

Minutes of Party Group Leaders' Consultative Forum

Thursday 10th November, 2022

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Ryan Murphy
Councillor Billy Hutchinson
Councillor Michael Long
Alderman George Dorrian
Councillor Mal O'Hara
Councillor Brian Heading
Alderman Sonia Copeland
Councillor Emmet McDonough-Brown.

Apologies: Councillor Fiona Ferguson

Officers:

John Walsh, Chief Executive
Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance (for Item 1)
John McConnell, City Services Manager (Resources & Fleet) (for Item 2)
Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty (for Item 3)
Nora Largey, Interim City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services (for Items 4 & 6)
Christine Sheridan, Director of Human Resources (for Item 5)

1. Finance Update

The Director of Finance provided an update on the work that has commenced on the estimates for 2023/24. He presented a summary of the current position for 2023/24 outlining the uncontrollable costs and the subsequent impact on the District Rate. He advised that Director challenge meetings had taken place and highlighted those growth proposals that were being recommended for removal. Members raised some concerns in relation to some of the proposals recommended for removal but were mindful of the challenges involved for the 2023/24 rate setting process. It was noted these concerns would be kept under review as this work progresses. It was also agreed that the Chief Executive would issue correspondence to the Department for Communities in relation to Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service funding for 2023/24. A detailed report on the current position and the proposals outlined would be presented to November SP&R Committee

The Director also outlined the 2022-23 Quarter 2 financial position which would also be presented to the November SP&R Committee.

2. Council Strategic Waste Management Arrangements

The City Services Manager provided an update on the progress being made on proposals for joint working between Councils in relation to waste management. He advised that SOLACE NI had previously approved a Strategic Investment Board review of the current arrangements. This review is now complete, and he outlined for Members the recommendations contained within the business case report and the proposed governance arrangements. A number of specific queries were raised by Members in relation to operations, potential savings and timelines to which the City Services manager provided clarity on. It was noted that the report presented to SP&R Committee in November would be an update to Members at this stage on the progress which has been made as further in depth work on this project is required. A report on the detail discussed will be presented to November SP&R Committee for consideration.

3. Fuel Poverty Hardship Fund

The Chief Executive updated the Forum on the recent motion raised by Councillor Flynn to set up an Emergency Fuel Poverty Hardship Fund, to be used to administer one-off vouchers to households in most need in Belfast which was agreed at the November Council meeting. The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty presented for Members a draft discussion document in confidence for consideration and feedback. This included the draft proposals for the design principles, eligibility criteria, delivery model(s) and potential budget allocation model. There was detailed discussion and a number of queries raised by Members in relation to the proposed delivery models(s), support for in work poverty households and any potential administration costs for the fund and how these might be absorbed. The Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty to consider in advance of a report going to SP&R Committee in November. It was also agreed that the draft discussion document would be circulated to Party Group Leaders for parties to further review in advance of November SP&R Committee.

Some Members also raised an issue in relation to advice services and capacity across the city and in particular in PUL communities. The Chief Executive noted the issues raised and to further consider those issues highlighted.

4. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on the live planning applications and informed the Forum of applications that were being presented to the Planning Committee in the coming months. There was detailed discussion on city centre living and how this is considered within a strategic context. There was also a query raised by a Member in relation to one of the updates provided, the City Solicitor to follow up.

Members also noted that the Replacement Planning Portal (new Planning IT system) would go live in early December and the City Solicitor outlined the risks involved as previously discussed at the last meeting of the Forum. She advised that Officers are continuing to address the risks outlined and that internal contingences will be put in place in order to mitigate these risks where possible.

5. Update on Response by other Councils Re: TU Demands

The Director of Human Resources updated the Forum on the local claim made by the Council's Trade Union Group in respect of the cost-of-living crisis and the collective list of demands for consideration by Council Management. She outlined for Members the detail of the proposals put forward and current position on each and advised that engagement with the Trade Union Group is ongoing. She also provided an update on the position for the other 10 Councils and the current proposals being considered in each respective Council. Members will be provided with regular updates as this progresses. The Chief Executive and the Head of Human Resources provided clarity on some queries raised in relation to proposals being put forward in other Councils.

6. AOB

arc 21

The Chief Executive advised that he had received correspondence from Noarc21 in relation to the arc 21 judicial review. Members noted the position outlined by the Chief Executive in relation to the correspondence received.

Knockagh Monument

Alderman Dorrian referred to a previous request from Mid and East Antrim Borough Council for Belfast City Council to reconsider its position and formally join the Knockagh Monument Joint Committee. It was agreed that a report would be brought to SP&R Committee for consideration.

Illumination Requests

The City Solicitor outlined a number of requests from Members to light up City Hall namely:

Councillor M Kelly - Children's Grief Awareness - 17 November 2022

Alderman Copeland - Pancreatic Cancer - 17 November 2022

Councillor McLaughlin Donor's Day - 27 January 2023

Given that two of the requests were for the same date, it was proposed that the illumination request for Pancreatic Cancer would be offered an alternative date, that is the 16 November 2022 in order to accommodate both requests. It was noted that both requests would be approved under the City Solicitors delegated authority.

In relation to the request from Councillor McLaughlin, it was noted that the date proposed is not available for illumination as City Hall is illuminated on that date for Holocaust Memorial Day. The City Solicitor to follow up with Councillor McLaughlin to determine an alternative date for illumination.