



Subject:	Visit Belfast Business Plan 2025-26
Date:	12 March 2025
Reporting Officer:	Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Senior Manager Culture and Tourism
Contact Officer:	Kerry McMullan, Tourism and Events Development Manager Pièr Morrow, Tourism Development Officer

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

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

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	<p>The purpose of the report is to present the request for funding from Visit Belfast for the 2025-2026 financial year and to set out the organisation's strategic development and operational delivery, focused on supporting tourism growth.</p> <p>Members should note that Visit Belfast will be in attendance at Committee to present the detail of its 2025-26 plan.</p>

2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Note the draft Visit Belfast business plan 2025-26. The overall funding requirement for Visit Belfast in the coming financial year has been taken account of in the revenue estimates that have already been approved by Council. - Approve and agree a funding allocation of £2,076,356 for 2025-26, subject to the development of a funding agreement, priority areas of activity and agreed targets.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p>Members will be aware that Visit Belfast was established by Council as the principal destination marketing and visitor servicing organisation for the city of Belfast. Visit Belfast leads on the tourism marketing activities and targets both the leisure and business tourism markets. It is a membership organisation with more than 460 partner businesses across the wider hospitality industry. Visit Belfast works on behalf of its funders and partners and with a range of public and private partners including Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland and Belfast Chamber to promote Belfast as a tourism destination.</p>
3.2	<p>Visit Belfast is a public/private partnership. Its current Chairperson is Marie-Thérèse McGivern; and Belfast City Council has four Councillor representatives on the Board: Councillor Sammy Douglas, Councillor Eric Hanvey, Councillor Tomás Ó Néill and Councillor Séanna Walsh. Also represented on the board are members from the private, public and community sectors.</p>
3.3	<p>The tourism and hospitality industry in Belfast has been going from strength to strength as Belfast continues to drive the regional tourism economy; in 2023 the most recent published Local Government District tourism statistics by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), Belfast hosted 1.7 million overnight trips accounting for 31% of all overnight trips to Northern Ireland generating tourism spend of £538 million, which is 44% of Northern Ireland overnight tourism spend. There are no tourism day visitor statistics available at this time.</p>
3.4	<p>Council has worked with Visit Belfast to continue to rebuild city tourism which has resulted in Belfast’s visitor economy being stronger and more competitive in a market context that has been challenging. The city has charted a strong recovery, yet challenges such as staffing, higher costs of doing business within the tourism and hospitality sector and the knock-on impact on hospitality opening hours in the city remain.</p>

3.5	<p>The inclusion of tourism as a key growth sector in the City Region Deal, acknowledged the fact that the sector is already a significant economic generator but recognises the need for significant additional investment in order to sustain growth. The Council's 10-year plan for tourism in the city; "<i>Make Yourself at Home</i>" sets out a vision for the future of tourism in the city that is centred on a people-based and sustainable model of development with a focus on: increasing the coherency of the Belfast experience; supporting quality authentic products; developing skills; and strengthening the city's position through marketing and communications.</p>
3.6	<p>Belfast's <i>Make Yourself at Home</i>, Tourism Plan recognises both the challenges to increase tourism and to maximise the positive impact that it can have on the city; whilst the updated Belfast Agenda has set a target to double the value of tourism from £400m to £800m by 2030. As the Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) for Belfast, Visit Belfast has an important role to play in realising the vision for tourism. It is in this context that Visit Belfast developed its three-year strategy <i>New Horizons (2024-2027)</i> and its year two business plan 2025-26 to support and promote tourism activity in the city region in a way that enriches the visitor experience, encourages longer stays and achieves meaningful economic and social impact for local people. Further details of activities that will be undertaken as part of this plan with associated targets will be set out in the presentation to the Committee and are included at Appendix A.</p>
3.7	<p>Visit Belfast's three-year strategy <i>New Horizons (2024-2027)</i> and year two business plan (2025-2026) are aligned to the four themes of Belfast's Tourism Plan: <i>Make Yourself at Home</i>, focused on delivering for the city:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grow the visitor economy in the Belfast city region in an inclusive and sustainable way ● Position the Belfast city region as a front of mind destination for leisure visits, business events and days out; ● Enhance the Experience for visitors by showcasing Belfast city region as a diverse and welcoming destination with a unique neighbourhood offer, and; ● Sustain its approach to championing sustainability, pioneering impactful initiatives, inspiring sustainable choices amongst visitors and clients and telling Belfast's sustainability story.
3.8	<p>Tourism Outlook – tourism contributes to the economic and social wellbeing of the city with high potential to create jobs quickly and provide the economic impetus for the wider economy. The analysis of tourism trends, market sentiment, policy context and performance</p>

indicators underscore the opportunity for growth in the year ahead, despite economic headwinds.

3.9 With two airports, Belfast Harbour as well as road and rail links, including the recently opened Grand Central Station with the introduction of an hourly train service to and from Dublin, the city is driving overall tourism growth in Northern Ireland. This, combined with its extensive leisure and business offer, is attracting visitors.

3.10 Visit Belfast 2024-2025 performance - Visit Belfast’s focus in year one of the New Horizons strategy was to achieve an economic impact target of £133m through leisure tourism marketing, business events, cruise and visitor servicing activity while adopting a new ‘triple-bottom line’ approach to measure the economic, environmental and social impact of tourism for Belfast. Visit Belfast is on target to deliver a very strong year one performance in 2024-25 with all KPIs achieved or exceeded.

3.11 Priorities outlined in Visit Belfast’s business plan 2025-26 include: directly deliver on the ambitions and priorities set out in *Make Yourself at Home* tourism plan for Belfast through key strategic focus areas of growing demand by leveraging major events infrastructure developments to enhance Belfast’s appeal; expanding year-round demand with a focus on shoulder season and midweek business; capitalising on increased tourism demand for Belfast to spread the benefits of tourism across the city, within our neighbourhoods and wider region; demonstrating sustainable leadership and innovation with greater measurable environmental and social impact; promoting Belfast’s emerging luxury and premium offer; driving growth and innovation through AI, digital and data-driven decision-making; collaboration across industry partnerships

3.12 Operational Targets for 2025-26 - based on projected levels of growth in 2025-26, Visit Belfast is proposing the following targets for 2025-26 as agreed by their board:

Total Output	Target
857,328 visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cruise 320,328 • Daytrips 250,000 • Overnight leisure trips 250,000 • Delegates 37,000
450,000 bed nights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 350,000 leisure, • 100,000 business

	<p>£141m contribution to the city's economy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leisure £62m • Business events £37m • Visitor servicing £19m • Cruise £23m
	<p>805,000 Visitor enquiries</p> <p>100 clients and industry supported on sustainability</p>	
<p>3.13</p>	<p>A detailed business plan has been submitted and reviewed by officers. The targets outlined will form the basis of key performance indicators for Council's 2025-26 funding agreement with Visit Belfast. Regular monitoring against targets will be included and these key performance indicators will relate to the trajectory for growth and align with the implementation phases for Council's tourism plan. This provides a basis for more effective monitoring of performance.</p>	
<p>3.14</p>	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>In the current financial year, Belfast City Council's funding arrangement with Visit Belfast is £2,076,356. An allocation of £2,076,356 has been set aside within the Departmental estimates for the financial year 2025-26.</p>	
<p>3.15</p>	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>No specific equality or good relations implications. Visit Belfast also works with councils outside of Belfast, as part of the Regional Tourism Partnership.</p>	
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Appendices</p>	
<p>4.1</p>	<p>Appendix A: Visit Belfast Presentation of Business Plan 2025-26</p>	