

# Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

## Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023

### Attendance

Members:

Councillor Michael Long  
Councillor Ciaran Beattie  
Councillor Brian Smyth  
Alderman Sonia Copeland  
Councillor Christina Black  
Councillor Tracy Kelly (*for Councillor Sarah Bunting*)  
Councillor Séamas de Faoite,

**Apologies:** Councillor Sarah Bunting

### Officers:

John Walsh, Chief Executive  
Sharon McNicholl Director of Corporate Services and Deputy Chief Executive  
Nora Largey, Interim City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services  
Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance (for Item1)  
David Sales, Strategic Director of City Operations (for Items 2 & 4)  
Sinead Grimes, Director of Property & Projects (for Item 3 & 6)  
Kate Bentley, Director of Planning & Building Control (for Items 5 & 6)  
Christine Sheridan, Director of Human Resources(for Item 6)  
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

### 1. Finance Update

The Director of Finance provided an update on the setting of the district rate for 2024/25 following the completion of the Departmental estimates process. He advised that potential efficiencies had been proposed by Departments as part of this process and that these would need to be considered by Members as part of the upcoming Party Group Briefings. He outlined that work has also been progressing in order to quantify the financial risks of the uncontrollable costs and their impact on the revenue estimates for 2024/25 and the medium term. Some issues were raised by Members in relation to how the council could support the Community & Voluntary sector to make external funding bids in these challenging times, it was agreed that officers would further consider. Members also noted an overview of the quarter two 2023/24 forecast position and that a report on both the setting of the district rate 2024/25 and the quarter two forecast position would be submitted to November SP&R for Members consideration.

The Director also provided an update on the review undertaken in relation to the criteria for the management of discretionary payment requests. Further to the update provided to Members at the October meeting the Director outlined some proposed changes to the criteria and the rationale for these changes. A report will be brought to November SP&R Committee for Member to consider the criteria changes discussed.

## **2. Review of Summer Community Diversionary Festival Fund**

The Strategic Director of City Operations provided a briefing on the review of the Summer Community Diversionary Festival Fund. The Director highlighted some of the suggested changes to the current approach, assessment process and budget. It was noted that a report outlining the proposed Terms of Reference for the independent review will be considered by Members at November SP&R Committee. The report will also outline the proposed timeframes for programme development, and it is anticipated that a call for applications would then commence in April 2024. A number of issues and concerns were raised by Members, specifically in relation to how smaller organisations could access the summer community diversionary funding and the challenging timeframe. The Director to consider the feedback provided in advance of a report being brought to November SP&R Committee. It was also agreed that other available funding streams particularly for capacity building be identified by Officers that could be shared with some of those groups highlighted. The Director also noted some additions to the proposed stakeholder engagement.

## **3. Peace IV**

The Director of Property and Projects firstly provided an overview of the Peace IV programme to date including key decision timelines. She then provided a detailed briefing on both current and emerging challenges and risks in relation to funding for Peace IV projects. The Chief Executive advised that discussions were ongoing with the Special EU Programme Body (SEUPB) in relation to the challenges and risks outlined. Work is progressing in order to minimise any adverse impacts where possible in advance of the closure of the programme in December 2023. Correspondence has also been drafted in relation to a specific issue which has arisen, and Members noted this will be issued imminently to SEUPB. The Chief Executive advised a special meeting of Party Group Leaders would be convened if required as this work progresses.

#### **4. Alleygates Update**

The Director of City Operations provided a briefing on Phase 5 of the Alleygates programme as requested by the November P&C Committee. The Committee asked that the full location details be shared with Party Group Leaders following the low response rate to the public consultation exercise and he advised that this information had been circulated in advance of the meeting. There was detailed discussion on the challenges involved to date, proposed alternative thresholds and way forward for installations. Following discussion the Director to incorporate the feedback from Members in the report to be submitted to November SP&R Committee. It was agreed that a review of the programme should be considered after this phase is complete given some of the issues raised which the Director noted.

#### **5. Planning Update**

The Director of Planning & Building Control 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. She also advised that the Local Development Plan would be included on the agenda for upcoming Party Briefings.

#### **6. AOB**

##### **City Innovation update**

The Director of Corporate Services and Deputy Chief Executive advised that the Belfast Region, led by Belfast City Council, had secured £3.8 million wireless innovation funding from the UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). Members had previously agreed that the bid should be made and had been updated on the content of the bid at the October SP&R Committee. A detailed update on the wider innovation programme of work including the detail of the DSIT funding award and contract would be brought to November SP&R Committee. A number of points were made welcoming the funding whilst stressing the importance of the innovation agenda having a positive impact on local communities. In relation to issues raised, the Deputy Chief Executive to follow up, she also advised Members that a further briefing on the City Innovation programme of work was available for Parties if required.

## **Freedom of the City**

A Member outlined a request for Freedom of the City which Party Group Leaders had considered previously. It was noted that the Forum had previously discussed the process for considering Freedom of the City requests and had requested that alternative options on how citizens could be recognised by the council be carried out. The City Solicitor advised that this work was progressing, and a report will be brought back to a future meeting of the Forum outlining proposed alternatives for recognition. Current requests will be considered in the context of the process once this work is completed. Consideration of timeframe for some of the requests was noted.

## **Dual Language Street Signs**

The Director of Planning & Building Control outlined the process for the erection of Dual language Street signs in the Gaeltacht Quarter as approved by October SP&R Committee. Members noted the suggested timeline and the operational issues involved for this programme of works.

The Director also provided an update on some current requests for the erection of Dual Language street signs to be considered by P&C Committee for which some adverse impacts had been identified which will be brought to the Committee in December. It was agreed that the long list of requests for Dual Language street signs outside of the Gaeltacht Quarter would be circulated to Party Group Leaders. Members also noted an update in relation to the process for requests for the City Centre, long streets, and developers applications. A number of specific queries were raised by Members and the Director to seek clarity and follow up after the meeting.

## **Elected Members Development Programme**

The Director of Human Resources provided an overview on the approach to the Elected Member Development framework and the process for re-accreditation of Charter Plus which is due early 2024. She outlined the proposed programme of work, and it was noted that this will be progressed via this Forum as a standing item.

## **Neighbourhood Regeneration**

The Director of Property and Projects provided a briefing for Members on the Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund. She advised that the November Area Working Group meetings will consider the business cases recommended to move to Stage 3. Members noted that site visits can be arranged for those Members who were unable to attend in September should they be required.

## **Coronation Gift**

The Chief Executive provided an update on the offer of a coronation gift (*an Irish Oak Tree*) to His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant for Belfast, which she wished to gift to the City. A report will be brought to November SP&R for Members consideration.

## **City Hall - Media Protocol**

The Chief Executive outlined the current guidelines for media interviews for party political purposes in City Hall following an issue raised. He asked that Members were mindful of these guidelines in the future. Members discussed in detail and some issues were raised also in relation to the use of Committee Rooms and the need for consistency. It was agreed that further consideration is given to this, and a report is brought back to Party Group Leaders for consideration and review.

## **Human Rights Day**

A Member raised a query in relation to a request made to Party Group Leaders to mark Human Rights day 2023. The City Solicitor advised that she was following up and would provide an update imminently.

## **Redevelopment in the Cathedral Quarter**

The Chief Executive provided an update in relation to a vesting issue within the Tribeca Site. In relation to a query raised by a Member regarding meetings with Party Group Leaders in relation to this issue the Chief Executive to provide clarity on how the meetings will be arranged.

## **Special Council Meeting**

The City Solicitor advised that a Notice of Motion for a special Council meeting had been submitted and was deemed competent, it was proposed that this would be held on Wednesday 29 November. The wording of the motion and the proposed time of the meeting to be circulated to Party Group Leaders.