



Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	NI Connections
Date:	17 June 2014
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	As one of the key actions within the Councils International Framework to attract foreign direct investment, tourism and talent, the Council has engaged with key stakeholders in the city to shape and support our international marketing work. One of these stakeholders is Invest NI and its NI Connections organisation.
1.2	NI Connections is a recently established organisation championed by Minister Arlene Foster, with the aim of developing and growing the support of people with a connection to Northern Ireland by birth, family, education or business. It is a not for profit public/private organisation which has been established to make use of Invest NI's systems, but to act as fully independent, and be managed by its governing council via a supervisory board made up of sponsors and subscribers.
1.3	The organisation's objectives are: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– to promote means for improved collaboration of diaspora consumers– methods to engage the strategic diaspora strategies to unlock the cultural diaspora market and mechanisms to support and remain connected with the recent Diaspora.
1.4	Essentially, NI Connections is a marketing and communications organisation that exists to create engagement with the NI diaspora worldwide, to send a consistent message in terms of our tourism, investment and educational opportunities.
1.5	Belfast City Council (BCC) was invited as a sponsor to NI Connections in December 2012, and subsequently joined with the approval of Members at an annual cost of £30,000, for a period of three years, after which a review was to be undertaken of benefits and outputs for BCC.
1.6	The Council was given a place on the NI Connections board to guide the strategic direction of the organisation. Development Committee members saw

	<p>this as an opportunity to influence the strategic direction of NI Connections, and to engage with a wider diaspora with other NI organisations and to leverage their contacts and relationships and goodwill in other international destinations and markets of interest to Council.</p>
1.7	<p>It was deemed that membership of NI Connections would allow Council the following benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategic alliances with other key international stakeholders in the city – An opportunity to develop a Belfast connections sub set of the network – An opportunity to develop the Belfast ask list for NI diaspora – Marketing of the Councils information and good news stories to the NI diaspora – Develop lucrative links with NI diaspora – Participation in NI Connections events throughout the world – Cooperation of NI Connections council at BCC events – Leverage of the Councils investment in diaspora relationships and opportunity to build on the synergies that exist with others in NI.
1.8	<p>Actively participating in NI Connections is only one action within the Belfast International Relations Framework, and provides Council with an effective tool in marketing the city internationally and utilising NI and Belfast diaspora across the world.</p>

2	Key Issues
2.1	<p>NI Connections has grown in its first year to develop an advocates network to create diaspora channels, facilitate collaborative events across the globe and provide member advice and support to use the diaspora network.</p>
2.2	<p>It's inaugural members included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Belfast City Council – Invest NI – NI Tourist Board – Visit Belfast – George Best Belfast City Airport – British Council – Belfast Metropolitan College – Belfast Harbour, who are taking a leading role as chair of the board – Tourism Ireland – Odyssey Trust – Titanic Quarter – Titanic Belfast
2.3	<p>In its first year of existence, the outputs that have been achieved by the network are outlined in the first annual report (Appendix 1), in relation to FDI introductions and groundwork, introductions into international educational institutions and tourism showcases.</p>
2.4	<p>Belfast City Council engaged and benefited in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Monthly attendance at the NI Connections Board – Attended the New York City launch of NI Connections – Attended the NI Connections launch in London to promote Belfast Music Week

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Contribution of Belfast good news stories, such as Belfast as headquarters of the Game of Thrones, via a NI promotional film to be placed in the international media – Participation in the NI Connections tourism sub group to promote the city globally through targeted events – Upcoming opportunity to participate in the investment sub group of NI Connections to deliver a strong FDI message for doing business in Belfast – Opportunity to share calendars of international activity between members to ensure a coordinated approach and on message approach to inward and outward activities such as trade missions or civic visits – Opportunity to promote Belfast City Council’s international relations work on the extensive social media campaign engaged in by NI Connections – Assistance from NI Connections to plan the first ever American Ireland Fund trade mission to Belfast in February of this year – Assistance in the planning of the first ever Belfast Tech Mission to the west coast of the USA in October 2013 – Access for BCC to the 1700 members of the NI Connections diaspora for our international relations outreach events to allow Council to unlock new contacts and help grow our own networks – Assisted the Waterfront Hall to target international conferences and exhibitions with 5 international conferences secured as a direct result of NI Connections promotion – Assisting with use of HMS Duncan programme to promote Belfast globally.
2.5	<p>NI Connections has now completed its pilot phase and is entering its delivery phase, having built up the strong network of 1700 plus members across the world. It has set out targets for the next two years which are outlined in the attached report.</p>
2.6	<p><u>Going Forward</u> Having been a member of NI Connections network for over a year, Officers have assessed the above benefits and the added value of remaining in the network at the annual cost of £30,000.</p>
2.7	<p>Members will be aware that Council has ramped up its international relations work and has delivered many activities in the last 18 months in the trade sectors of investment, tourism and education within the targeted markets of North America, Europe, India and China.</p>
2.8	<p>Given the growing level of activity that Council is delivering within the International Relations Framework with new initiatives such as Belfast Boston Sister Cities, the MOU with Shenyang, the UKIERI project in India and the many other planned activities, Officers have evaluated the benefits of the NI Connections annual subscription.</p>
2.9	<p>It is therefore felt that an annual subscription of £30,000 is excessive. Having discussed this with NI Connections, BCC has been offered a more basic level of membership at a cost of £6,000 per annum subject to review.</p>
2.10	<p>This would allow Council to continue being promoted as a member, and to make up the financial shortfall it has been proposed that BCC directly involve NI Connections in its outward and inward activities as an opportunity in kind for NI</p>

