



Subject:	Growing the Economy and Working and Learning Update: Programme of Work 2020/21
Date:	7 October 2020
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Cathy Keenan, Economic Development Manager (Local Economic Development) Sinead O'Regan, Economic Development Manager (Employability and Skills)

<b>Restricted Reports</b>	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>Call-in</b>	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	At a meeting of City Growth and Regeneration Committee in March 2020, the work programmes to support the delivery of targets under the Growing the Economy and Working and Learning pillars of the Belfast Agenda and the Inclusive Growth Strategy were agreed.
1.2	Given the current circumstances and the specific ongoing challenges for Belfast residents and local businesses, the purpose of this report is to update Members on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The current status of the council-led activities relating to Growing the Economy and Working and Learning pillars of the Belfast Agenda</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emerging priorities and activities aimed at re-focusing the current work programme to ensure that the council's activities to help stabilise and grow new and existing businesses, social enterprises and cooperatives in Belfast and to address growing levels of unemployment as a result of COVID-19 are effective at this time.</li> </ul>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Note the work undertaken to date across a wide range of work areas within the Growing the Economy and Working and Learning pillars of the Belfast Agenda, including the outcomes achieved and scheduled towards year end</li> <li>Note the changing operating environment and the emerging proposals to ensure that the council interventions remain effective.</li> </ul>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>Main report</b>
3.1	<p>Members will be aware that, at the City Growth and Regeneration Committee meeting on 4 March 2020, approval was given for the delivery of the Growing the Economy and Working and Learning work plans for the current financial year. These work plans were developed as part of the council's contribution towards the commitments identified under these themes within the Belfast Agenda, and to the corporate plan, as well as supporting the council's ambitions to deliver inclusive growth.</p>
3.2	<p>As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, officers have been working closely with local residents, businesses and delivery partners across the city to adapt the support available to ensure that it remains relevant and effective. An update on this refocused activity was presented to this Committee on 10 June 2020. This report takes account of the work that has been further developed to support the city recovery plans – as discussed at the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 18 September 2020 – focusing on job retention and creation, business support and skills development.</p>
3.3	<p><b><u>Growing the Economy update</u></b></p> <p>The pandemic has created a significant shock across most economic sectors. Businesses have been forced to re-examine their business models and ways of working in order to survive. As a result, we have adapted our range of support services to businesses to help them to come through the current crisis and, importantly, be in a position to work towards recovery and business growth in the future. In practical terms, this meant moving all of our</p>

	<p>business support to online delivery models to ensure that businesses could still access the support that they need.</p>
3.4	<p>Despite the challenging operating environment, there has been some positive work in a range of areas including:</p>
3.5	<p><u>Starting a Business:</u></p> <p><i>Enterprise Pathway – start-up support for unemployed/economically inactive</i></p> <p>Prior to the outbreak of COVID 19, we had developed a new business start-up intervention in partnership with DfC to support those who were currently unemployed. This year to date, 20 individuals who have been long-term unemployed/economically inactive are engaged and are receiving personalised business mentoring support to develop business plans and access to financial support to set up their business. Taking account of the demand for the service as a result of the recent spate of redundancies and growing unemployment numbers, we have extended the contract to support an additional 50 residents to make a move towards self-employment, with the potential to cater for more significant numbers if the demand arises.</p>
3.6	<p><i>Go for It – start-up support</i></p> <p>By the end of August 2020, we had supported 112 individuals through the Go For It programme supporting the creation of 69 jobs. 90 of these businesses accessed further support 1:1 specialist mentoring support and incentives to enable them to overcome barriers to starting up, and adapt their business within the current climate.</p>
3.7	<p><i>High Growth Start-up Support</i></p> <p>We developed a targeted intervention to identify those businesses that demonstrate the potential for high growth and to provide them with the necessary support and resources that they need to achieve their potential. We also re-engaged 36 past participants through our additional support put in place to help companies navigate their way through the pandemic. Since April 2019, we have created 53 jobs and supported a total of 120 high growth start-ups, increased the average turnover growth by £21,607 per company and supported them to secure nearly £1m in investment.</p>
3.8	<p><u>Social Enterprise and Cooperative Support:</u></p> <p>By utilising our membership with CLES, this summer we engaged them to undertake an initial baseline analysis of the social enterprise and cooperative sectors in Belfast, using existing</p>

datasets to identify the size and geographical spread. This initial research identified approximately 1202 active organisations which could be considered as part of Belfast's social economy (87 of which were registered on the Mutuals Public Register). Based on this initial research we are now working to engage directly with the sector to further understand what we need to do to enable the development of more social enterprises and cooperatives across the city.

3.9 Through our support for social enterprises and cooperatives, we have engaged 29 new social enterprises and 5 cooperatives since April 2020 and also provided enhanced support to those that we had previously engaged with to help them through the challenges created by COVID. This included financial support to 46 social enterprises and cooperatives, providing access to resources to cover their overheads and adapt their businesses to enable them to remain sustainable, unfortunately there was a low uptake of cooperatives with only 3 applying for funding support. Since April we have significantly increased levels of engagement with cooperatives, providing those who are participating on our support with 4 extra days mentoring, covering the cost of registration fees and delivering dedicated training and webinars. There is also a series of future events planned in October and November in partnership with cooperative alternatives.

3.10 Growing a Business

Through our business support we have engaged 178 businesses since April 2020. 126 of these businesses received enhanced resilience support to enable them to adapt and sustain their businesses through the COVID pandemic, and 52 were supported to enhance their procurements skills and access new tendering opportunities. The webinars delivered as part of this support engaged 576 businesses covering topics such as introduction to tendering, business resilience and continuity, selling online and managing cash flow.

3.11 One area that has seen significant demand over the last number of months is our digital business support. Our specialist assistance for SMEs to enhance their digital skills have provided essential support for businesses during COVID-19. Since April, 56 businesses have accessed mentoring support and 115 have engaged in digital webinars.

3.12 *Innovation Factory*

In keeping with NI Executive guidance, a decision was taken to close the Innovation Factory (IF) on 24 March 2020. The centre remained closed until the 1 July 2020. As part of a corporate decision on fees and charges, elected members agreed to give all tenants a three

month rent free period from 1st April 2020 to the 30th June 2020. This rent free period has been gratefully received by tenants and has meant that more than 80% of the businesses that were located at the Innovation Factory before March 2020 have now re-opened their offices. Following the re-opening, the centre has been performing well and is now reporting a 60% occupancy rate. This means that it is on track to achieve an occupancy rate of 71% by the end of the year, as stipulated in the ERDF letter of offer from Invest NI. Following the more recent UK government and NI Executive restrictions regarding workplaces, IF has been able to retain customers, reporting that the flexible workspace option is working better for their business at this point in time and this is reflected in the current performance.

3.13 *DfC Revitalisation Support: Business Grant Scheme*

Members will be aware that the Northern Ireland Executive established a number of financial support schemes for businesses. In a number of instances, the Department worked closely with the council to promote the scheme and to support uptake. We also supported the administration of some elements of the £25,000 funding for the retail and hospitality and leisure sector. A total of 699 businesses in the Belfast City Council area were successful in accessing this support.

3.14 We are currently managing and administering the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation grant for businesses which has been provided to the council as part of a package of support from DfC. This funding provides businesses with financial support for capital items to enable them to adapt their businesses to increase sales and footfall. To date there have been almost 700 applications for this support. Following an initial allocation of £400,000 towards the scheme, the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting on 18 September 2020 agreed to double the amount available to £800,000. Based on an average funding allocation in the region of £1,600, this should allow us to support up to 500 businesses all across the city.

3.15 As the effects of the pandemic emerge, we continue to work with individuals and businesses to identify what we need to do to rebuild the economy in partnership with our city stakeholders. The Belfast: Our Recovery Plan approved by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on 18 September outlines our commitment to promoting sustainable and inclusive growth, investment and employment. Over the remainder of the financial year, we will continue to build on the achievements highlighted above, engaging with local businesses and partners to ensure that our support is informed and impactful. Some key areas of work are likely to include:

3.16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scaling up our start-up support and making it more flexible to meet the needs of those needing the support: experience from previous recessions suggests that many people – either by necessity or through a change in circumstances – take the plunge and start their own business. We are constantly working to make our support offer more flexible and to ensure that it is promoted as widely as possible – focusing on self-employment as a positive route to job creation and income generation. In addition to responding to the emerging need, we are currently engaging in a research and reflection piece – in partnership with Invest NI – to identify the future shape of our start-up support. This recognises that entrepreneurship levels in Belfast are traditionally low and that a key characteristic of most successful cities is a vibrant business base with a dynamic start-up support ecosystem. Members will be aware that, since 2015, councils have had responsibility for start-up and enterprise support. As ERDF resources for this work come to an end, we need to understand the likely scale of the emerging “ask” in this area so that we can built a collective response and take account of these issues in our medium-term financial planning</li> </ul>
3.17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delivering interventions in partnership with Invest NI to ensure there is support in place for those businesses that will be impacted by the EU’s exit from the EU. As the shape of the future requirements emerge, it is important that we provide information, guidance and advice to ensure that businesses can understand the new operating environment and adapt their business to take account of this way of working</li> </ul>
3.18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We continue to build on our support for Social Enterprises and Cooperatives at this time and are working with our procurement team to understand how we can better support the sector to access public procurement opportunities, including taking account of the work around social value procurement</li> </ul>
3.19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We are refocussing our business growth support to target businesses in sectors that have been most negatively impacted by COVID-19 such as tourism, hospitality and retail. This support will enable them to access advice and guidance on remaining resilient, developing their business models to engage new customers and plan for the future, linking into financial support that has been made available through the NI Executive. Working with the Digital Innovation Commissioner, we are also considering how we utilise technology to support businesses in these sectors to increase their customer base</li> </ul>

3.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We continue to work with our seven partner councils along the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor to identify business and new collaborative opportunities. Progress on this work will be presented in a separate committee paper.</li> </ul>
3.21	<p><b><u>Working and Learning Update</u></b></p> <p>At the 4 March 2020 meeting of the City Growth and Regeneration Committee, members received an update on the extensive programme of work that had been undertaken in the year to date. A series of priority interventions were set out and agreed under four key headings, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting access to employment</li> <li>Focus on young people</li> <li>Strategic engagement</li> <li>Policy influence and guidance.</li> </ul>
3.22	<p>Clearly, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on both our delivery models – with limited or no face-to-face engagement possible for most of the period since March 2020 – and on our ability to delivery employer-led interventions to support long-term unemployed and economically inactive individuals into employment. Members will be aware of some of the headline economic figures over the last six months:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Redundancies at their highest level since 2013 – with 601 redundancies in Belfast to date (to July 2020)</li> <li>57% reduction in job vacancies on figures for last year</li> <li>July 2020 saw the largest monthly rise in claimant count in the UK since modern records began: for Belfast, between March and July, the number of claimants by residents aged 16 years and over rose by 7,310 to 14,745 (98.3%). In claimant count rate terms, this equates to a 3.3pp increase</li> <li>Belfast workers aged 25 to 29 saw the largest proportional increase in claims (1,375, 157.1%), followed by the 40 to 44 age group (840, 146.1%)</li> <li>There is now of total of 44,100 furloughed employments in Belfast, accounting for nearly a fifth (17.7%) of all furloughed employments in Northern Ireland. The level of uptake has varied across sectors: “accommodation and food” has the highest take-up rate (81%), followed by the “construction” (71%), and “arts” (70%)</li> <li>Around 8,900 people in Belfast are currently claiming the UK government self-employment support allowance (SEISS).</li> </ul>

3.23	<p>Taking account the radical changes in the labour market since the initial plans were developed, the team has had to pivot its work significantly. At the outset, it was relatively unclear as to how long this situation may last and what the likely impact would be. As time progresses, it is clear that the labour market will be scarred for some time by the economic implications of the pandemic.</p>
3.24	<p>As the economic generator for the region, this means that the impact of job losses, the large number of employees on furlough and shorter working hours for those working in Belfast will have an impact all across the region. For those Belfast residents who have previously found it difficult to access employment, there is a risk that they will face a double disadvantage: a reduction in available jobs (particularly in those sectors that may have supported entry-level roles such as hospitality and retail) as well as significantly increased competition for any job vacancies.</p> <p>Details of ongoing work and emerging areas of engagement for each of the work areas are set out below:</p>
3.25	<p><u>Supporting access to employment</u></p> <p>This area of work aims to remove barriers to people out of work to enter into employment and for those in work to advance in employment. Officers have expanded this programme of work to include the delivery of several employment academies in a variety of sectors including: Hospitality, Childcare, Transport &amp; Logistics, Social Care, Childcare, Construction and Leisure.</p>
3.26	<p>Belfast City Council, in partnership with The Executive Office (TEO), also supports five European Social Fund training and skills development projects in the City which specifically target and support long-term unemployed, young people not in education, employment or training and people with disabilities. These include LEMIS+, Springboard, Workforce, Specialisterne and USEL.</p>
3.27	<p><i>Employment Academies</i></p> <p>The end of year results for 2019/20 have been positive, with 544 participants commencing an Employment Academy (70+ still on transport employment academies as well as upskilling programmes) and 354 into employment which represents an average of 75% into employment rate for those successfully completing.</p>

3.28	<p>The collapse in demand across many sectors has had a significant impact on ability to deliver this year to date. A full programme of planned activity was suspended in mid-March 2020 with contingencies in place to mitigate against financial, delivery and safety risks. In practical terms, this means that we had to place a temporary pause on the delivery of Employment Academies in transport, hospitality, leisure and construction. For a number of other employers that had indicated a willingness to work with us on Employment Academies (e.g. Translink), their operating environment means that these are currently on hold. Given all of the above, it has been necessary to adjust the targets for Employment Academies from 350 to 270 jobs or better jobs.</p>
3.29	<p>While some sectors have stepped back, demand has remained strong in others. We continue to engage with prospective employers for entry-level jobs in sectors such as social care, leisure and logistics as well as Upskilling Academies in social care, childcare/playwork and construction. Activity has included:</p>
3.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At the start of lockdown, Officers provided support to Belfast HSC Trust in recruitment of temporary staff as part of COVID-19 preparations across various occupational areas – driving, call centre, administration, cleaning, auxiliary staff etc.</li> <li>• In partnership with Department for Communities, Officers have recently provided support to The Range for 120 posts required in opening of their new store at Boucher Road, with 200 people interviewed in September 2020</li> <li>• Continuation of existing Employment Academies and Upskilling academies in social care, childcare and playwork through online training delivery: these academies include QCF Levels 2-5 qualifications are aligned directly to a better job which the employer is required to evidence as part of the selection process onto the academy</li> <li>• Ongoing support for Social Care Upskilling Academy at QCF Level 3 and QCF Level 5 for 44 new people as well as a Childcare/Playwork Upskilling Academy for 22 new people to meet growth demand with this sector, directly linked to business growth plans of employers. These Employment Academies target those who are working at entry levels within the respective sectors, with the aim of enabling them to access a better job within their occupation. Officers note that employer applications for access to this academy and linked to business growth has come predominately from childcare providers who are social enterprises, and is largely a response to implementing changes required as a result of changes to the numbers that can be accommodated, while taking account of social distancing</li> </ul>

- Three Leisure Employment Academies with 34 places are planned to go live in September and October 2020. These will support the creation of new roles, particularly Recreation Assistants and Swim Teachers
- Driven by sectoral engagement with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), Social Care Employment Academies are beginning to be delivered using an online format. At this point, we are working on the basis of an indicative 60 academy places which can increase where demand is identified and during September 16 people completed this employment academy with 14 people offered employment to date. A differentiated delivery approach has been designed to ensure a balance of delivery targeted at those who are newly unemployed as well as those who are economically inactive (who are offered access to a QCF Level 2 through the Employment Academy once in employment) to ensure that Inclusive Growth remains embedded in delivery while also providing interventions for those newly unemployed.
- Sectoral engagement being undertaken with Logistics UK to identify workforce needs across their members with continued demand across warehousing and driving occupations due to COVID-19 and Brexit. From there, academies will be designed/planned for an indicative 90 places which can increase where demand is identified
- Design of an Upskilling Construction Academy in partnership with the Construction Industry Training Board and Construction Employers Federation for those aged 25yrs+, working in skilled trades who do not have a QCF qualification and require this for their CSR Card renewal. Initially, it is proposed that 25 places will be allocated for residents to access the relevant occupational qualification within the financial year. In addition to this, Officers are scoping opportunities within the green economy to identify potential new interventions within a growing sector and one that has been identified as being central to supporting sustainable growth in Belfast.

3.31

*European Social Fund (ESF) projects*

As set out above, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the ability of ESF projects to engage with those who are out of work and do not have the digital devices/ connectivity/ capacity to be able to engage virtually. Some projects did not actively recruit new participants in Quarter 1 and Quarter 2, while others (particular those who work with young people) found that, while their participant base was still able to engage, the impact on training delivery and job outcomes remains significantly impacted.

3.32	<p>Activity in the first quarter of this financial year is therefore much lower than expected with 367 new participants and 57 job outcomes, representing 50% of expected delivery at this stage. Officers are supporting ESF projects with targeted communication and marketing strategy to drive engagement where possible.</p>
3.33	<p><u>Focus on Young People</u></p> <p>A key focus of the Belfast Agenda is to tackle educational inequalities and to provide support to enable young people to fulfil their potential. The Employability and Skills team has taken forward a number of targeted interventions in this space including:</p>
3.34	<p><i>Youth Support Programme</i></p> <p>This provides targeted support for young people between 14 years old and 24 years old who are at risk of or have already disengaged from formal education or training/employment. Through this programme, at least 160 young people will supported – either through 121 mentoring or through practical support and training/qualifications.</p>
3.35	<p>In recognition of the research above indicating that young people are likely to be disproportionately affected in the downturn, we have scaled up our level of engagement in this programme, with targeted engagement and referrals coming from the Educational Welfare Service.</p>
3.36	<p><i>Supporting Educational Attainment</i></p> <p>Members will be aware that the educational attainment levels at GCSE level in Belfast are significantly lower than in most other council areas. There is a particular gap in those attaining at least a grade C in English and Maths. Given that these are such a fundamental building block for accessing further education or employment opportunities, members agreed to support this targeted intervention through the Citywide GCSE Support Programme. This builds on the successful Easter School and community revision programme that originated in west Belfast and was subsequently extended to parts of east Belfast. Through the council initiative, the programme is now available all across the city. It targets young people in year 12 at risk of not achieving grade C in English and Maths with a target of supporting 365 students p.a. and helping at least 175 of those to achieve Grade C in English/Maths GCSE.</p>

3.37	<p>Delivery for this area of work was progressing and on track until COVID-19 cancellation of exams and lockdown. Officers have been working closely with the Department for Education and the Education Authority to consider alternative approaches in the current operating context. Emerging opportunities include supporting Year 12 students predicted at a D grade in English/Maths to achieve a pass grade as well as flexing delivery to different age groups/ subject areas and exploring opportunities for numeracy and literacy catch-up. Challenges remain in the logistics of being able to deliver this programme safely, including the need to maintain ‘social bubbles’ with the school environment and the fact that external employees/additional teaching staff are not permitted within the school buildings. Officers are therefore working with the delivery agent and schools to identify potential solutions, including blended learning, utilising teachers within each school to deliver the intensive revision required etc.</p>
3.38	<p><u>Strategic Engagement</u></p> <p>Given that statutory responsibility for Employability and Skills provision continues to remain within the remit of NI government departments, and taking account of the scale of challenge as articulated above, the Employability &amp; Skills team focuses on creating mechanisms to work in partnership with statutory providers as well as influencing their interventions to the benefit of the city. This includes engagement with the emerging City Deal programme – ensuring that Belfast residents can benefit from the opportunities that will be presented from this investment, as well as working with key government departments working in this area.</p>
3.39	<p><i>Employability NI</i></p> <p>Employability NI Programme is a cross governmental approach to co-design and co-commission a sustainable future strategic employment offer which provides a tailored level of support proportionate to need. The programme has been designed in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver a reduction in economic inactivity and long-term unemployment to bring NI closer in line with UK rates</li> <li>• Provide increased support for those with health conditions (esp. mental health) and disabilities</li> <li>• Create a mechanism for government to collaborate with Councils and other Departments to offer local solutions.</li> </ul>
3.40	<p>The proposed governance structure for the programme involves the establishment of Local Inclusive Labour Market Partnerships in each council area. Their purpose is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide leadership and lead on the integration of services</li> </ul>

- Develop local area plans including setting targets for performance
- Manage devolved funding and its delivery through a dynamic purchasing framework
- Manage arrangements for the evaluation of local interventions.

3.41

Council officers have been part of the Programme Board for Employability NI that drove the initial development of the programme. While the operating environment in which the programme will deliver services has changed dramatically, officers have been arguing that the need for enhanced targeting of services at a local level is more critical than ever, in order to support inclusive and sustainable economic growth in the city. Officers are currently working with DfC with a view to exploring how the Community Planning structures can offer a mechanism for mobilising the proposed Local Inclusive Labour Market Partnerships in Belfast. This will be central to our ability to focus government interventions on areas of most need. An update report will be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee.

3.42

#### Policy Influence and Development

Achieving economic growth through an inclusive approach is a key focus of the Belfast Agenda. The Council is actively engaged in a range of activities that fall within the remit of inclusive growth and social value. A number of work streams are currently being developed and rolled out which seek to utilise the Council's investment and decision-making powers to increase the impact of our expenditure. Key areas of work include:

- Utilising procurement spend to deliver greater economic and social impact through the use of social clauses and social value with a new Social Value Procurement Policy being prepared for approval at SP&R Committee in November 2020 following an all-party working group currently being established.
- The development and implementation of developer contributions aligned to the planning process and developer briefs.

3.43

#### *Developer Contributions*

From April 2020, the Employability & Skills team has been consulted with on nine major planning applications in order to establish whether developer contributions relating to employability and skills may be appropriate and, if so, to provide preliminary advice on the nature of the intervention and the potential support mechanisms. Officers are also currently working alongside a developer on one of the city's most significant development schemes that has already received outline planning permission. This work includes engagement with the developer and local community representatives with regard to the development of an employability and skills plan for the site.

3.44	<p><u>Financial &amp; Resource Implications</u></p> <p>The activities outlined within this report will be resourced from the 2020/21 Economic Development and Employability and Skills budgets agreed by this Committee on 4 March 2020.</p>
3.45	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>Each of the proposed projects referenced in this report is informed by statistical research, stakeholder engagement and complementary policies and strategies. The unit is currently undertaking a process of equality screening on the overall work programme, this will ensure consideration is given to equality and good relation impacts throughout the delivery of each project.</p>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>Appendices – Documents attached</b>
	None