

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Employer Engagement Support
Date:	18 September 2012
Reporting Officer:	John McGrillen Director of Development ext 3470
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Members will be aware that the Investment Programme contains a range of commitment around employability and skills development. One of the key commitments involves collaboration with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and other partners on a city-wide employability and skills strategy.
1.2	The aim of this proposal is to develop a collaborative, targeted approach to employability and skills development issues by creating a better understanding of the local welfare to work arena and enabling partners to align and pool funding and resources to reduce duplication of services and fill gaps in provision. The anticipated outcome of this approach is that additional people would be helped into employment and that those employment prospects would be more sustainable
1.3	Members will be aware that a skilled, flexible workforce is one of the greatest contributors to economic growth and city competitiveness. Ensuring alignment between the skills development and employment agendas is a major challenge for all cities. This alignment is recognised in the recently-published Northern Ireland Economic Strategy (NIES) which focuses on re-building and re-balancing the Northern Ireland economy. Promoting employment and employability is the key “re-building” theme in the strategy while the “re-balancing” themes include a commitment to “improving employability and the relevance and use of skills.
1.4	In order to ensure that employability initiatives and approaches are in line with existing employer needs and future growth areas, it is important to ensure a structured dialogue with employers. One such avenue for engagement is through the Employers’ Forum. This was established in 2003 as part of the Task Force initiatives in west Belfast and greater Shankill. It is managed by Business

	in the Community (BITC) and draws on the resources of this organisation's members to provide opportunities for skills development and employment opportunities, focusing on those furthest from the labour market.
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2	Key Issues
2.1	Since their establishment in 2003, initiatives undertaken by the Employers' Forum have helped almost 1300 long-term unemployed people into work. While the focus of the initiative has been on those from west Belfast and greater Shankill, employers have also provided opportunities for those from all communities across Belfast.
2.2	As part of the city-wide strategy, there is an opportunity to explore how the Employers' Forum can be engaged to act as the employer conduit. This will ensure that ideas and proposals can be tested to confirm that they are in line with employer demands. Equally, employers can be encouraged to develop new and flexible approaches to recruitment and skills development, particularly engaging those furthest from the labour market.
2.3	The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has also confirmed that it would be keen to work with Belfast City Council and the Employers' Forum to develop an agreed approach to employer engagement that will ultimately improve the quality of interventions and ensure greater alignment between skills supply and demand.
2.4	In order to progress this, it is planned that a meeting will take place between DEL, Belfast City Council and Business in the Community to look at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A draft terms of reference for the city-wide employers' forum • A proposed work programme • Areas of focus e.g. key sectors; geographical areas; target groups • Governance arrangements • Financial commitments and contributions.
2.5	Subject to member agreement, a report will be brought back to the second meeting of the Development Committee in October to agree the way forward.

3	Resource Implications
3.1	No specific resource implications to be agreed at this stage – to be outlined in the October committee report.

4	Equality and Good Relations Considerations
4.1	No specific equality and good relations considerations at this stage. The city-wide approach will take account of all relevant considerations.

5	Recommendations
5.1	Members are asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the proposed engagement with DEL and the Employers' Forum as part of the city-wide employability and skills plan • Agree to a further report to be presented to the October meeting, setting out a proposed way forward, and including financial commitments.

6	Decision Tracking
A further report to be brought to the second meeting of the Development Committee in October 2012.	

7	Key to Abbreviations
DEL – Department for Employment and Learning NIES – Northern Ireland Economic Strategy	