



**Report to:** Development Committee

**Subject:** Get Belfast Reading Initiative

**Date:** 16 December 2014

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<b>1</b>	<b>Relevant Background Information</b>
1.1	<p><u>Cultural Framework for Belfast 2012–15</u> As Members will be aware, the Cultural Framework for Belfast 2012–15 was agreed and published in October 2012. Its vision is that:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">By 2020, everyone in Belfast experiences and is inspired by our city’s diverse and distinctive culture and arts. Arts and heritage are valued for enriching quality of life and creating wealth, and the city’s culture and creativity is renowned throughout the world.</p>
1.2	<p>The Cultural Framework complements the Investment Programme, which recognises arts and heritage as key drivers of the city’s economy. It was developed in consultation with the arts and heritage sectors, and the Council’s approach has been cited as best practice. Its aims are arranged under four themes – Distinctly Belfast, Inspiring communities, Attracting audiences and Strengthening the sector – and its targets include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increasing audiences from Belfast by 10 per cent</li> <li>- growing visiting audiences from 15 to 25 per cent</li> <li>- establishing a strong, skilled, multifaceted arts and heritage infrastructure</li> <li>- generating £8 in income for every £1 invested in the sector</li> </ul>
1.3	<p><u>Literary Belfast</u> Belfast is the home of many writers and poets, many of whom have enjoyed international success and recognition. The city has a rich literary heritage and prolific literary activity across diverse venues and as part of festivals across the year. This reputation is recognised in tourism initiatives such as Literary Belfast online resources and events developed in 2011.</p>
1.4	<p>However despite its proliferation of writing, Northern Ireland has low literacy levels amongst adults as well as young people. This has been particularly noted in Belfast. Northern Ireland ranked 19 out of 24 for literacy in a major study by</p>

1.5	<p>the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) carried out across Europe last year. A report launched in September 2014 (compiled by the coalition Read On, Get On) also noted that the region had high levels of inequality in reading attainment amongst children.</p> <p>There is therefore a need to stimulate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reading as a private and group activity, particularly with hard to reach groups or areas of the city</li> <li>- awareness of Belfast’s literary history and current talent, and allow people to see the city through its writers’ eyes.</li> </ul>
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<b>2</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>
2.1	<p>In line with the vision of the Cultural Framework, Belfast City Council has developed the initiative ‘Get Belfast Reading’ to help attract audiences, inspire communities, and strengthen the local cultural sector. The main aims are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increase awareness of and engagement in reading based activities</li> <li>- stimulate the use of books and literature</li> <li>- break down barriers to reading</li> <li>- encourage attendance at literary events</li> <li>- build awareness of local writing talent and literary heritage, and</li> <li>- enhance literacy levels for all ages across the city</li> </ul>
2.2	<p>Get Belfast Reading will contribute to achieving targets in the Cultural Framework and benefits of the initiative will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- improved health and wellbeing</li> <li>- enhanced quality of life through social interaction and pleasure</li> <li>- educational benefits and longer term economic benefits</li> <li>- events and visual elements have positive impacts on perception of the city – local, national, international</li> </ul>
2.3	<p>The initiative has been developed by Belfast City Council in consultation with relevant stakeholders including Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Libraries NI, Verbal Arts Centre, BookTrust, Linen Hall Library, the Reader Organisation, and the Read On, Get On campaign. The focus of the initiative is to encourage participation across the city and focus work where there is currently limited provision.</p> <p>The initiative has several proposed strands.</p>
2.4	<p><u>Belfast Book Boxes</u></p> <p>A minimum of 15 Belfast Book Boxes will be created and installed at key community access points across the city (at least 5 outdoor and 10 indoor). They will be designed by an artist working within the community. ‘Book boxes’ is an established model that has been rolled out in other cities across the world, but this would be the first initiative in Northern Ireland.</p>
2.5	<p>The call to action is ‘take a book, read a book, return a book’. The aim is to stimulate an interest in books, increase access to reading material in areas far from libraries, and improve social cohesion and a sense of community. The book boxes will be promoted with events and programmes such as the ‘One City, One Book’ initiative. In addition to books, each box will also include information about local events and resources such as library, community, and arts centre activities.</p>

2.6	<p><b>Shared Reading Initiative</b></p> <p>A number of shared reading groups will be established across the city. The call to action will be to make reading enjoyable, building the confidence, self-esteem and reading ability of all age groups with a focus on hard to reach groups. Key to this will be to train volunteer reading coaches in a high quality model of shared reading, in order to effectively engage new readers and audiences.</p>
2.7	<p>A number of community based 'reading rooms' have already been established in Belfast, led by Verbal Arts Centre. Libraries NI also have an active reader development programme. Interest in these has been strong and has attracted new participants and stimulated them to read (often Belfast focused) literature and be more confident in expressing themselves and sharing their stories. Groups meet in diverse and accessible venues including community centres, libraries, hospitals and arts centres. To date ad hoc approaches have been made by organisations seeking financial support from Council and there is demand for more groups to be established across the city. There is also a waiting list of volunteers who wish to become trained reading coaches. Get Belfast Reading would give structured support to help establish and maintain a number of reading rooms across the city.</p>
2.8	<p><b>Literary Belfast resources</b></p> <p>This strand will update and increase the accessibility of existing Literary Belfast resources to help raise awareness and knowledge for locals and visitors. This will include reanimation of the Belfast Writers app; an update of web resources; further promotion of the exhibition; and renewal of on-street visuals.</p>

<b>3</b>	<b>Resource Implications</b>
3.1	<p><b>Financial</b></p> <p>A budget of £15,000 is included in the TCA unit's 2014/15 budget. In kind support will be provided by stakeholders.</p>

<b>4</b>	<b>Equality and Good Relations Considerations</b>
4.1	An equality impact assessment for the project will be carried out to ensure all areas of the city have the opportunity to benefit.
4.2	Good Relations considerations will be taken into account.

<b>5</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
	It is recommended that Members note the contents of this report and agree to proceed with the Get Belfast Reading initiative.

<b>6</b>	<b>Decision Tracking</b>
	There is no Decision Tracking attached to this report.

<b>7</b>	<b>Key to Abbreviations</b>
	TCA: Tourism, Culture and Arts.