



Your reference

Our reference SW/as

Date 22 September 2016

Minister Paul Givan MLA
Department for Communities
5th Floor
Lighthouse Building
Gasworks Business Park
Ormeau Road
BELFAST BT7 2JB

Dear Minister

MEETING WITH BELFAST CITY COUNCIL DEPUTATION

Thank you for taking time to meet with a cross-party delegation from the Council on 13 September and providing an opportunity to discuss some common priorities and challenges facing the city.

I wanted to write to you to outline some of the key areas discussed at the meeting which the Council would wish to work alongside the Department for Communities (DfC), and across Government, to progress.

1. Programme for Government and Belfast Agenda

The Council welcomes the Department's support for the Belfast Agenda and looks forward to continuing to work with officials to ensure alignment with the emerging Programme for Government, Investment Strategy, refreshed Economic Strategy and the new Social Strategy which will be brought forward by DfC.

2. Transfer of Regeneration Powers

The Council seeks the early transfer of key regeneration functions such as comprehensive development and compulsory purchase powers, as previously planned for as part of local government reform. This would ensure that the Council has the necessary levers to unlock and bring forward priority regeneration schemes, secure further investment and create additional employment opportunities within and across the city.

The Council looks forward to continuing to work in partnership with DfC to develop and deliver important regeneration schemes within the city (eg Streets Ahead Phase III, Northeast Quarter / Royal Exchange development, East Bank development, New Flagship

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Visitor Attraction, Transport Hub etc) and to maximise the wider social, economic and regenerative impact of these schemes. Such a collaborative approach is reinforced through the Memorandum of Understanding in place between both organisations.

During discussions, Members outlined the desire of the Council to bring forward proposals for the creation of a number of 'Centres of Excellence' across the city (eg boxing, athletics, rowing, and a national soccer training centre) and would wish to explore the potential to partner with the Department to bring such schemes forward.

3. Infrastructure Investment

The Council wants to work alongside the Department, NI Executive and other partners to co-commission two specific pieces of work in relation to (i) creation of a Strategic Infrastructure Plan for the City-Region and (ii) identifying viable alternative funding mechanisms to deliver key city infrastructure and regeneration schemes.

4. City-Region Growth Partnership

The Council would also seek the support of DfC in developing proposals around a City-Region Growth Deal. This would seek to secure necessary resources to deliver key regeneration schemes, stimulate investment, create jobs and support economic growth not only in Belfast but the wider city-region. It will also help deliver necessary infrastructure and address connectivity and accessibility challenges.

5. Local Development Plan

The Council would wish to explore with the Department and NIHE how the population growth projections which may emerge from the Local Development Plan may affect future housing demand and supply, including tenure and mix, within the city including the liveability of the city centre.

6. Community Development

The Council is aware that a review has been initiated of the current support and funding provided by the Department to the voluntary and community sector including the Community Support Programme. As you will be aware the Council currently receives funding (albeit reduced from previous years) under this programme which is a core element of the Council's Community Support Programme and sustains a range of impactful programmes across the city. The Council would strongly recommend that this funding be protected as part of any review.

The Council would also wish to explore with the Department and other city stakeholders how a more holistic and integrated approach can be taken to utilising community based assets and maximising their wider social and regeneration impact.

7. Addressing Inequalities

The Council is aware that DfC has lead responsibility for bringing forward the new Social Strategy and would intend to publish a draft in the coming months for consultation in line with the PfG. As highlighted at the meeting, there are strong commonalities between the priorities, and associated desired outcomes, of DfC and Council. There is a real opportunity to work in partnership to focus on cross-cutting issues and co-design and deliver impactful local interventions that will make a real and sustainable difference to people's lives.

8. Employability and Skills

The Council welcomes the commitment given that senior departmental officials will work with Council officers, alongside the Department for the Economy and other partners, in establishing an Economic Forum. As discussed, this forum will seek to develop a more co-ordinated approach to addressing the city's employability and skills challenge and will seek to design localised, but scalable, interventions including a 'Belfast Works Employability Pathway Programme'. We also welcome the commitment to work alongside Belfast City Council on the Belfast Works pilot.

9. Welfare Reform

The Council welcomes the reassurance given by departmental officials that the mitigation measures around welfare reform will be rolled out as a matter of priority and acknowledges the in-year budget allocation recently made available to Councils to fund additional advice service support within the city.

10. Fuel Poverty

The Council welcomes the commitment given that departmental officials will engage with colleagues within the Department for Communities to examine how the current financial regime and funding around fuel poverty, including the Affordable Warmth scheme, can be made more flexible and sustainable. It also welcomes the opportunity to explore what other interventions may be taken to alleviate the impact of fuel poverty.

11. Legislative Reform

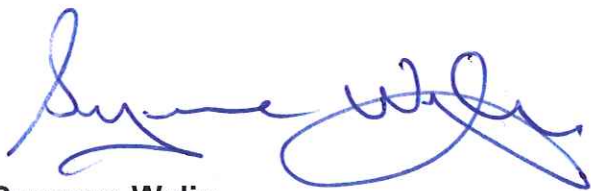
I note that the Department intends to introduce legislation into the Assembly in order to update the law in Northern Ireland in respect of the retail sale of alcohol. The Council would endorse any such proposals and measures which not only address ongoing political and community concerns surrounding excessive alcohol consumption and related harm in Northern Ireland, but which also provide much needed support to the hospitality sector and a boost to tourism across the region.

The Council would therefore welcome the opportunity to contribute to the review and development of new entertainments licensing and liquor licensing laws, whether this be through formal consultation or by the provision of evidence at Committee Stage in the Assembly. I would appreciate if your officials could provide an update on the anticipated next steps in respect of these reviews.

We also wish to work closely with the Department with regards to an exploratory review of both the existing Sunday trading laws and the gambling and betting laws in Northern Ireland in order to make them more responsive to the current social and economic environment. I have asked my officers to contact departmental colleagues to work up a specific proposal, for political and Ministerial consideration, as to how we could constructively and sensitively bring forward an initial review.

Finally, I would like to thank you again for the very constructive meeting and look forward to continuing to work with you and officials to progress the issues outlined above.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Suzanne Wylie', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Suzanne Wylie
Chief Executive