

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 14th March 2024

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Jenna Maghie (*for Councillor Michael Long*)
Councillor Ronan McLaughlin (*for Councillor Ciaran Beattie*)
Councillor Christina Black
Councillor Brian Smyth
Councillor Sarah Bunting
Councillor Séamas de Faoite
Alderman Sonia Copeland

Officers:

John Walsh, Chief Executive
Sharon McNicholl Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services
Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance (for Item 1)
Wendy Langham, Programme Director, Belfast Stories (for Item 2)
Eimear Henry, Strategic Lead, Belfast Stories (for Item 2)
John Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy (for Item 3)
Shauna Murtagh, Physical Programmes Portfolio Manager (for item 4)
John Greer, Director of Development (for item 5)
Nora Largey, Interim City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services (for Items 6, 7,8 & 10)
Christine Sheridan, Director of Human Resources (for Item 9)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Finance Update

The Director of Finance provided a summary of the Medium Term Financial Plan which will be considered by March SP&R Committee. Given the many challenges involved in securing the 2024/25 district rate he advised that consideration needed to be given to the future priorities and sustainable funding so that any budgetary gaps can be identified in a timely manner highlighting the need for a longer-term, forward-looking approach to rate setting. It was also imperative that any potential gaps are integrated with future efficiency and transformation plans going forward. In relation to a query raised on future income generation the Chief Executive provided clarity.

The Director also advised a report will go to March SP&R to update Members on the Capital Strategy for 2024/25 which incorporates the prudential indicators for the Council for the period 2024/25 to 2026/27, and the Council's Treasury Management Strategy for 2024/25.

2. Belfast Stories Update

The Programme Director and Strategic Lead for Belfast Stories provided a detailed update for Members on the progress achieved to date on the project, including an overview of the story collection framework, stories audit and stories pilot that has commenced. The Director also outlined the governance arrangements which have been put in place in order to ensure the effective delivery of the project. Members noted the key programme milestones for the year ahead including an update on the timeline for the Outline Business Case and noted a financial request to allow for mobilisation costs which Members will be asked to consider at March SP&R Committee. It was also noted that agreement for a proposed study visit to be arranged for the Belfast Stories Members Working Group would be included in the report.

3. Belfast Agenda Refresh

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy updated the Forum on the Belfast Agenda strategic framework and supporting action plans for the period 2024-2028 which was recently considered at the February meeting of SP&R Committee. A copy of the Executive Summary had been circulated to Party Group Leaders in advance of the meeting and the Director asked that Members feedback any comments by close of play today in advance of the summary document going to print. A query was raised in relation to one of the performance measures included in the summary document and the Director agreed to consider alternatives. The Director also outlined the arrangements and timeline for a soft launch of the refreshed Belfast Agenda.

4. Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund

The Physical Programmes Portfolio Manager provided a briefing for Members on the recent decision made by the CG&R Committee to reallocate monies to the Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund (NRF) which had previously been ringfenced for the Belfast 2024 programme. She outlined the background to the NRF along with an update on the agreed funding allocation model previously agreed and the project pathway approval process. Members noted the proposal for reallocation of the additional monies within the existing funding allocation model and a report on the detail discussed will be brought to March SP&R Committee for consideration.

5. Funding Request

The Director of Economic Development advised that the Chief Executive had received correspondence in relation to the proposed staging of a 5km race in Belfast in June 2024. He outlined the details of the event including the request from the organisers for a financial contribution from the Council and highlighted that there was at present no budget or resource assigned to this request. Members discussed the request in light of unallocated resources and a report will go to SP&R for Members consideration.

6. Language Strategy Draft Action Plan

The City Solicitor provided an update on the draft Language Strategy Action Plan 2023-26 following public consultation. She highlighted some of the key findings from the consultation and advised that given the issues raised as part of the consultation process the updated action plan will be brought back to SP&R Committee in April. A query was raised by a Member in relation to the timeline for the Draft Irish Language Policy. The City Solicitor advised given the ongoing party group briefings taking place that it was the intention that it would also be brought in April.

7. Illuminate Requests

The City Solicitor outlined for Members two illuminate requests received. Members noted the following request would be agreed under the City Solicitors delegated authority.

- **Darkness into Light Suicide awareness - 26th March 2024**

In relation to a request for illumination for Easter Celebration, the request was agreed in principle under the City Solicitors delegated authority, however the City Solicitor to follow up with PGL's on the preferred date and colour of illumination to mark the occasion. It was also noted that a report on the framework for illumination requests would be brought to a future meeting of SP&R Committee.

8. 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. A number of queries were raised in relation to NI Water and it was noted that the Chief Executive will follow up via correspondence to the Chief Executive of NI Water. In

relation to specific queries raised by Members the City Solicitor to follow up with those Members.

9. Elected Member Development Programme

The Director of Human Resources provided an update on the proposed changes to the current member development processes and budget arrangements, the detail of which was previously circulated for parties to further consider. She also updated Members on the upcoming political management development training for Council Officers which includes Members participation in some of the training sessions. Party Group Leaders were reminded to forward nominations to the Human Resources Manager.

10. AOB

Remote Meetings Regulations

The City Solicitor referred to correspondence received from the Department for Communities in relation to the regulations to give councils the flexibility to hold meetings by remote/hybrid means. A first draft of the regulations using the powers in the Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Act (NI) 2021 was included in the correspondence for comment. Given the timeframes involved it was noted that the City Solicitor would make an Officer response to the consultation received under delegated authority and the response would then be brought to April SP&R Committee for notation.