10 September 2026

Committee Chair: Alderman M Magill

Committee Vice-Chair: Councillor B Mallon

Committee Members: Aldermen – M Cosgrove and S Ross, Councillors - R Foster, E McLaughlin, M Ní Chonghaile and B Webb

Dear Member

MEETING OF THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Economic Development Committee will be held in the **Chamber, Mossley Mill** on **Tuesday 15 September 2026** at **6.30 pm.**

You are requested to attend.

Yours sincerely

Richard Baker GM MSc
Chief Executive, Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council

PLEASE NOTE: Refreshments will be available in the Café from 5.20pm

For any queries, please contact Member Services:
Tel: 028 9448 1301

memberservices@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk

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REPORT ON BUSINESS TO BE CONSIDERED AT THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEETING ON TUESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2026

3. ITEMS FOR DECISION

3.1 ED/DI/005 ASK CAPITAL GRANT PROGRAMME GRANT AWARDS

1. **Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to seek Members' approval for the award of one grant under the ASK Capital Grant Programme.

2. Background

The ASK (Advice, Skills and Knowledge) Mentoring Programme was launched in September 2025 and supports local businesses through tailored one-to-one mentoring and business development support.

Through the programme businesses can access up to 10 hours of mentoring support across a range of areas such as Advanced Digital Technologies, Digital Infrastructure & Strategy, Innovation & Product Development, Business Strategy and Planning and Sales & Marketing.

To support the implementation of mentor-led recommendations, the Council introduced the ASK Capital Grant Programme, which provides eligible businesses with grant assistance towards capital investment projects.

Following completion of mentoring eligible businesses may be invited to apply for an 80% funded capital grant of up to £1,500 to support investment in software, systems, equipment and other innovation-enabling technologies aligned with Economic Development objectives.

3. Previous Council Decision

In May 2026, Members approved the extension of the ASK Capital Grant Programme, with a budget allocation of £75,000 for the 2026/27 financial year.

4. Capital Grant Applications Received

Members are advised that during the period 7 August 2026 to 20 August 2026, one application was received, with a maximum of £1,500 being recommended for approval. Grant awards are set out in the table enclosed.

5. Financial Position

The overall ASK Capital Grant Programme budget for 2026/27 is £75,000. To date, £38,040.77 has been awarded. Should Members approve the grant recommendation within this report the remaining programme budget would be £35,459.23.

6. Summary

This report makes one grant recommendation under the ASK Capital Grant Programme for the period 7 August 2026 to 20 August 2026, with a total value of £1,500.00.

7. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members approve the one grant award totalling a maximum of £1,500.00 to the successful applicant under the ASK Capital Grant Programme.

Prepared by: Natasha Donald, Economic Development Manager

Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director of Infrastructure and Regeneration

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

3.2 ED/REG/083 OUT OF TOWN CENTRE SHOPFRONT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME GRANT AWARDS

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to seek Members' approval to award two grants under Call 6 of Phase 2 of the Out-of-Town Centre Shopfront Improvement Programme.

2. Introduction / Background

The aim of the Out-of-Town Centre Shopfront Improvement Programme is to visually enhance commercial areas outside town centres, improving the overall appearance of the street and changing the way residents and visitors view local retail areas. It is envisaged that this will ultimately attract more shoppers and boost local trade.

The programme covers minor works to include painting, signage, window dressing and other visual improvements. Major structural works are not covered under this scheme.

Eligible businesses/property owners can apply for a grant of up to £4,999, at a grant rate of 80%.

3. Applications Received

Members are advised that for the period 28 March 2026 – 31 July 2026, two applications were received and assessed by a panel of officers. The total value of grants recommended for approval is £2,129.52, subject to the receipt of all supporting documentation. Grant awards are set out in the table enclosed.

4. Financial Position

The overall programme budget for Phase 2 is £139,743.55. To date, £68,265.60 has been awarded. Should Members approve the two grant recommendations enclosed, the remaining programme budget would be £69,348.43.

A further call for applications opened on 1 August 2026 and will close on 25 September 2026.

5. Summary

This report makes two grant recommendations under Call 6 of Phase 2 of the Out-of-Town Centre Shopfront Improvement Programme.

5. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members approve the two grant awards totalling £2,129.52 to the successful applicants under Call 6 of Phase 2 of the Out-of-

Town Centre Shopfront Improvement Programme, subject to the receipt of all relevant supporting documentation.

Prepared by: Hannah McVeigh, Regeneration Officer

Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director of Regeneration and Infrastructure

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

3.3 ED/ED/321 RURAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT GRANT SCHEME (RBDGS) 2026/2027 FUNDING AWARDS

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the award of funding through DAERA's RBDGS to applicants detailed in Annex 1, subject to satisfactory eligibility checks, successful application and DAERA budget allocation.

2. Introduction/Background

Members are reminded that in May 2026, it was agreed to deliver a Rural Business Development Grant Scheme through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), alongside the other Councils in Northern Ireland. Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council's available grant aid budget under this scheme is yet to be confirmed, although a budget of 10% of Letter of Offer value will be provided from DAERA to the Council to administer the scheme.

The key aim of the Scheme is to provide capital grants of up to £7,500 to support micro-businesses located in rural areas with under 5,000 population to invest in new equipment or capital items. The objective of the fund is to enable businesses to remain sustainable or to grow. The maximum grant-funding rate is 50%, with at least 50% match-funding provided by participating businesses.

As determined by DAERA, the scheme was opened for applications on 29 June 2026 until 30 July 2026 for projects to be completed by 21 December 2026.

A total of 84 applications were received by Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council. To be successful in securing a grant, businesses applying must pass eligibility checks and score a minimum of 65% in their application assessment. Eligibility checks and grant assessments are currently underway by Economic Development Officers, with application outcomes to be shared in October 2026. In a number of cases, the grant awarded is less than the value requested. This is primarily due to certain items being deemed ineligible.

Details (enclosed) in Annex 1 are RBDGS applicants, their project title and their proposed project costs. Officers will conduct eligibility checks and assessments on each application. This is a competitive grant, where awards will be determined on the basis of merit. Values contained within Annex 1 are subject to change pending satisfactory eligibility checks, successful application and DAERA budget allocation.

Projects that are deemed ineligible or do not meet the threshold/criteria for the programme will be notified and signposted to alternative business support opportunities through the Economic Development Team.

3. Previous Decision of Council

In May 2026, the Council gave approval to participate in the Rural Business Development Grant Scheme through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), alongside the other Councils in Northern Ireland.

4. Financial Position/Implication

There is no direct financial contribution required from the Council. DAERA will provide 10% of the funds awarded through Letters of Offer (for administration purposes) to promote and deliver the programme, which will be managed by the Economic Development Team.

5. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members approve the Rural Business Development Grants detailed in Annex 1, subject to satisfactory eligibility checks, successful application and DAERA budget allocation.

Prepared by: Matthew Mulligan, Economic Development Officer

Agreed by: Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

3.4 ED/ED/325 BUSINESS GROWTH ACCELERATOR / NON-DOMESTIC VACANCY RATING LIABILITY – CONSULTATION RESPONSE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to make members aware of a consultation being progressed by the Department of Finance/LPS in relation to potential rates interventions designed to complement existing measures such as the Back in Business scheme and Small Business Rate Relief and to seek members views in relation to a response.

2. Background

The Council welcomes the consultation paper issued by the Department of Finance/LPS regarding the proposals for a Business Growth Accelerator and Non-Domestic Vacant Rating Liability intervention. The paper outlines how the two interventions could work as follows:

1. Business Growth Accelerator – will delay immediate increases in rates following property improvements thereby addressing this challenge to investment.

2. Non-Domestic Vacant Rating – proposes introducing a phased increase in liability for vacant commercial property, replacing the current 50% rate.

   Stage 1 – increase liability to 75%
   Stage 2 – increase to 100%

The following would remain unchanged:

- The initial 3-month exemption, and
- Existing exclusions (e.g. insolvency, listed buildings)

Council Considerations

1. Business Growth Accelerator – The Council does not hold any data which supports the position that rates increase immediately following property improvements is a major barrier to investment however, on face value it would make logical sense that this would certainly be a consideration for any business thinking about investing in their property. The proposal for a grace period of e.g. 12 months would provide a short ‘breathing space’ for such a business but would be short term in its relief which in turn questions its value. The lower level of rates applied during the grace period would represent a loss in rates received by central and local government on a proportionate basis. Whilst generally supportive of such measures the Council would wish to understand more about the rationale and evidence base for bringing forward this proposal as opposed to any other – Who is it targeted at? Is there evidence that this is a particular challenge and that the accelerator would have the desired impact? What would the cost be of such as scheme? Has consideration been given to a pilot programme?

The Council generally agrees with the scope as set out on Page 12. With respect to the general principles of such an intervention, the Council would be generally supportive but would be doubtful as to whether this would incentivise new activity unless it was a large business with a significant rates bill. Whilst a longer grace period would be more attractive for businesses it would have the opposite effect on the Council's rates collection therefore a 'reasonable' period would need to apply. With respect to vacant properties being brought back into use as part of such an intervention, the Council would agree that enhanced support should apply but only if the use is desirable to a town centre location e.g. new retail brand not currently operating in the town. Consideration could also be given to tiers of investment which would attract different levels of a 'grace' period which could act as an incentive.

2. Non-Domestic Vacant Rating - The Council notes that the current 50% rate, is lower than that in other jurisdictions, and is perceived as reducing incentives to bring property back into use and understands that the proposed changes could encourage occupancy, reduce long term vacancy, align more closely with other jurisdictions and increase revenue (estimate up to £20 million).

The Council has made significant efforts both through its own work and in collaboration with the Department for Communities, other public bodies and the private sector to grow the rates base across the Borough and address the challenge of vacancy particularly in town centres. Vacancy is undoubtedly a major inhibitor to growth and where multiple vacant properties exist in one street, town or locality this further compounds the disincentives for investment. In many cases, property ownership within towns and villages rests with a relatively small number of individuals/families and by virtue of this the same applies to vacant properties.

As part of the Council's regeneration programme, field work has been undertaken to establish the extent of vacancy across the Borough's 5 towns, the results of which are summarised below for 2026:

Table 1: Overall Commercial Vacancy Level by Town (July 2026)

Town	No. of Units (Total)	No. of Units Vacant	% Vacancy
Ballyclare	132	15	11%
Crumlin	74	12	16%
Glengormley	121	4	3%
Randalstown	82	16	20%

Other supporting data includes ownership, the length of time that a property has been vacant, it's last known use etc. In some cases, properties have been vacant for a significant number of years, and it would appear are potentially 'land banked'. The Council is developing this work further in an effort to shape a programme based on a financial model which would be attractive to the private sector whilst also representing value for money to the public sector.

The Council has appointed CBRE and Turley to provide independent expert advice on vacancy and they are nearing the end of their assignment, the results of which will inform and shape future initiatives. The Council is open to discussing this work with LPS.

Members are advised that they may wish to respond on a corporate individual or party-political basis.

4. Recommendation

Members instructions are requested.

Agreed and Approved by: Majella McAllister, Director of Economic Development and Planning

3.5 ED/LMP/001 ANTRIM AND NEWTOWNABBEY LABOUR MARKET PARTNERSHIP UPDATE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to:

- **Provide an update to Members on the LMP**
- **Seek approval of the draft 2027-2030 LMP action plan**
- **Seek approval to commence programme delivery for the 2026/27 action plan.**

2. Introduction/Background

Members will be aware of the Labour Market Partnership (LMP), the aim of which is to improve labour market conditions by working through coordinated, collaborative, multi-agency partnerships, achieving regional objectives whilst being flexible to meet the needs presented by localised conditions and helping to connect employers with employees.

Members will recall that at the Economic Development Committee meeting in March 2026, approval was granted to proceed at risk with 2026/27 activity pending receipt of a Letter of Offer from Department for Communities (DfC), and for Officers to hold delegated authority to accept a Letter of Offer upon receipt. Since this approval, Officers have been working to prepare activity and programmes for the year ahead without incurring costs. However, to date no letter of offer has been received from the Department for Communities.

3. Key Issues

Update on Letter of Offer

A letter was received from Minister Lyons on 26th March 2026 stating that, as the Executive has not agreed the Draft Budget 2026-30 and to ensure business continuity, an interim allocation would be provided to LMPs for 2026–27 pending agreement of a final Budget.

This interim support was provided by the Department to cover the three-month period up to 30 June 2026 with interim allocations based on last year's budget. The grant allocation for the first 3 month period was £98,991.63.

A further letter was received from Minister Lyons on 25 June 2026, issuing a further interim allocation for quarter 2 to support the continuation of services. This allocation was again £98,991.63 to cover July to September 2026.

To date, there has been no further correspondence from the Department regarding a formal funding offer.

Strategic Priority	Full allocated budget	Budget to operate key function	Justification
SP1.1 Partnership Delivery	£2,400	£1,000	ANBC not hosting coordination meeting in 26/27
SP1.2 LMP Sub-Groups	£1,600	£600	In line with 25/26 actual costs
SP1.3 Strategy & Evaluation	£5,000	£5,000	27-30 Action Plan spend
SP2.1 Pathway Programme	£49,000	£49,000	Workforce contracted, full budget required for the programme to be undertaken
SP 2.2 Academies	£154,916	£100,000	This would allow a core selection of priority academies to be delivered
SP2.3 Upskilling	£95,000	£50,000	£15k Upskilling academies £35k Employee Upskilling
SP2.4 Disability	£15,000	£15,000	Priority given to this SP following investment in development of Enable action plan and previous reprofiling of this budget
SP3.1 PR	£11,212	£4,000	Focus on utilising internal promotion opportunities
SP3.2 Employability Events	£15,000	£15,000	Priority given to this SP due to the strategic nature of the large employability events for the LMP
SP3.3 Engagement & Outreach Officer	£27,000	£0	Outreach and engagement to be conducted within current resourcing where possible

SP3.4 INSPO Programme	£20,750	£5,000	Reduction in availability for funding to schools
SP3.5 Beyond School event	£4,000	£4,000	Based on 25/26 costs – key event to be retained
TOTAL	**£400,878**	**£248,600**	

The total interim allocation provided to date is £197,983.26. Once salary and running costs are deducted from this total, this allows for approximately £130k of programme costs. If a Letter of Offer was received at normal funding levels, it would be expected to allocate approximately £400k of programme costs.

Therefore, to deliver the 2026/27 action plan, there is a shortfall in programme costs of £270k, in the event that no Letter of Offer is received.

Given the above context, there are a number of options available to the LMP to allow commencement of programme delivery for 2026/27:

1) **Utilise the remaining £130k of DfC interim funding for programme delivery. This would allow for delivery of the following indicative activities:**

Strategic Priority	Estimated interim spend	Justification
SP1.1 Partnership Delivery	£1,000	Essential function
SP1.2 LMP Sub-Groups	£600	Essential function
SP1.3 Strategy & Evaluation	£5,000	27-30 Action Plan spend
SP2.1 Pathway Programme	£49,000	Key programme to LMP delivery, already in contract so no procurement required to allow immediate progression
SP 2.2 Academies	£50,000	This would allow a small number of priority academies to be delivered
SP2.3 Upskilling	£5,400	Potential to use for Learning Fund to maximise interventions with limited budget
SP3.1 PR	£4,000	Focus on utilising promotion opportunities
SP3.2 Employability Events	£15,000	Priority given to this SP due to the strategic nature of the large employability events for the LMP
TOTAL	**£130,000**	

TOTAL £130,000
DfC Interim Allocation: £130,000
ED budget (if no LOO received): NIL

2) Deliver a wider range of key priority programmes and functions of the LMP as outlined below:

TOTAL £248,000
DfC Interim Allocation: £130,000
ED budget (if no LOO received): £118,600

3) Utilise ED budget to commence delivery of full 2026/27 LMP Action Plan until Letter of Offer received or in the event that no LOO is received.

TOTAL £400,878
DfC Interim Allocation: £130,000
ED budget (if no LOO received): £270,878

Officers have considered the above context and believe that proceeding with spending the interim allocation is the most practicable solution at this time, in anticipation of a Letter of Offer.

Draft 2027-2030 Action Plan

The Department for Communities have advised local LMPs that they are required to develop a combined Action Plan for 2027/28, 2028/29 and 2029/30. The combined Action Plan should cover the full three-year delivery period. Unlike in previous years, it is not necessary to divide the plan into three separate annual plans with clear delineation between each year.

In previous years, LMPs were required to carry out a Strategic Assessment of the labour market in their area. For the 2027-30 Action Plans, DfC commissioned a Strategic Assessment of the whole Northern Ireland labour market, which includes individual reports for each of the 11 Council areas. The Strategic Assessment includes a statistical review and evaluation of current labour market evidence. The resulting analysis has identified key issues, trends and emerging challenges for reference within the Action Plan to demonstrate the evidence base for proposed interventions. A copy of the 2026 Regional Strategic Assessment is enclosed. The Antrim and Newtownabbey report is also enclosed.

Stephanie Morrow of Morrow Gilchrist Associates has been appointed to assist the LMP in developing the three year action plan. A planning workshop took place with the LMP Partnership on 12th August 2026 and a further follow-up session took place on 26th August 2026 where LMP Members were invited to provide feedback on the first draft of the Action Plan. The first draft has been submitted to DfC for review, ahead of presentation of the draft plan to Regional LMP on 28th September 2026. The draft 2027-2030 Action Plan is enclosed.

4. Previous Decision of Council

Members will recall that at the Economic Development Committee in March 2026, approval was granted to proceed at risk with 2026/27 activity pending receipt of a Letter of Offer from Department for Communities (DfC) and for officers to hold delegated authority to accept a Letter of Offer upon receipt.

5. Financial Implication

The financial implications are dependent on the option approved by Members. These options are as follows:

Option 1: Utilise the remaining £130k of DfC interim funding for programme delivery. This would allow for delivery of key activities as outlined above.

TOTAL £130,000
DfC Interim Allocation: £130,000
ED budget (if no LOO received): NIL

Option 2: Deliver a wider range of key priority programmes and functions of the LMP as outlined above.

TOTAL £248,000
DfC Interim Allocation: £130,000
ED budget (if no LOO received): £118,600

Option 3: Utilise ED budget to commence delivery of full 2026/27 LMP Action Plan until Letter of Offer received or in the event that no LOO is received.

TOTAL £400,878
DfC Interim Allocation: £130,000
ED budget (if no LOO received): £270,878

6. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members;

a) Approve the draft 2027-2030 LMP action plan

b) Approve commencement of programme delivery for the 2026/27 action plan utilising a Council allocation of £118,600 alongside the interim allocation (option 2)

Prepared by: Jill Murray, Economic Development Manager

Agreed by: Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

3.6 ED/ED/322 YOUTH EXCHANGE PROGRAMME 2026/27

1. <u>Purpose</u>

The purpose of this report is to seek approval for the 2026/27 Sister Cities Youth Exchange Programme at a cost of up to £10,000 for up to 4 young people from the Borough aged 16/17 (year 13 or equivalent); seek approval of financial assistance for participants families and to seek approval that the Mayor and Chair of Economic Development Committee or their nominees sit on the interview panel to recruit the programme participants.

2. <u>Introduction/Background</u>

Members will be aware that the Sister Cities Youth Exchange Programme provides young adults from Antrim and Newtownabbey and Gilbert, Arizona with an opportunity to develop an understanding of a different country, its culture, and its people through a family living experience. The programme lasts approximately six weeks during the summer with half the time spent in Gilbert and half in Antrim and Newtownabbey. This year marked 23 years of the exchange programme.

3. <u>Previous Decision of Council</u>

This long running programme is part of the Council's ongoing Sister City relationship with Gilbert, Arizona. Most recently, in September 2025 Economic Development Committee Members approved;

a) Delivery of the Sister Cities Youth Exchange Programme 2025/26 at a cost of up to £10,000 for up to 4 young people from the Borough aged 16/17 (year 13 or equivalent) be approved.
b) Financial assistance of up to £500 per participant family be agreed (total £2,000)
c) The Mayor and Chairperson of the Economic Development Committee or their nominees sit on the interview panel to recruit the young people, alongside a member of the Economic Development team.

4. <u>Key Issues</u>

The Sisters Cities Youth Exchange is a programme that has been running since 2000. The Programme aims to provide Antrim and Newtownabbey's young adults with the opportunity to travel to the Council's Sister City, Gilbert, Arizona to develop an understanding of a different country, its culture and people through a family living experience.

Promotion of the programme begins in October, which involves a social media campaign, issuing of information packs to local schools, creation and distribution of posters within local leisure and community centres as well as press releases. In addition to this, Officers host pre-application information sessions to give potential applicants a taste for the exchange programme and allow attendees the opportunity to raise any questions they may have. Past participants typically attend these sessions, sharing valuable insights into the exchange as well as tips and guidance for the application process.

This year, three young people from the Borough were matched with a young person from Gilbert. First the NI participants travel to the US to spend 3 weeks experiencing the American way of life, living with their host family. Each participant is given an opportunity to learn about their hosts' local cultures and customs in ways which could not be achieved through a casual holiday to the US.

At the end of the three weeks, the participants from the Gilbert host families return with their NI matches to be home hosted in the Borough. During their stay they have the opportunity to closely experience the Northern Ireland culture and make lifelong friends. Further to a BBQ welcome event hosted at Mossley Mill, each host family is provided with vouchers for local ANBC activities and restaurants to financially support the hosting element of the programme.

5. Financial Position/Implication

Financial provision of £10,000 for the 2026/27 Sister Cities Youth Exchange Programme exists within the Economic Development budget.

6. Equality and/or Rural Screening Requirements

N/A

7. Governance

The Youth Exchange programme will be managed by the Economic Development Team.

8. Recommendation

It is recommended that:

a) Delivery of the Sister Cities Youth Exchange Programme 2026/27 at a cost of up to £10,000 for up to 4 young people from the Borough aged 16/17 (year 13 or equivalent) be approved.

b) Financial assistance of up to £500 per participant family be agreed (total £2,000)

c) The Mayor and Chairperson of the Economic Development Committee or their nominees sit on the interview panel to recruit the young people, alongside a member of the Economic Development team.

Prepared by: Matthew Mulligan, Economic Development Officer

Agreed by: Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Planning and Economic Development and Planning

3.7 ED/ED/279 GO SUCCEED FY26/27 FUNDING UPDATE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the current funding position for the Go Succeed Programme Delivery 26/27 (Entrepreneurship Support Service). The total Go Succeed funding package for FY 26/27 is £8.93 million.

2. Introduction/Background

At Economic Development Committee in January 2026, Members were updated on the funding position for FY26/27 and options for future funding for the Go Succeed Programme.

Members will be aware that the Go Succeed Project Management Office (PMO) at Belfast City Council secured a £2.53 million (revenue) funding package for Go Succeed programme delivery for FY26/27 from UK Government's Local Growth Fund. This award represented a significantly reduced and heavily capital-skewed budget, which presented challenges for programme delivery in its current format.

Working to mitigate against these challenges, PMO had been actively engaging with Councils, governmental departments and regional officials to explore options to minimise impact to service delivery and the client experience. Potential options had included accessing top-up funding from NI government departments, increased match funding from Councils and utilisation of programme underspends from previous years.

On 10 August, Minister Dr Archibald confirmed a £1 million funding package from the Department of Economy for Go Succeed to bolster the previously confirmed budget allocation from UK Government Local Growth Fund, which would be match funded by local councils. This budget would primarily support capital grant delivery.

Alongside this, PMO confirmed that underspend from FY25/26 would support uplifted Engage and Foundation targets, effective from 1 September, which would allow delivery to be in line with the previous year and meet Statutory Targets around jobs promoted through Start-Up Activity.

Outlined below is a summary of Go Succeed programme delivery for FY26/27, including the budget summary.

Service Delivery

These are the programme adjustments that been made to ensure delivery is in line with budget allocation.

- Engage and Foundation Mentoring uplifted to FY25/26 levels utilising underspend from previous year. This ensures the Council can continue to meet Statutory Targets for Job Creation via Start-Up Activity

- Growth and Scaling Mentoring reduced by 20% from previous financial year
- £16,000 local Community Outreach budget confirmed, used to promote the service to underrepresented groups
- Removal of Peer Support Networks
- Consolidation and reduction of masterclasses

Grants

- Budget allocation for delivery of Go Succeed Grants confirmed, with call opening on 1 September
- Open to those who have completed >60% of their allocated mentoring hours on the Foundation, Growth and Scaling pillars of the service

Budget Breakdown for Antrim and Newtownabbey

	LGF (£) Total 26/27	LGF (£) Total 25/26 Revenue Underspend	LGF (£) Total 25/26 Capital Underspend	DfE (£) Total	Council Contribution (£)	Go Succeed Underspend from 25/26 (£)	TOTAL
Antrim and Newtownabbey	**£118,982**	**£5,716**	**£7,759**	**£47,026**	**£124,373**	**£96,972**	**£400,828**

Antrim and Newtownabbey targets for 26/27 are

	Annual Target	Delivery to July 26	% towards target
Indicative number of participants engaged across all 'Engage' activities	**265**	**115**	**43%**
Indicative number of participants engaged across all 'Foundation' activities	**41**	**30**	**73%**
Indicative number of participants engaged across all 'Growth' activities per year	**102**	**56**	**55%**

3 Previous Decision of Council

Council committed to contributing up to £154,694 towards participation in the 2026/27 programme. £124,373 of the previously approved £154,694 will be utilised for Go Succeed in 2026/27.

4 Financial Position/Implication

The Council has previously agreed to match-fund the Programme to the value of £77,347 in 2023/24, £77,347 in 2024/25, £77,347 in 2025/26 and up to £154,694 in 2026/27.

5 Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the update provided regarding the Go Succeed FY 26/27 programme.

Prepared by: Matthew Mulligan, Economic Development Officer

Agreed by: Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Economic Development and Planning

3.8 ED/ED/039 RYBNIK VISIT UPDATE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the successful civic visit undertaken by the Mayor to Rybnik in June 2026 and to seek approval to extend an invitation for an incoming visit.

2. Background

The twinning relationship between Newtownabbey Borough Council and Rybnik, Poland formally commenced on 18 October 2003. Following local government reorganisation in 2015, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council inherited and reaffirmed this strategic partnership through renewed partnership agreements signed in December 2015.

The twinning relationship with Rybnik, Poland, has remained largely symbolic in recent years, initially grounded in civic goodwill and shared European values.

Activity over the years has been limited to short civic visits centered around the Rybnik Days Festival which happens in June every other year and, in recent years, have been attended by the Mayor, a Member and an Officer.

3. Previous Decision of Council

In March 2026, approval was granted for the Mayor and one Officer from Economic Development to accept the invite to the Rybnik Days Festival 2026 with expenses being covered by the Economic Development budget.

4. Key Issues

Update on Rybnik Days Festival Visit 2026

From 11th-15th June 2026, the Mayor and accompanying officer visited Rybnik at the invitation of the municipality to participate in the Rybnik Days Festival, forming one part of an international delegation of 11 regions. The itinerary for the visit is enclosed.

The agenda included visits to key educational and regeneration facilities, participation in the International "Golden Lyre" Brass Band Festival, and attendance at civic ceremonies marking significant partnership anniversaries with Saint-Vallier, Eurasburg and Ivano-Frankivsk. Delegates also took part in a guided tour of the city, visited the Ignacy Historic Mine as part of the Industriada Festival of Industrial Heritage, and attended cultural events associated with the city celebrations. The programme concluded with participation in the Feast Day of St. Anthony of Padua, patron saint of Rybnik, before the departure of delegations.

Invite to Antrim and Newtownabbey 2026/2027

The last visit by a delegation from Rybnik to Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council took place in 2019. Following the Mayor's attendance at Rybnik Days in June 2026, and interest expressed by the hosts, it is proposed that an invitation be extended to a small delegation from Rybnik to visit the Borough before the end of the current Council term, further strengthening the long-standing relationship between the two municipalities.

During the June visit, Rybnik Municipality met the costs associated with accommodation and the programme of activities, while travel costs were met from the Economic Development budget. It is proposed that a reciprocal arrangement would apply for any future visit, whereby the visiting delegation would meet their own travel expenses, with the Council covering accommodation and the local programme. It is anticipated that the visit would be approximately two days in duration.

The estimated cost to the Council is in the region of £1,500 to £2,000, which can be accommodated within the existing Economic Development budget.

Given the nature of the relationship with Rybnik and its areas of strategic interest, the Economic Development Team would work closely with colleagues from Community Planning, Tourism and Heritage to develop a programme that showcases the Borough's assets and facilitates knowledge exchange on areas of mutual interest.

5. Financial Position/Implication

The estimated cost to the Council is in the region of £1,500 to £2,000, which can be accommodated within the existing Economic Development budget.

6. Summary

Members are asked to note the update on the Mayor's participation in the Rybnik Days Festival 2026 and the continued engagement between Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and the Municipality of Rybnik. The visit provided an opportunity to strengthen civic links, gain insight into areas of mutual interest relating to regeneration, heritage, tourism and community development, and engage with a wider network of international partner municipalities.

It is proposed that the visit would be delivered on a reciprocal basis, with the visiting delegation meeting their own travel costs and the Council covering accommodation and a programme of activities. The estimated cost to the Council of £1,500 to £2,000 can be accommodated within the existing Economic Development budget.

7. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members:

a) Note the update on the Mayor's visit to Rybnik and participation in the Rybnik Days Festival 2026; and

b) Approve an invitation to a small delegation from Rybnik to visit Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council before the end of the current Council term, with associated costs of approximately £1,500 to £2,000 to be met from the existing Economic Development budget.

Prepared and Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director of Regeneration and Infrastructure and Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Economic Development & Planning

3.9 ED/ED/314 INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - PAYS DU COQUELICOT (POPPY COUNTY), FRANCE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to consider the merits of proceeding with a formal relationship with the Pays du Coquelicot (Poppy County), France, based on the information currently held by the Council.

2. Background

International Relationships continue to play an important role in supporting the Council's ambitions in relation to economic development, tourism, culture, education and civic engagement.

The Council's International Relations Review produced a framework, presented in March 2026, which provides a structured methodology for assessing both existing and potential international partnerships to ensure they are strategically aligned, deliver measurable outcomes and represent an appropriate use of resources.

As part of the March report an assessment was outlined of the opportunity presented by Pays du Coquelicot (Poppy County), located within the Somme region of France based on this framework.

The review recognised the significant historical connections between the Borough, Northern Ireland and the Somme region, alongside opportunities relating to heritage tourism, educational exchanges, cultural engagement and wider economic collaboration.

Initial engagement between representatives of the Council and Pays du Coquelicot has included an inward visit by a delegation in June 2025 and an outward visit in August 2025. These exchanges have been positive and demonstrated a mutual interest in considering a more structured relationship which would support shared objectives and strengthen links between both areas.

3. Previous Decision of Council

In August 2026, the Council agreed that a report be prepared based on information already gathered on the merits of proceeding with a formal relationship with the Pays du Coquelicot (Poppy Country) for members consideration and that no further scoping is required.

Prior to this decision, in March 2026 members considered a detailed report on the International Relations review with associated recommendations and a framework which could be utilised to assess existing and new requests.

The framework requires consideration of:

- Strategic alignment with Council priorities.
- Potential economic, civic and cultural benefits.
- Resource implications and organisational capacity.
- Community interest and mutual benefit.
- Evidence that measurable outcomes can be achieved.
- Sustainability and long-term value of the relationship.

Following consideration of the report, it was agreed one elected member and an officer attend the Rybnik event, and that all remaining items be deferred to an Elected Member Workshop with further consideration to be presented at Full Council meeting.

4. <u>Assessment of the Opportunity</u>

The March report included an evaluation of the Poppy Country/Somme Region opportunity against the proposed International Relationship Framework shown below;

1) Initial Approach or Interest from a Jurisdiction	Interest initiated informally through civic contacts linked to remembrance events.
2) Does the Opportunity Align with Strategic Goals (Economic, Civic, Cultural)?	**Yes** - Heritage tourism, educational engagement, and cultural diplomacy directly align with the Borough's priorities for community enrichment, international visibility, and tourism growth.
3) Can Meaningful Outcomes Be Realistically Achieved with Proportionate Resources?	**Yes (Cautious)** - Educational and cultural projects, such as joint school programmes or commemorative tourism initiatives, could be established at relatively low cost, focusing primarily on targeted events rather than permanent infrastructure or heavy staffing. Educational and cultural projects, such as joint school programmes or commemorative tourism initiatives, could be established at relatively low cost, focusing primarily on targeted events rather than permanent infrastructure or heavy staffing.
4) Start with a Friendship Relationship (Low Cost, Diplomatic Engagement)	**Recommended first step:** *Formalise a Friendship Agreement focusing on low level economic development activity, shared heritage* commemorations, student visits linked to history curriculum, and possible collaboration with local museums or cultural groups.

5) Evidence of Mutual Benefit, Capacity, and Community Interest?	*Monitoring phase:* • Engage local schools, heritage groups, and tourism officers to gauge interest and ability to participate. • Seek reciprocal commitment from Somme authorities in hosting and supporting joint activities. • Assess the appetite among the Borough's residents for participating in remembrance-related cultural programmes. • Potential impact of low level economic development activity.
6) Upgrade to Twinning or Sister City Status?	*Only if:* • Tangible, multi-year educational and cultural programmes develop. • Economic benefits (e.g., increased tourism to the Borough) can be measured or forecast with confidence. Otherwise, maintain the relationship at the Friendship level with periodic reviews.

The Somme region represents a culturally significant and strategically aligned opportunity for Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council. However, it is recommended that engagement proceeds initially via a Friendship Relationship, focusing on specific, manageable projects around heritage, education, and tourism. Future escalation to a more formal Twinning arrangement should be conditional on demonstrated mutual benefit and community value.

5. Financial Position/Implication

At this stage no additional financial commitment is being requested.

A further report will be presented to Members outlining a proposed programme of activity, governance arrangements and costs.

6. Summary

The assessment undertaken through the Council's International Relations Framework has demonstrated that Pays du Coquelicot represents an aligned opportunity with the potential to deliver meaningful benefits.

7. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members;

(a) approve the formalisation of a Friendship Agreement focusing on low level economic development activity, shared heritage commemorations, student visits linked to history curriculum, and possible collaboration with local museums or cultural groups as a first step in developing a formal relationship with Pays du Coquelicot (Poppy County), France

(b) officers develop a programme of activity, governance arrangements and associated costs for consideration by Members.

Prepared by and Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director, Regeneration and Infrastructure and Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Economic Development and Planning

3.10 ED/ED/326 HEAVY INDUSTRY INNOVATION NETWORK – LETTER OF SUPPORT

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update Members on a proposed Heavy Industry Innovation Network project being developed utilising Shared Island funding and seek approval for the submission of a letter of support.

2. Introduction/Background

Officers have been approached by Future Cast an Innovation, R&D, Education & Science Centre for Construction, Quarrying & Manufacturing supply chain with locations in Leitrim, Sligo, and Roscommon. Future Cast specialise in funding and innovation and R&D Projects and comprise a team of 20 Engineers, Scientists, Lecturers, Building Technicians with wider team of 75 PHDs and Masters in Colleges in Ireland, EU and USA.

The goal of Future Cast is to establish a resilient, future-proofed heavy industry sector network across 42 Council Districts on the Island of Ireland and bridge regional innovation divides, accelerate decarbonisation in key sectors, and foster shared prosperity.

The enclosed presentation provides a more detailed overview of the Heavy Industry Innovation Network (HIIN) Cluster project proposal, with a €136million funding application currently being prepared by Future Cast for Shared Island funding later this year.

Part of the proposed project includes providing a solution which will encompass:

- A physical presence in all 42 Council areas
- x 500sqm units in each area
- Support for start-ups and scale ups, connected to central innovation centres targeting heavy industry

The project will target a number of other funds as part of its operational approach including from Enterprise Ireland and Invest EU.

The project proposes the creation of Heavy Industry Innovation Units, with a phased roll-out proposed. Ultimately the success will relay on the availability of land and partnering with local landowners and / or Councils.

However, at this stage no commitment is required from the Council regarding specific sites or development proposals in the Borough. A letter of support has been requested from the Council for inclusion in their Shared Island funding application.

It is considered that a letter of support from the Council is provided given that there is no further commitment required from the Council at this stage and that should the project come forward, it may help support our local heavy industry, business start-ups in the Borough and scaling up of local businesses.

Members will be aware that the Advanced Manufacturing innovation Centre (AMIC) at Global Point will be officially opened later this year. Given that the Future Cast project proposes to focus on heavy industry and will seek to provide spaces for small start-up / grow-on spaces there is no conflict with the aims of AMIC.

3. <u>Previous Decision of Council</u>

No relevant previous decision by the Council.

4. <u>Financial Position/Implication</u>

There is no direct financial contribution required from the Council.

5. <u>Recommendation</u>

It is recommended that Members approve the submission of a letter of support from the Council for inclusion in a funding application to the Shared Island Fund.

Prepared by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director, Regeneration and Infrastructure and Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

3.11 ED/ED/298 NI ECONOMIC CONFERENCE 2026

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to seek Members' approval for attendance at the Northern Ireland Economic Conference 2026 for Members of the Economic Development Committee and relevant Council Officers.

2. Introduction/Background

Members may recall that Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council was the sponsor for the 2022 and 2023 Agenda NI Northern Ireland Economic Conference, which took place at the Kingfisher Hotel. In the years since, the Economic Conference has been hosted in the Titanic Hotel Belfast under the theme of "Creating good jobs, promoting regional balance, raising productivity and achieving net zero by 2050".

The Northern Ireland Economic Conference is Northern Ireland's premier economic analysis event and is unique in being the only forum which takes a high-level look at the performance of and prospects for the local economy.

3. Previous Decision of Council

It was agreed at the Full Council meeting in September 2025 that Members of the Committee and relevant Council Officers attend the Northern Ireland Economic Conference, the cost of which was met through the Economic Development Budget.

4. Overview

The 2026 Northern Ireland Economic Conference is again being hosted in the Titanic Hotel in Belfast, on Wednesday 18th November.

Key issues to be addressed at the conference include:

- Global and UK economic outlook
- Medium term economic outlook for Northern Ireland
- Narrowing the productivity gap
- Creating good jobs and tackling economic inactivity
- Addressing regional balance
- Making City and Growth Deals count
- Achieving net zero by 2050
- Assessing the impact of trade tariffs
- Recalibrating the skills agenda
- Promoting innovation and R&D
- Analysing public expenditure
- Infrastructure investment as an economic driver

The programme is still being finalised but will include keynote addresses from:

- Dr Caoimhe Archibald, Minister for the Economy
- Chris Giles, economic commentator for the Financial Times
- John Campbell, Economics and Business Editor for BBC Northern Ireland
- Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, NI Audit Office
- Graeme Wilkinson, Heads of Industry Skills, DFE
- Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal
- Fionnula McKenna, Head of Strategic Development, Construction Futures NI
- Damian Duffy, CE and Principal, Belfast Metropolitan University
- Ana Osmond, Head of Policy, FSB
- Sean O'Rianin, Professor of Sociology, Maynooth University
- Dr Adele Bergin is an Associate Research Professor at the ESRI
- Paul Mac Flynn is Co-Director of the Nevin Economic Research Institute

5. Financial Implications

Tickets for the event are £195+VAT each, which is a special discounted rate for local government. It is proposed that interested Members of the Committee and relevant Officers attend the event.

The total anticipated cost will be met from the existing Economic Development budget.

Members are asked to notify Tara McCormick (Tara.McCormick@antrimandnewtownabbey.gov.uk) by 30th September 2026 if they are interested in attending.

6. Equality and/or Rural Screening Requirements

None.

7. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members approve attendance of Economic Development Committee Members and relevant Council Officers at the Northern Ireland Economic Conference 2026

Prepared by: Tara McCormick, Executive Officer

Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director of Regeneration and Infrastructure

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Economic Development and Planning

3.12 ED/ED/313 LOCAL ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP MINUTES

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to seek Members' approval for the minutes of the Antrim and Newtownabbey Local Economic Partnership meeting held on 26 June 2026 and to seek approval of several Member changes to the Partnership.

2. Background

Members are reminded that the Local Economic Partnership (LEP), established as a Working Group of the Economic Development Committee, comprises representatives from the Council, Invest NI and key stakeholders from the public, private and community sectors. The Partnership aims to support local economic growth and improve opportunities for businesses and residents across the Borough.

The LEP is supported through the Department for the Economy's Regional Balance Fund, with funding of up to £2.868m allocated to Antrim and Newtownabbey over three years to support delivery of the LEP Action Plan.

The Partnership provides a forum to identify local challenges and opportunities, consider investment priorities and oversee the delivery of the LEP Action Plan. The Action Plan sets out the agreed programme of activity to support business growth, improve productivity, encourage investment and create new economic opportunities across the Borough.

3. Previous Decision of Council

In November 2024, Members agreed to establish the Antrim and Newtownabbey Local Economic Partnership as a Working Group of the Economic Development Committee.

In March 2026, Members approved the LEP Action Plan for Years 2 and 3.

4. Governance

The LEP Partnership operates as a Working Group of the Economic Development Committee and meets as agreed to oversee delivery of the LEP Action Plan.

The Partnership met on 26 June 2026, and the minutes of the meeting are enclosed for Members' consideration and approval.

5. Membership Changes

Since the outset of the LEP, several changes to the Membership have been confirmed, these have been undertaken in line with the Terms of Reference of the Local Economic Partnership.

- Antrim Enterprise is now represented by CEO Nick Serb, following the resignation of Jennifer McWilliams
- Social Enterprise NI is now represented by Amanda Johnston, following the retirement of Colin Jess.
- Rob Grundy from Catalyst NI has been invited to join the partnership.

6. <u>Recommendation</u>

It is recommended that;

a) The minutes of the Antrim and Newtownabbey Local Economic Partnership meeting held on 26 June 2026 be approved.

b) Members approve the changes to the membership of the Local Economic Partnership.

Prepared by: Conor Steele, Local Economic Partnership Officer

Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director, Regeneration and Infrastructure

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

3.13 ED/LMP/001 MINUTES - LABOUR MARKET PARTNERSHIP

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to recommend to Members approval of the minutes of the Antrim and Newtownabbey Labour Market Partnership meeting held on 18 June 2026 (enclosed).

2. Introduction/Background

Members will be aware of the Labour Market Partnership (LMP), the aim of which is to improve labour market conditions by working through coordinated, collaborative, multi-agency partnerships, achieving regional objectives whilst being flexible to meet the needs presented by localised conditions and helping to connect employers with employees.

3. Governance

The Partnership meets bi-monthly (6 times per year) and is chaired by the Mayor. Minutes from LMP meetings are reported to the Economic Development Committee.

4. Recommendation

It is recommended that the minutes of the Antrim and Newtownabbey Labour Market Partnership meetings held on 18 June 2026 are approved.

Prepared by: Jill Murray, Economic Development Manager

Agreed by: Michael McKenna, Deputy Director, Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAllister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

4. ITEMS FOR NOTING

4.1 ED/ED/277 TOWN CENTRE SHOPFRONT PROGRAMME

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the Urban Shop Frontage Scheme and the launch of Phase 4 across the Borough's five town centres.

2. Background

Since June 2024, the Economic Development section has managed and delivered the shop frontage programme with an operational budget of £494,000, comprising £420,600 from the Department for Communities and a Council contribution of £73,400. The programme enables local businesses to access a maximum grant of £4,999 per property for eligible works, at a grant intervention rate of 80%, for properties located within defined town centre boundaries.

To date, the programme has received 174 applications, with 139 Letters of Offer issued. Of these, 113 applicants have completed their projects and claimed grant funding, with 6 claims currently being processed. The remaining 20 projects were not completed and therefore these Letters of Offer have been withdrawn.

A total of £368,295.36 in grant funding has been claimed by businesses across the five town centres, as outlined in the table below.

Town	No. of Properties	Grant Funding Claimed
Ballyclare	41	£123,367.94
Randalstown	23	£72,198.17
Antrim	19	£70,099.20
Crumlin	7	£24,555.42
Glengormley	23	£78,074.63
Total	**113**	**£368,295.36**

3. Financial Position

To date, the Council has drawn down £331,465.82 from the Department for Communities and contributed £36,829.54 towards the programme. This leaves a balance of £72,477.16 of DfC funding, and £34,719.68 of the Council contribution remaining.

A further £18,507.80 is currently committed against six outstanding claims. After allowing for these commitments, approximately £107,196.84 remains available.

The extension to 31 March 2027 does not imply any additional financial contribution from the Council.

4. Phase 4

Due to continued interest in the programme and remaining available funding of approximately £107,196.84, the Department for Communities has approved an extension to the programme until 31 March 2027.

Therefore, a fourth and final phase was opened on 20 August 2026 across all five town centres and will close for applications on 21 September 2026. This is to allow sufficient time for applications to be assessed, approved and for successful applicants to complete works and submit claims in line with the funder's Letter of Offer.

5. Summary

The Urban Shop Frontage Scheme continues to support businesses across the Borough's five town centres. Phase 4 opened on 20 August 2026 and will close on 21 September 2026, with the programme extended by the Department for Communities until 31 March 2027.

6. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the update on Phase 4 of the Urban Shop Frontage Scheme.

Prepared by: Alastair Law, Regeneration Officer

Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director, Regeneration and Infrastructure

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Economic Development and Planning

4.2 ED/ED/203 BELFAST REGIONAL CITY DEAL - CONTRACTS FOR INNOVATION PROGRAMME

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update Members on Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council's participation in the Belfast Region City Deal Contracts for Innovation Programme, including participation in the forthcoming Challenge Sprint process.

2. Introduction/Background

Members will be aware of the Council's participation in the Belfast Region City Deal – the £1bn investment project aimed at supporting inclusive economic growth that delivers more and better jobs, a positive impact on the most deprived communities and a balanced spread of benefits across the six participating Council regions.

One pillar of the City Deal programme focuses upon innovation and digital with some £50m earmarked for projects in this area. The Contracts for Innovation Programme is the first major investment project that will be opened under the digital pillar.

Contracts for Innovation, is an innovation procurement mechanism which enables public sector organisations to solve complex challenges through research and development.

Unlike traditional procurement approaches, Contracts for Innovation is designed to address problems where no suitable solution currently exists within the market. The public sector organisation defines a challenge and desired outcomes, allowing businesses, SMEs, start-ups, research institutions and innovators to develop and test new approaches to solving the problem.

The model has been successfully used across Northern Ireland, the UK and Europe to address a range of economic, environmental and public service challenges including business rates intelligence, tourism innovation, transport optimisation, environmental management, climate resilience and digital public services.

In recent years, Belfast City Council, Tourism NI, the Education Authority and Health and Social Care organisations have all utilised this approach to stimulate innovation and improve service delivery.

The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) continues to support public sector organisations across Northern Ireland in developing and delivering innovation challenges and has invited local authorities to consider opportunities for future challenge-led innovation programmes.

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has therefore commenced engagement with the Contracts for Innovation Programme to better understand the potential opportunities available and assess whether a suitable challenge area exists that could be developed for future consideration.

Participation in this stage of the programme does not commit the Council to progressing a challenge but provides an opportunity to explore areas where innovation may help address strategic priorities and service delivery challenges.

3. Key Issues

As part of the programme, Belfast City Council has organised a Contracts for Innovation Challenge Sprint designed to assist public sector organisations in identifying, scoping and refining potential innovation challenges.

The programme will bring together innovation specialists, public sector organisations and challenge owners to explore potential opportunities and assess their suitability for future Contracts for Innovation competitions.

Approximately five to six officers from across a range of Council service areas will participate in the Challenge Sprint process. This cross-functional approach will ensure that the Council's strategic priorities, operational challenges and future ambitions are appropriately represented and considered.

Participation in the Challenge Sprint will provide officers with the opportunity to:

- Understand the principles of challenge-led innovation.
- Review successful Contracts for Innovation projects.
- Develop and test potential challenge statements.
- Explore opportunities for collaboration with partner organisations.
- Assess potential funding opportunities.
- Determine whether a future ANBC-led challenge should be progressed.

The findings from the Challenge Sprint will help inform future engagement with SIB and any subsequent recommendations that may be brought forward for Member consideration.

4. Financial Position/Implication

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Participation in the Challenge Sprint and initial scoping process will be undertaken using existing officer resources.

5. Summary

Contracts for Innovation provides an opportunity for Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council to explore innovative solutions to strategic challenges facing the organisation and the wider local government sector.

The Council has commenced engagement with the Programme and will be represented by a cross-service group of officers through the forthcoming Challenge Sprint process.

An initial assessment has identified a range of potential challenge themes spanning digital transformation, organisational intelligence, customer experience, regulatory services and economic development.

Participation at this stage is focused on identifying and refining potential opportunities. No decision has yet been taken regarding a preferred challenge area, and any future proposal will be brought forward for Member consideration.

6. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the Council's participation in the Belfast Region City Deal Contracts for Innovation Programme, including participation by Council officers in the forthcoming Challenge Sprint process.

Prepared and Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director, Regeneration and Infrastructure

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

4.3 ED/ED/324 DAERA FUTURE RURAL POLICY "RURAL NI: OUR NEW APPROACH 2026-2041"

1. <u>Purpose</u>

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the development of DAERA's future rural policy, "Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041", and to highlight the Council's ongoing involvement in the policy co-design process.

2. <u>Introduction</u>

DAERA is currently leading the development of a new long-term rural policy for Northern Ireland, entitled "Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041". The policy aims to create a framework through which government and communities can work together to support thriving, sustainable and inclusive rural communities. The draft policy includes proposals relating to rural representation, local partnerships, rural evidence and data, strengthening rural communities and reviewing the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

As part of the policy development process, DAERA has established a series of Council Co-Design Workshops involving local authorities, government departments and voluntary and community sector representatives to help shape the final policy proposals.

3. <u>Key Issues</u>

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has been represented throughout the DAERA co-design process, with Council officers participating in workshop discussions relating to the proposed Local Strategic Rural Partnerships (LSRPs), community planning arrangements, rural engagement structures and future delivery models.

The emerging policy proposes the establishment of Local Strategic Rural Partnerships across the ten rural councils in Northern Ireland. DAERA has indicated that these partnerships should complement existing Community Planning structures and strengthen the rural voice in local decision-making rather than create additional layers of governance.

The co-design discussions have highlighted opportunities to improve collaboration between central and local government, strengthen engagement with rural communities, and ensure that future rural investment is informed by local priorities and evidence.

The policy remains under development and will continue to evolve following analysis of consultation responses and stakeholder engagement. DAERA has advised that further workshops and ongoing engagement with councils will take place throughout the development process.

4. Financial Position/Implication

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report at this stage.
Any future funding opportunities, resource requirements or delivery responsibilities associated with the implementation of the new rural policy will be considered and reported to Members as further details become available.

5. Summary

DAERA is progressing the development of its future rural policy, *"Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041"*. The Council has actively participated in the co-design workshops and stakeholder discussions that are informing the policy's development. While the direction of travel is becoming clearer, details regarding governance arrangements, partnership structures, funding mechanisms and implementation arrangements are still being developed. Council officers will continue to engage with DAERA and other partners throughout the process and will provide further updates to Members as the programme develops and more detailed proposals emerge.

6. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the update on DAERA's Future Rural Policy "Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041", the Council's ongoing involvement in the policy co-design process, and that further reports will be brought to Members as the programme develops.

Prepared and Agreed by: Steven Norris, Deputy Director, Regeneration and Infrastructure and Michael McKenna, Deputy Director of Investment and Business Development

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

4.4 ED/ED/284 STRATEGIC PLANNING APPLICATIONS OVERVIEW

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update Members regarding Major Strategic Planning Applications and for Members to note current Planning Application Notices.

2. Recommendation

It is recommended that Members acknowledge the Major Strategic Planning Overview as (enclosed).

Prepared by: Kathryn Bradley, Business Support Planning & Economic Development

Agreed and Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

4.5 WM/WM/040/VOL 2 REGIONAL BALANCE BILL – CALL FOR EVIDENCE/ CONSULTATION RESPONSE

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the Northern Ireland Regional Balance Bill and provide an overview of its key provisions.

2. Introduction/Background

The Regional Balance Bill seeks to establish a statutory framework for addressing regional disparities in economic performance and living standards across Northern Ireland.

The Bill proposes to place a legal duty on the Northern Ireland Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a Regional Balance Strategic Framework (RBSF). The framework would set out how regional economic disparities are to be identified and addressed across government, with consideration given to differences in economic performance, investment, infrastructure, public services and living standards between different parts of Northern Ireland.

A central feature of the Bill is the requirement for government departments to take account of regional balance when developing policies and delivering public services and infrastructure. This is intended to provide a more coordinated and strategic approach to reducing regional inequalities and ensuring that the benefits of economic development are distributed more evenly across Northern Ireland.

The Bill also proposes specific functions for the Department for the Economy in relation to the preparation and maintenance of the framework, reporting to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the provision of guidance and research to support its implementation.

The legislation is particularly relevant to areas which have experienced longstanding economic and investment disparities, including the North West and the Derry/Londonderry area. The proposed framework could provide a statutory basis for greater consideration of regional need when government investment and policy decisions are made.

3. Summary of Key points of the Bill

Main points from the proposed Regional Balance Bill are summarised as follows:

- Statutory Duty: Places a legal duty on the Northern Ireland Executive to develop, adopt, maintain and implement a framework to address regional economic disparities and differences in living standards.
- Regional Balance Strategic Framework: Establishes a Regional Balance Strategic Framework (RBSF) setting out how regional inequalities will be identified and addressed across government.

- Cross-Government Responsibility: Requires government departments to take regional balance into account when developing policies and delivering public services, infrastructure and investment.
- Focus on Regional Disparities: Aims to address differences in economic performance and living standards between regions, including areas such as the North West and Derry/Londonderry, which have experienced historic economic imbalances.
- Role of the Department for the Economy: Gives the Department for the Economy responsibility for preparing and maintaining the framework, providing guidance and research, and supporting its implementation.
- Accountability and Reporting: Introduces arrangements for annual reporting and evaluation, allowing progress in reducing regional disparities to be monitored and reported to the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- Long-Term Strategic Approach: Seeks to embed consideration of regional balance into government decision-making, with the overall objective of ensuring that economic growth, public investment and improved living standards are distributed more equitably across Northern Ireland.

4. Key actions

The Committee for the Economy opened a call for public and stakeholder evidence in relation to the Regional Balance Bill on 24 June 2026(enclosed). The evidence-gathering period is scheduled to remain open until 22 September 2026.

The Committee is seeking views and evidence from stakeholders to inform its consideration of the Bill as it progresses through the Assembly legislative process.

The Bill proposes the establishment of a Regional Balance Strategic Framework which would require consideration of regional balance across government policy, public services and infrastructure. It would also introduce an annual reporting and evaluation mechanism to assess progress in addressing regional disparities.

The Second Stage debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly is anticipated to be scheduled following the conclusion of the Committee's evidence-gathering phase.

Given the potential significance of the Bill and its potential impact on future policy and future availability of resources. Members may wish to engage with the consultation procedure or provide evidence to the Committee for the Economy.

5. Financial Position

There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report.

Any future financial implications for the Council would depend on the final provisions of the legislation, the resulting Regional Balance Strategic Framework and any associated requirements placed on local government.

6. Recommendation

Members are asked to note the consultation on the Bill and may wish to respond on a party political basis.

Prepared by: Michael McKenna, Deputy Director, Investment and Business Development and Steven Norris, Deputy Director, Regeneration and Infrastructure

Approved by: Majella McAlister, Deputy Chief Executive, Director Economic Development and Planning

5. ANY OTHER RELEVANT BUSINESS

Any Other Relevant Business would be taken at this point.