



Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Future of Comet Economic and INTERREG Partnerships
Date:	19 August 2014
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Members will be aware that Belfast City Council has worked with partners across the metropolitan area for more than a decade. That work has principally been focused through two partnership structures, namely the Comet Economic Partnership and the Comet INTERREG Partnership.
1.2	The Comet Economic Partnership involves economic development staff from each of the six council areas. Collaborative activity includes lobbying with regards to EU funding and policies, delivery of joint projects to support SME development and engagement in best practice sharing EU funded projects.
1.3	In 2005, the councils were approached by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to form a shadow Comet INTERREG IIIA Partnership to prepare the Greater Belfast area for pursuing INTERREG IVA funding. At this time, a shadow Comet INTERREG Partnership was set up consisting of 12 elected members, 2 from each of the council areas. The Partnership became fully operational in 2007, and is coordinated by a secretariat based within Belfast City Council's EU Unit.
1.4	SEUPB currently provides all funding for running costs of the secretariat (currently around £85,000 annually). This covers staff and overhead costs for the INTERREG Partnership Manager whose role is to support the Board as well as managing all claims and compliance issues between the project partners and the SEUPB.

2	Key Issues
2.1	<p><u>Comet Economic Partnership</u> Members will be aware that the Comet area as currently defined (i.e. council areas of Belfast, North Down, Newtownabbey, Castlereagh, Lisburn and Carrickfergus) will no longer exist in its current format following the reform of local government in April 2015. At the April 2013 AGM of the Comet Economic Partnership, the six councils agreed to continue the partnership in its current format until March 2015 and to see out a number of operational commitments agreed through the annual action plan and service level agreement arrangement. Traditionally, councils had set aside a nominal amount to support small-scale collaborative project activity, focused on business development and growth as well as shared learning and collaboration on EU issues.</p>
2.2	<p>Given the boundary changes that will come about as a result of local government reform, as well as the changing priorities and areas of focus of the new councils, there is an opportunity to consider whether these arrangements should continue as is or whether there is a need to change the way of working.</p>
2.3	<p>While the current partnership arrangements provide an opportunity for officers to share information and engage in collaborative working, the majority of the engagement occurs at an operational level, with limited opportunity for strategic input.</p>
2.4	<p>The EU institutions and other international governance structures and partnerships such as OECD are increasingly focusing on the importance of working at the functional urban area level, namely the travel to work area or the area beyond the administrative boundaries within which the majority of movement and activity takes place. Given the changing dynamics within the new council areas, there may be an opportunity to consider how greater strategic collaboration across the adjacent council areas can be achieved, focusing on those issues that lend themselves to joint planning and delivery.</p>
2.5	<p>In the interim, the options for collaborative working at operational level include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="376 1335 1394 1469">1. Enter into a new and extended service level agreement (SLA) with those councils who make up the new/expanded metropolitan area, develop a new agreed action plan and agree an annual budget for collaborative activities <li data-bbox="376 1469 1394 1603">2. Councils to work together on an informal project by project basis. This would not require any formal structure and would be sufficiently flexible to accommodate a broad range of activities, beyond the current areas of focus.
2.6	<p>While there is some value in the collaborative engagement, it is considered that the current structures no longer lend themselves to the priorities of individual and collective councils. Moreover, there is a considerable staffing requirement on the part of Belfast City Council's EU team to resource the partnership and, given the increasing commitments on EU and international activity, it may be more appropriate to re-focus the activities towards this new area of work.</p>
2.7	<p><u>Comet INTERREG Partnership</u> The Comet INTERREG Partnership along with the other cross border local authority partnerships (namely the North West Cross Border Group, the East Border Region, the Irish Central and Border Region and the North East</p>

	Partnership), have lobbied extensively to maximise the role of local authorities in the design and delivery of the future INTERREG V programme.
2.8	SEUPB have, however, indicated that they will not be willing to financially support the INTERREG Partnerships under the new INTERREG V programme. Equally, the partnerships will not have a formal status in the new programme structure. Therefore, if councils wish to retain the partnership structure, they will have to resource them fully from their own budgets.
2.9	In the case of the partnership for the new Belfast metropolitan area – depending on how this was defined – it would require the councils to meet all overheads associated with the operation of the partnership – currently £85,000 per annum.

3	Resources Implications
3.1	<u>Comet Economic Partnership</u> Under the current structure, the six COMET local authorities make an annual financial contribution of £5,000 towards a service level agreement under which a range of planned activities are undertaken. The partnership is supported by officers from the council's EU unit.
3.2	<u>Comet INTERREG Partnership</u> The current INTERREG partnership costs £85,000 per annum and costs are currently fully met from SEUPB funds. Should council wish to maintain a structure of this type, it is likely that the annual running costs would be similar to this.

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

5	Recommendations
5.1	It is recommended that Members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agree to end the current SLA structure between the COMET councils but commit to exploring ongoing strategic and operational engagement on issues that lend themselves to joint planning and delivery - Agree to abolish the current Comet INTERREG Partnership when it ends in 2015.

6	Decision Tracking
	Should the recommendations be approved, no decision tracking is required.