Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Northern Ireland Science Festival
Date:	17 June 2014
Reporting Officer:	John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	The inaugural Northern Ireland Science Festival is scheduled to take place from 19 February to 1 March 2015. The festival is seeking to build on a format that has been very successful for a number of cities in recent years, notably Dublin (City of Science in 2012) and Brighton which holds an annual event that runs for a month in February each year.
1.2	The Northern Ireland festival will be based principally in Belfast with some events also taking place across the region.
1.3	A report was presented to the Development Committee in April 2014 and members noted the proposals to organise the event and agreed to receive a report at a future date to set out a funding request to support the event.

2	Key Issues
2.1	A science festival is an event that showcases science and technology in the same way that events take place to promote arts or music. Numerous cities now include science festivals as part of their programme of city events, using these as a way of generating footfall in the city but also assisting in profiling the city as a centre for technology and economic growth. In Derry/Londonderry, the city has recently invested in the high profile CultureTech event and this was a flagship event in the City of Culture programme in 2013, albeit that the focus was more on culture and technology. A follow-up event is planned for this year.
2.2	The vision for the Northern Ireland Science Festival is to showcase science, technology, engineering and maths as a central part of our culture and society. Statistics suggest that there is a considerable mismatch between the number of young people studying these subjects at school and the demand from employers for staff with this educational background.
2.3	It is intended that the event will act as a focal point for partners to demonstrate the best of what they do, while at the same time raising awareness among young

	people of the opportunities available to them in these fields. In addition, it is intended that the event can act as an anchor in the branding of Belfast as a "smart city" and one in which technology supports and drives its daily operation and its future growth.
2.4	One of the key themes emerging from the draft Integrated Tourism Strategy is the opportunity to celebrate innovations that have their roots in Belfast and Northern Ireland and to build tourism products around these. Titanic Belfast has done much to draw out the message of the maritime and industrial history of the city. However there is an opportunity to build new narratives around the city's scientific heritage, linking to the ongoing work in that field today, through institutions such as the two universities. This will also support the drive to grow the business tourism in the city, with a visible commitment to that growth through investment in the expanded Waterfront Hall.
2.5	There is also an opportunity to link the Science Festival into some additional events that are being planned by NI Screen and Generator NI around this time, regarding opportunities to exploit the business and tourism potential of music and its convergence with digital media and new technologies. These events aim to re-profile Belfast as a dynamic city with an emerging economy and niche offer for both businesses and tourists.
2.6	The event is being organised by a company with charitable status called Science Festival NI. Its board consists of representatives from twelve organisations including the two local universities, Northern Ireland Science Park, Institute of Physics, Institute of Engineering and Technology and Open University.
2.7	At present, the organisation is in the process of finalising its programme and tying down sponsorship to cover the costs of programming and delivery. It has a target of around £120,000 to be secured from sponsorship to make the event happen. It has secured a principal partner at this stage – the Department for Employment and Learning – and the Minister in that department has confirmed sponsorship of £50,000 towards the event. This is to be spent mainly on programming and promotion of the event and is linked to their priorities around promoting STEM.
2.8	The organisers have a target of 10,000 participants over the course of the 10 day programme. While many of the activities are still being finalised, it is expected that there will be at least 50 events taking place across the city under the NI Science Festival banner. As an indicative overview of the types of events that might take place in the course of the festival, the organisers have identified a number of key themes, including: • Words and ideas – series of talks and lectures on scientific issues impacting on our everyday lives. • Bright Sparks – series of events focused on young people. • Science in Sound – using the world-renowned Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC) at Queen's – one of only four of its kind in the world – these events will look at the latest innovations in sound technology. • Science in Film – working with Queen's Film Theatre to profile key films with a scientific slant. • Health and wellbeing – looking at how science is impacting on healthcare and what we can expect to be the next generation of innovation in this field, focusing on the innovations generated in Belfast.

	• Our digital society – focusing on issues such as cyber security and coding, offering the opportunity to profile what a super-connected Belfast will look like.
2.9	Organisers are planning a number of keynote events during the course of the programme. These include the 2015 Turing lecture – a world-leading event presenting a topic from current research in computer science and delivered by an acknowledged expert in the field. The lecture is named in honour of Alan Turing the globally renowned computer scientist and code-breaker. The Turing lecture regularly attracts up to 400 delegates and is broadcast live online. The event has never before been held in Northern Ireland. The organisers have bid to host the event in 2015 as part of the first NI Science Festival and are currently awaiting a decision on this (decision expected imminently).
2.10	One of the major priorities for the festival will be to undertake events in local communities, in conjunction with schools. In addition, they are seeking to partner with some key media organisations in order to raise the profile of the event locally and nationally and to link into national campaigns to make science interesting to young people in particular. It is planned that there will be a number of programmes produced that will be broadcast online and available on the web, post-event.
2.11	We are also engaging with CultureTech to explore opportunities for a 'Big Video Challenge' involving all post-primary schools in Belfast. Through this challenge, young people will work in teams to produce a short video on an agreed topic. There will be a very specific STEM angle to the videos and we will use the Science Festival platform to showcase the work created as part of the challenge.
2.12	Given the linkages with the emerging integrated economic strategy and the integrated tourism strategy, and the opportunities that the event presents to get young people involved and to bring people into the city as part of developing a new narrative for Belfast, it is proposed that the council commits sponsorship of £35,000 towards the inaugural event. £25,000 will be made available from the Economic Development Unit (EDU) budget and £10,000 will be made available from Tourism, Culture and Arts Unit (TCA).

3	Resource Implications
3.1	Sponsorship of £35,000 is being sought towards the programme costs.

4	Equality and Good Relations Considerations
4.1	There are no specific equality or good relations considerations attached to this report.

5	Recommendations
5.1	Members are asked to: - Note plans to organise the first Northern Ireland Science Festival in February 2015 - Note and approve the request to commit sponsorship of £35,000 towards the event, to be identified from within existing EDU and TCAU budgets for this year - Note the plans for the 'Big Video Challenge' including the showcase event which will take place as part of the Science Festival.

6	Decision Tracking
If Members agree to support the event, an update on progress will be brought to a future meeting of the Development Committee Timeline: December 2014 Reporting Officer: Lisa Toland	