

We would also be keen to work central government in developing a Northern Ireland Housing Supply Strategy. During the development of the Belfast Agenda numerous stakeholders highlighted that addressing housing need and driving housing-led regeneration are key to enhancing quality of life. The Council is committed to creating a more vibrant, more inclusive and more liveable city. Investment in quality homes, placemaking, connectivity and social infrastructure lies at the heart of that vision.

While public sector investment in social housing has been sustained in recent years, the rate of output of residential development has not kept pace with demand. As it stands, Belfast and the wider region are recording increasing numbers of households living in housing stress. We have committed to working in partnership to address this urgent issue and ensure that everyone will have access to a high quality, affordable and sustainable homes.

Unlike many other cities of a similar size, the residential population of Belfast city centre is low. To achieve real vibrancy, it will be important to facilitate a sustainable mix of people living in the city centre, including families, elderly people and young professionals.

While our housing targets primarily focus on new builds, it is critical that we strike the right balance between investment in new stock and maintenance of our existing homes, including a need to ensure that homes are energy efficient and resilient to the effects of climate change. It is also important that housing-led regeneration considers the need to respect the historic and natural heritage of Belfast, as bestowed in its listed buildings, conservation areas, green spaces and waterside location.

In line with the commitments set out the PfG, the Council have committed through the Belfast Agenda to:

- Increase housing supply across all tenures. This will include private homes (both home ownership and private rental), social homes and intermediate homes for rent and sale (such as shared ownership and other intermediate rental arrangements) as they are developed across the council area.
- Reduce social housing projections by increasing the provision of social homes through the Social Housing Development Programme.
- Increase the number of people living in the city centre across all tenures.

The Council would also support the Executive as they seek Treasury agreement for appropriate treatment of borrowing to enable the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to increase investment in its homes, improve energy efficiency and contribute to new supply. Recognising the need to commit significant investment to bring forward schemes of scale

We continue to service a divided society, where a duplicated service delivery model has been virtually impossible to transform. The additional costs of servicing a segregated society runs to upwards of £1.5b per annum, depending on what is included in the analysis.

Housing is one example of where a binary or segregated system has been in place and needs transformed if we are to have a truly inclusive society. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) itself accepts 90% of social housing is segregated in Northern Ireland as a whole, rising to 94% in Belfast – more than before the conclusion of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

The Council welcomes the on-going work to transform the private rented sector and continues to work with Department for Communities to support this programme. As part of this programme the Council wishes to highlight that the statutory fitness standard remains out of date and is not fit purpose to ensure that homes are maintained in accordance with modern day standards. The Council would welcome the introduction of a new standard which brings Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK for this standard.

### **Complex Lives model**

The Council agrees that good housing is essential to our health and wellbeing. We want everybody to have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs within thriving and inclusive communities. However, we recognise that in some cases, supports need to be in place to enable those who are most vulnerable within society and face complex challenges to be able to avail of opportunities that come with increasing the supply of housing. As such, the ***Belfast Complex Lives model*** is an example of a collaborative new delivery model dealing with an important and complex challenge for the City.

The Complex Lives model has been created to provide joined up support for some of Belfast's most vulnerable people who have fallen into a cycle of rough sleeping, addiction, poor mental and physical health and offending behaviour. These are people who meet the definition of Chronic Homeless as defined by Northern Ireland Housing Executive, estimated at around 200 people at this point.

The multiple disadvantage and acute needs of people caught in this cycle cannot be met by any single agency. The Complex Lives model provides a 'whole system' partnership delivery model that joins up support services across the statutory, voluntary and community sector and that enables changes in the way support works where that is needed. This is a product of the Belfast Community Planning approach and delivery of the Belfast Agenda, which promotes partnership working.

The model produces 'wrap around' support for outreach & engagement, supporting people into accommodation/housing, treating addictions, meeting physical and mental health needs,

and helping people to reduce offending and re-offending, amongst other support that can be needed.

The Complex Lives model is not a new layer of support service or a replacement for existing services. It is a collaboration model that enables a range of existing services in to join up their work more effectively. Given the nature of the complex and inter-connected challenges highlighted in the PfG. The Council believe that the NI Executive and its departments can look towards the Complex Lives model as the type of partnership arrangement which need developed at a local level across Northern Ireland to address the societal challenges.

The Council also welcomes the Commitment to launch a new Fuel Poverty Strategy by 2025, to support those struggling with the cost of living. This approach aligns with ongoing programmes managed by Belfast City Council in relation to Anti-Poverty, Hardship Funding and Cost-of-Living support. The Council would therefore welcome any future opportunities to engage and collaborate with departments in developing this strategy.

The Council also welcomes the commitment to review the NIHE Private Sector Grants, including the Disabled Facilities Grant to ensure that these grants effectively support our most vulnerable citizens.

The Council would also wish to stress the importance of the transfer of key regeneration functions to local government. The transfer of Comprehensive Development Powers and the ability to acquire land for regeneration purposes, when used alongside community and land use planning, would help to strengthen and enhance our ability to drive strategic regeneration activity, unlocking and realising the potential of major/flagship schemes and reinvigorating key areas in the city, and increasing housing supply.

## 7. Safer Communities

<b>Issue</b>	A central role of government is to protect its citizens. By keeping communities safe we enable them to have the confidence they need to live productively and engage fully in society.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>We are committed to keeping our communities safe and to making sure you feel confident and secure to live your life to its fullest.</p> <p>Acknowledging the levels of trauma in our post-conflict society, we will work across the Executive to embed trauma-informed, responsive systems; systems that help people to easily navigate and access the support they need, when they need it, and for however long they need it for. Focused on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Speeding Up Justice Programme</li><li>• Investment in digital capabilities</li><li>• Sufficient number of police officers in line with NDNA commitments</li><li>• Necessary prosecution resources</li></ul>

- Cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending
- Strategic Framework for Youth Justice

### **Belfast City Council Response**

The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive's draft Programme for Government and would be keen to explore opportunities for supporting the NI Executive in achieving this PfG priority.

The Council agree that a central role of government both central and local is to protect its citizens by keeping communities safe and enabling them to have the confidence they need to live productively and engage fully in society.

Addressing issues impacting on the sense of safety and creating community confidence happens at a local level. The Council and the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships have a key role to play in delivering these outcomes including supporting placed-based approaches and early intervention programmes which are preventative rather than remedial in nature.

The Council support the proposed actions put forward by the NI Executive as a means for creating safer communities, including:

- Speeding up Justice Programme
- Digital Transformation across Criminal Justice
- Cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending
- Strategic Framework for Youth Justice

The Council find it concerning that the issue of tackling hate crime is not referenced in the issue and proposed actions within the PfG. Sectarian and racist hate crime continues to blight our society, as evidenced by PSNI statistics and what was witnessed in Belfast in August 2024. Tackling such hate crime must be a priority for the new Programme for Government, through prosecutions and through a meaningful programme of education and engagement.

The Council believes that its Good Relations approach of building relationships between people from different religious, political and ethnic backgrounds needs to be front and centre in tackling issues such as hate crime, as it is the primary means of preventing such crime in the long-term. As such, the reductions in funding for Good Relations projects and programmes runs counter to the clear need to tackle hate crime and the Council would ask that the funding of Good Relations projects is reviewed and allocations as a minimum are restored to ensure a sustainable funding model for this critical area.

The Council also note that there is no reference to Modern Slavery in the Programme for Government or indeed within this section. This is a growing area of concern, and all government departments should be committed to ensuring that modern slavery does not

exist within their supply chain or any part of their business, and we believe it would be helpful if this was referenced within the PfG.

The Council would also request that greater emphasis is placed on supporting **newcomer communities** to transition and integrate into local neighbourhoods as a means of creating safer communities. Again, this is particularly important for Belfast in light of public disorder and unrest in August 2024, and we believe that the issues of tackling hate-crime, and integration for newcomer communities is a growing issue of concern for city and wider region and should be reflected within the PfG.

Belfast City Council recognises its critical role in addressing inequalities across the city and within its communities. This is an area in which our elected members are highly engaged to explore initiatives to tackle inequalities with other relevant public bodies. As a Council we aim to tackle inequality, create more and better jobs, equip people with the skills to take them, and give citizens more control over the decisions that affect their lives and their communities.

Much work has taken place in the last number of years to ensure that the Council builds up its information and data knowledge of those who live, work and invest in the City. It is fundamental for local government to understand the nature and scope of the inequalities and where they exist before we can plan to develop programmes to target and reduce these inequalities for the greater good. We believe that this rich source of information can be shared with central government colleagues to ensure a co-designed and informed approach to delivery of the PfG outcomes.

In recent years, Belfast City Council, has developed new and innovative service models to ensure inequality and diversity issues are properly addressed within its communities. The most pragmatic approach is to develop council-wide strategies for provision of services and grant funding e.g. leisure centres, play parks, community grants initiatives. A new system area-based planning is being developed to foster area-based working on appropriate issues, and we would be keen to engage further with government departments as we continue to develop this approach.

It is vital that local government, the closest form of government to the community, works with that community to empower them and increase their participation to create safer communities in line with the NI Executive's vision. Rather than doing 'for...', or 'doing to...' it's important that councils 'do with...' communities, and in this vein, the principles of co-production are vital.

**Shared Space** – The Council is committed to working with the Shared City Partnership to deliver an integrated plan to improve good relations and developing a sustainable, transferable, and scalable approach to the management of shared space. We welcome the PfG commitment to bringing forward flagship transformational programmes to increase shared space and create multi-use places in local neighborhoods. We would be keen to work alongside the Executive to maximise potential opportunities for the city and explore potential synergies with other emerging physical investment schemes.

The Council welcomes the opportunity to work with NICS Departments to deliver the recently secured £15million PeacePlus Local Action Plan which will help build a compassionate cultural vibrant and inclusive city.

## 8. Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment

<b>Issue</b>	Lough Neagh is one of our most important natural resources and is of huge economic significance for those who depend on it for drinking water, its fishing and eel industries. It is also of growing importance for recreation and tourism.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>The proposed action in relation to protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment will focus on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our First Environment Strategy</li> <li>• Climate Action</li> <li>• Interagency Protocol</li> <li>• Lough Neagh Action Plan</li> <li>• Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI)</li> </ul>

### Belfast City Council Response

The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive's draft Programme for Government. and would be keen to explore opportunities for supporting the NI Executive in achieving this PfG priority, particularly within the field of Climate Action where the Council has been a forerunner on addressing these issues at a city level.

In autumn 2019 Belfast signed its climate emergency declaration aiming to reach net-zero emissions. Belfast City Council facilitates a Belfast Climate Commission which was established in 2020 to support more intelligent choices in the city on issues related to energy, carbon, weather and climate.

In its report later that year, *A Net-Zero Carbon Roadmap*, the Belfast Climate Commission recognised that the Covid pandemic and subsequent lockdown had reduced the carbon footprint in the city and has changed some behaviour, but also suggested the city needs a "more positive way of addressing the climate challenge in the context of a healthy, inclusive and vibrant city".

While the city had achieved a 42% reduction in its carbon emissions from 2000-2020 the Commission has set a target of 66% reduction by 2025, 80% by 2030, and 100% by 2050.

The Commission identifies that currently 39% of Belfast's emissions come from the domestic housing sector, 24% from public and commercial buildings, 20% from transport, and 18% from industry.

In identifying key activities within the sectors, within the public and commercial sector it identifies work on improving the fabric of buildings, improved cooling and lighting, and heating improvements as having significant impact. This is aside from the major impact that could be realised from improvements in domestic housing.

We welcome the planned publications of a Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland, with responsible production and consumption at its core. We note that the Strategy will have three key principles of designing out waste, keeping products in circulation at their highest value for as long as possible and regenerating natural systems. We anticipate that the Strategy will include clear and measurable targets and goals going beyond (the current) weight-based approaches to waste reduction and application of the waste hierarchy.

It is disappointing that, apart from the Circular Economy Strategy, there is no other reference to waste management or waste treatment within the PfG Consultation document, including potential infrastructure requirements to deal with waste generation in Northern Ireland. Specifically, there is no reference to the (now delayed) publication of a Waste Strategy for Northern Ireland. The previous strategy, published in 2013, only outlined and set the policy framework until 2020. The eagerly anticipated new Waste Management Strategy will be of significant importance for Northern Ireland moving towards a target of Net Zero by 2050.

Waste has a potential major role to play within the Government plans referenced (within the consultation document) to decarbonise our economy and become self-sufficient in affordable renewable energy. For example, CHP plants, EFW and other technologies, that could transform waste into other energy products, all have the potential to contribute towards renewable energy targets.

Within the PfG Consultation, we would have welcomed a commitment from Government to address other waste streams in Northern Ireland, other than household waste – e.g. commercial, industrial and construction and demolition waste. It is noted that within the recently published NIAO review of Waste Management in Northern Ireland that around 90 per cent of the waste produced in Northern Ireland is not being robustly monitored, and this will create considerable challenges for future waste management planning and forecasting. (It is worth also noting that the report also highlights that, overall, councils have been successful in achieving their landfill and recovery targets, with a 2020 target for 50 per cent recycling rate for household waste being met in 2019.) As per our earlier comment, we are still awaiting publication of the new Waste Management Strategy and such issues might be addressed with that.

There no longer appears to be a plan, within the PfG, to establish an independent Environmental Agency for Northern Ireland, despite the environmental challenges faced by the country and in particular the protection of one of our most valuable natural assets, Lough Neagh.

Belfast City Council welcomes the development of Northern Ireland’s first Environmental Improvement Plan but would emphasise that the Plan needs to be robust and adequately resourced. The Plan should include SMART targets and a detailed action plan to deliver these.

The Council is pleased to see acknowledgement within the PfG that “unless we look after our natural environment, we are likely to see many more environmental crises, like Lough Neagh” with associated economic, social and reputational consequences for NI.

The Council stresses the need to invest in protection of the natural world and supports that “the EIP in conjunction with other strategies will provide a coherent response to the global challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change”. The Executive has a key leadership role in environmental protection and the Councils commends the importance of developing a new NI Biodiversity Strategy for public bodies to work towards.

## 9. Reform and Transformation of Public Services

<b>Issue</b>	We recognise the many compounding factors, set out below, which have resulted in the unsustainability of many of your public services and the need for urgent Reform and Transformation.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>We know that fiscal and service sustainability will require brave decisions, collaborative working, and a relentless focus on innovation and efficiency in service delivery. This can only be achieved through partnership working, and a willingness to accept change, challenge the status quo, and make long-term strategic decisions.</p> <p>The proposed action in relation to Reform and Transformation of Public Services will focus on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unsustainability of Public Services</li> <li>● Service Delivery Transformation</li> <li>● Productivity and Digital Transformation</li> <li>● Innovation and Research Transformation</li> </ul>

### Belfast City Council Response

The Council fully support the inclusion of this priority with the NI Executive’s draft Programme for Government and is extremely keen to work with NI Executive and partners across the public sector to undertake the necessary reform and transformation of public services to ensure that our citizens benefit from the public services that they required.

The Council as a public body fully recognise the unsustainability of public services if we continue to operate in the current way and understand the critical need of investment and reform to ensure the quality and efficiency require in delivering public services.

The Council agree for the need to bring forward innovative and transformative approaches to deliver public services. The Council welcomes the commitment of the NI Executive that fiscal and service sustainability can only be achieved through partnership working, and a willingness



to accept change, challenge the status quo, and make long-term strategic decisions. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further and provide case studies and examples where the Council has led or participated in partnership model that have affected significant and transformational outcomes.

By way of example, for the last number of years the Council has been a partner on Innovation City Belfast (“ICB”). The ICB partnership is made up of the leaders of Belfast City Council, Belfast Harbour, Belfast Met, Catalyst, Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University, with Invest Northern Ireland as an advisory partner.

The Council believe that partnerships such as ICB demonstrate how with the right willingness to collaborate across the public, private and university sectors we can work together in drive innovation and attract investment for the city and region. This approach could be replicated across Northern Ireland as a means of ensuring local partners work together to reform and create a sustainable system of public services reflecting the local areas where they are located.

The Council also note the proposed action to maximise any potential funding sources and would be interested to know if the NI Executive intend to develop a funding strategy to set out its approach to maximising funding opportunities. The Council would keen to support any future approach between central and local government where we can seek to maximise impact by aligning resources and leveraging additional funding and resources for NI. We would be keen to engage with departments to identify joint solutions to maximise the benefit of the capital investment.

The Council understand that the NI Executive propose to set up a new Reform and Transformation Unit. While this appears a sensible approach to dealing with these difficult issues, the Council would welcome further to details to understand the detailed approach that the NI Executive proposes to tackle this significant challenge and we would be keen that this Unit is representation of the wider public sector and the Community and Voluntary Sector. The Council have a strong desire to play its role in this area and be a part of this approach and we fully appreciate the difficulties for our residents of terms of accessing the public services they should expect.

In addition to focusing on transformation, the Council would commend that due consideration be given to opportunities to adopt a more collaborative and cross-cutting approach across the public sector with partners in the Community and Voluntary sector. The Council believe progress and improvements in this area can happen now and does not need to wait on the outcome of this transformation work. In our view we should be building on existing relationships and multi-agency approaches in addressing interconnected and complex societal challenges, such as the reform of and transformation of public services.

The Council would also welcome the early publication of a Fiscal Framework, Sustainability Plan and Transformation Programme as part of the NI Executive’s proposed Reform Package. The Council would welcome if these plans were subject to early engagement for the Council and wider local government sector.

The Council welcome the announcement that there will be a newly created Public Sector Transformation Board. The Council believe that when this Board is been set up there should be meaningful representation from local government put forward by a local government representative body such as SOLACE NI or NILGA. Representation on the Public Sector Transformation Board and any satellite boards should reflect a place-based approach representing different communities. The Council would also welcome an opportunity to consult on the proposed Terms of Reference for this Board.

In relation to the focus on Innovation and Research Transformation, the Council believe partnerships such as the ICB are well positioned to provide information, evidence and learning on global best practices in using innovation and new technologies to improve our approaches to service delivery.

In relation to the Reform and Transformation of Public Services, the Council would ask that where additional regulatory controls that have impacts for District Councils are brought forward by the NI Executive during this assembly term, that Departments hold effective and meaningful pre-engagement and consultation Councils and undertake regulatory impact assessments to properly determine the resources needed and identify funding support from Departments before they are introduced.

In the Secretary of State's budget statement in April 2023, he said: "The Northern Ireland Budget per person is around 20% higher than equivalent UK Government spending in other parts of the UK. Yet, the level of public services offered are still not affordable and outcomes are not improving". We continue to service a divided society, where a duplicated service delivery model has been virtually impossible to transform. The reform and transformation of public services must start to address duplication and dismantle the segregated nature of such services.

The impact of the conflict places our society at a distinct disadvantage. But financing this region must face up to the fact that in order that we are able to get to a position where our region is on par with other parts of these islands, there is no doubt that our society does need additional support and investment.

It is therefore totally right that in areas such as health, policing, community and economic activity, these are given adequate investment and support, in order to enable our people to catch up with the rest of these islands; people who are already at a disadvantage as a result of the conflict and its legacies.

But in other areas of public service delivery, we are spending much more than we need to. This is partly because of how services were historically developed, during the period of conflict. Our school system, public housing, transport, road network, leisure and governance have effectively been designed to facilitate separation. Therefore, addressing this service delivery model needs to be at the core of any programme of reform and transformation of public services.

The Council notes that the PFG references the role of Voluntary and Community Sector in tackling complex issues and working with government to address interconnected problems. We also believe that local government has equally as important role to play and would welcome

further engagement on the following matters as a means to help in the reform and transformation of public services:

- Greater fiscal and financial powers to local government
- Align priorities with Medium-term financial planning to ensure adequate resourcing
- Multi-year budgets for councils
- Further devolution of functions to local government (e.g. regeneration)
- Recognising and maximising opportunity presented through community planning

It is the view of the Council that local government should deliver the majority of services that affect citizens and communities at a local level. At the heart of delivering these services should be a place-based approach. This is because only when a public body such as a council knows and understands the needs of a community that it can deliver the necessary interventions leading to positive outcomes.

In addition to focused place-based services., local government also had a broader role to play in demonstrating civic leadership on the key policy challenges faced by society relating to climate emergency, community cohesions and the need to promote inclusive growth ensuring employment and skills opportunities for all persons within their areas.

The approach set out above to addressing these policy issues through a partnership approach is best delivered under the auspices of community planning. The responsibility for community planning and the duty to produce a community plan for the was an outcome of the 2015 programme to reform local government. In this regard the Council, as has wider local government, been required to enter into and develop sustainable partnerships with statutory partners across areas such as health and social care, education and academia to provide holistic solutions to cross-cutting policy issues which affect the City.

## Introducing Our Missions

<b>Issue</b>	The Executive is subject to significant financial constraints driven by a range of factors. In the 2024/25 financial year, demand for services far outstripped the funding available. For every £1 we had to allocate for spending on day-to-day funding of public services we had three times as many demands. Similarly, for every £1 available to spend on capital, including money for hospitals, schools, and roads, we had one and a half times as many demands.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	Our Missions – People, Planet, Prosperity and Peace. <b>Understanding Missions by Tracking Wellbeing</b>

	<p>Wellbeing is a combination of social, environmental, economic, and democratic factors which are essential for society to flourish. These factors align to People, Planet, Prosperity and Peace.</p> <p>Our Missions have been broken down across ten strategic domains of wellbeing supported by a selection of indicators, each of which is a high-quality official statistic. Each project and programme contained within the draft Programme for Government can be linked to a Mission. Focused on the following areas:</p> <p>Understanding Performance</p> <p>Making Things Better</p>
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### Belfast City Council Response

The Council welcome the recognition by the NI Executive the need to plan for future generations and a focused commitment to the following long-term missions of **People, Planet, Prosperity, and Peace**.

The Council welcomes the publication of the PfG Wellbeing Framework as a means of understanding individual metrics identified as measures of success for quality of life in Northern Ireland. In addition, we particularly welcome the process of disaggregating indicators by different demographic groups such as sex, age, marital status, religion, disability, ethnic group, sexual orientation, those with and without dependants, and political opinion as well as by geographic area. We would welcome an opportunity to engage with NICS colleagues in the further development of the Framework and exploring opportunities for aligning with metrics emerging through community planning processes across the region.

We would however seek further clarification on the proposed definition and measurement of the 'Employment Rate indicator' as it appears to differ from the Economy Minister's metric included in the recently published Sub-Regional Economic Plan.

The Council also welcome the commitment that alongside the Wellbeing Dashboard the Executive will be keeping track of delivery and publishing a delivery report each year, by which the public can assess the progress of the PfG.

### Building New Foundations

<b>Issue</b>	We are committed to investing in our public infrastructure and reshaping how our services are delivered.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	<p>We will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boost Housing Funds</li> <li>• Improve the Planning System</li> <li>• Deliver Better Public Services</li> <li>• Support Our Net Zero Future</li> </ul>

- Manage Our Water
- Upgrade Stadia and Support Local Sports
- Retrofit Homes
- Improve Our Transport Infrastructure for Safer Travel, Connected Communities and Sustainable Economic Growth

We are committed to investing £26 billion of public funding in the next decade. More detail on this will be provided in the upcoming Investment Strategy.

### **Belfast City Council Response**

The Council welcome the commitment of the NI Executive set out in the PfG, to invest in public infrastructure and reshaping how services are delivered.

The Council understand that without the necessary infrastructure in place to support investment and development then ambitions to transforming public services will be an empty ambition.

The Council also welcome the commitment to invest £26 billion of public funding in the next decade to address these infrastructure deficits. The Council would have some concerns whether this funding in itself will be enough to deliver what is needed across the Region and look forward to the early publication of the upcoming Investment Plan in which we trust further details on how this funding will be allocated and sequencing of investment will be set out. Set out below is specific commentary of the proposed foundations:

- **Boost Housing Funds**

As set out previously in our comments under priority number 6 – provide more social, affordable, and sustainable housing. The Council fully support additional funding to boost the provision of housing, given that housing is key to the quality of life for all citizens. The Council in its Belfast Agenda advocates a housing-led regeneration approach, in which housing provision is at the heart of wider regeneration of communities and places. The Council welcome further details coming forward on these housing funds.

- **Improve the Planning System**

Since the transfer of local planning powers to local government in 2015, the Council has developed the City's first Local Development Plan and is currently developing a suite of local planning policies to supplement its plan. It has been the experience of this Council that the Planning System in NI continues to impact on the operation and delivery of planning at a local level, affecting not only the plan-led approach but also timescales in decision making and therefore confidence in investment and communities. We therefore welcome and recognised the need to prioritise the planning reform agenda and trust that both central and local government partners can work together to create a more effective planning system, which generates investment and in turn promotes inclusive economic growth in the city and across the region.

- **Deliver Better Public Services**

The Council are happy to share recent programmes of work which it has undertaken in relation to developing its Social Value Procurement policy and Ethical Procurement approach to assist

in any training departments wish to offer in terms of making smarter, greener spending decisions.

- **Support Our Net Zero Future**

The Council agree the need for Targeted Investment for a Net Zero future. The Council believe that there is an urgent need for more funding dedicated to green skills and training, including the establishment of a Green Skills Academy in Northern Ireland, to ensure the workforce is equipped for the transition to a net zero economy. Which will change the lives of our people and communities for the better.

- **Manage Our Water**

The Council is aware and has expressed its concerns recently at a number of meetings with NI Executive Ministers regarding the Living with Water Programmes and issues that have arisen due to the historic underfunding in our wastewater infrastructure.

This underfunding has brought us to the position wherein the issues facing the Living With Water programme and NI Water is having a significant impact on the city and the wider region in terms of environmental and growth implications due to continued non-investment in the required infrastructure.

The Council would therefore urge the Infrastructure Minister and the NI Executive to work with the Council to consider other funding options and creative solutions and prioritise the need to invest in the infrastructure of cities, supporting the delivery of housing and growth, noting the significant risk to delivery of city centre living and the provision of housing across the city and region.

- **Upgrade Stadia and Support Local Sports**

The Council welcomes the commitment of the Northern Ireland Executive to the programmed upgrade of stadia, including the commitment to progress with the redevelopment of Casement Park, and support for local sports.

The Council is currently developing a Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy. While this is emerging work, it restates the long-accepted premise that moving more as part of everyday life is recognised as an essential component of our physical and mental wellbeing and supports us to learn, work and enjoy life to the full. Given that our population is ageing, and people are living more sedentary lives, health inequalities have increased.

The PfG seems to focus on Association Football and Casement Park, whilst access to other facilities such as tennis, basketball and cycling is not evident. Alongside our Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy, council are also developing a related Pitches Strategy which looks at playing pitches but also a broad range of other outdoor sports facilities in the city.

- **Retrofit Homes**

The Council welcomes the PfG commitment to facilitating the retrofitting of existing housing stock through sustainable funding and partnership models. The Council's climate has developed a host of research into the value of retrofitting houses and have worked closely with NIHE in this area and would be happy to share any knowledge to inform the approach of departments.

The most effective way to tackle the housing crisis from a supply perspective is through a sustained reduction in market prices, which can largely be achieved by optimising the use of our existing housing stock. Therefore, there should be a stronger emphasis on retrofitting and improving current properties.

- **Improve Our Transport Infrastructure for Safer Travel, Connected Communities and Sustainable Economic Growth**

The Council note the commitment to improving transport infrastructure for safer travel, connected communities and sustainable economic growth. This is a key element within our own Belfast Agenda. While we recognise the NI Executive’s future plans in this areas. We do not believe it captures the importance of connected, active and sustainable travel as a means for the region, cities and towns to thrive by allowing the maximum value of people to travel, whilst doing the least possible harm to the environment.

In 2020, the Zero-Net Carbon Roadmap for Belfast highlights that transport was responsible for 21% of the city’s carbon emissions. As the regional capital and central hub of journeys into and out of Northern Ireland (by land, sea and air). Belfast has a central role to play in delivering the ambitions of the NI Executive in relation to active and sustainable and would welcome further engagement with the NI Executive on this issues.

## Shaping a Better Tomorrow

<p><b>Issue</b></p>	<p>Our commitments are based on a recognition of our duty and drive to do better for you, your family, our communities, and this place we all call home, now and for generations to come. Our focus will centre on three long-term Missions: People, Planet, and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>People:</b> Working to support everyone at all stages of their life to ensure they have the chance to succeed by improving life opportunities.</li> <li>• <b>Planet:</b> Harnessing the potential of a green growth economy while ensuring we provide an equitable transition to a sustainable and affordable society as we take responsibility for decarbonising our economy and society.</li> <li>• <b>Prosperity:</b> Improving our economic productivity while making sure that we have an economy that works for everyone, and our story continues to be an inspiration to others.</li> <li>• <b>Peace:</b> Our cross-cutting commitment to Peace will make sure that everyone feels the benefit of a growing economy, improved environment, and fairer society.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Proposed Action:</b></p>	<p><b>People:</b> We are focusing on People, a long-term mission to make sure that everyone can live a long, healthy and happy life. We want everyone to benefit from a fair and inclusive society where everyone flourishes, no one is left behind, and everyone is made to feel welcome.</p>

	<p><b>Planet:</b> To ensure we protect our environment and tackle climate change in a way that is fair and balanced to everyone, the Executive will develop and focus on delivering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate Action Plan</li> <li>• Water Quality</li> <li>• Flood Risk Management</li> <li>• Environmental Improvement Plan</li> <li>• Affordable Renewable Energy</li> <li>• Just Transition</li> <li>• Renewable Electricity Support Scheme</li> <li>• Facilitate Net Zero Infrastructure</li> </ul> <p><b>Prosperity:</b> Our goal is to support social enterprises and businesses here to thrive and ensure that everyone, no matter where they live, can have well-paid and fulfilling jobs. We will build capacity in the Social Enterprise Sector and will prioritise areas that are vital to delivering on productivity and decarbonisation. This includes sectoral partnerships to improve pathways into good jobs, a focus on technical and vocational qualifications, and provide opportunities for those returning to the labour market.</p> <p><b>Peace:</b> We will partner with international governments, investors, and philanthropists to embed a cross-cutting commitment to peace within Our Plan creating a fair and prosperous future for all, and ensuring our story continues to inspire others.</p>
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### Belfast City Council Response

These missions are in broadly line with the missions we as Council have set out in the Belfast Agenda and the sustainable development agenda in general, therefore we strongly support this approach.

The Council is willing to engage with the NI Executive departments and share from our experiences in having established a dedicated Climate unit tasked with creating a sustainable nature positive city. We believe that we have a strong record in this area and could assist in supporting the deliverables which the NI Executive have set out in relation to their Mission in respect of the Planet.

### Funding the PfG

<b>Issue</b>	The demands on our finances outstrip the funding available. That is why we have had to prioritise where we invest our money today.
<b>Proposed Action:</b>	We will continue to work with the UK Government to secure a fair funding settlement based on need, and to advocate for multi-year budgets which can enable planning for the future and the effective delivery of the changes set out in this Programme for Government.



	After consultation is complete and a final Programme for Government is put in place, the budget process will prioritise commitments made in the Programme for Government.
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### **Belfast City Council Response**

Whilst the Council welcomes the ongoing work of the NI Executive to secure a fair funding settlement with the UK Government based on need and advocating for multi-year budgets which enables planning for the future. The current draft PfG lacks detail in relation to funding and budget to deliver the priorities and missions set out within this.

Stormont's major source of funds is the "block grant" it receives from the Treasury every year. Other options not touched upon within the PfG include the introduction of charges, e.g. domestic water charges, welfare reform mitigations, university tuition fees, concessionary transport fares and charges for domiciliary care. Bringing these more into line with UK policy would free resources to spend elsewhere.

Along with multi-year budgeting, enhanced borrowing powers and greater flexibility over how the executive can smooth spending from one financial year to the next would enable the executive to better plan and manage its budget.

The Council believes that the PfG provides an opportunity to partner with local governments to draw together existing interventions at a high level and offer collective recommendations on this matter, including new borrowing powers, simplified loan and borrowing regimes, government incentives for start-ups in sustainable, tax yielding industries and a common delivery framework for significant funding allocations such as Shared Prosperity Funding.

Local political and business leadership is at the heart of this transformation, which includes cities retaining more of the taxes raised in them to spend on priorities decided by local people who know their places best. This is not just a 'more money' agenda. It is also about the freedom to align local and regional efforts to get better results, preventing problems before they arise.