

# **Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum**

## **15<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

### **Attendance**

Members:

Councillor Christina Black (Chair)

Alderman Sonia Copeland

Councillor Billy Hutchinson

Councillor Ronan McLaughlin (for Councillor Ciaran Beattie)

Councillor Nuala McAllister (for Councillor Michael Long)

Councillor Brian Heading (for Councillor Donal Lyons)

Councillor Mal O'Hara

Alderman George Dorrian

Councillor Tracy Kelly (Joined the meeting for Alderman Dorrian)

Councillor Fiona Ferguson

Apologies: Councillor Ciaran Beattie, Councillor Michael Long, Councillor Donal Lyons

### **Officers:**

Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive

Ronan Cregan, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources

John Walsh, City Solicitor

Sinead Grimes, Director of Physical Programmes (for item 6)

Christine Robinson, Strategy, Policy & Partnerships Manager (for items 4 & 10)

Nicola Lane, Good Relations Manager (for Item 5)

Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

## **1. Finance Update**

The Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Finance and Resources presented to members an update on the council's current financial position along with an assessment of the impact of the Covid 19 emergency and current restrictions on council income and expenditure for 2020/21. He highlighted the financial considerations around Furloughed and Casual staff that Members would be presented with at October SP&R Committee. Members of the Forum raised a number of specific queries on the Job Support Scheme and the Director advised that discussions were ongoing on whether the scheme was applicable to Local Government and he would update Members as this progresses.

Members discussed the Medium Term Financial Plan 2021/22 – 2023/24 and the impact of the Estimated Penny Product (EPP) on the District Rate Income for 2021/22 – 2023/24 and

the challenges involved in the setting of the rate this year given the current complexities. The Director advised that it is anticipated that the deadline for setting the district rate will be extended given the degree of uncertainty. A report will be brought to SP&R Committee in October outlining the process and challenges faced.

Members also discussed proposals for exploring income generation opportunities given the significant financial pressures being faced at present, the Director advised a report on a Corporate Pricing Policy along with supporting guidance will be presented to October SP&R for consideration outlining proposals.

## **2. Operational Recovery Update**

The Chief Executive provided an update to Members on organisational recovery following the recent announcement from the NI Executive Office on significant time-bound interventions to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland, which will take effect from Friday 16<sup>th</sup> October. She advised Officers are assessing the impact on services in light of the new restrictions, clarification and guidance is being sought from the Executive Office on specific areas where required. Members raised some issues in relation to Civic Amenity Sites/Recycling Centres and Pitches. The Chief Executive advised that as clarification is still being sought that an Operational Recovery report will be presented to October SP&R which where possible will address issues raised.

## **3. Governance**

The City Solicitor provided an update on the current governance arrangements. He advised that given the current situation and the recent interventions announced it would not be possible to hold committee meetings with more Members in the Committee rooms, which had been suggested at this time. Members discussed the current risks/issues involved and the contingency arrangements being considered should issues arise as the situation evolves. He asked that Members are mindful of the current pressures faced by Officers and council services at this time. In light of these current pressures he outlined that Working Groups would only be arranged where there is an urgent issue and the Area Working Groups would meet on a quarterly basis unless an urgent issue in relation to funding arises, in order to allow Officers to work on maintaining recovery as a priority.

## **4. City Recovery – Community Consultation**

The Chief Executive outlined to Members the previously agreed City Recovery Plan that sets out the Council's framework for recovery. September SP&R committee agreed that

engagement with communities and key stakeholders would be ongoing to identify local priorities/challenges and implementation plans. The Strategy, Policy & Partnership manager provided an overview of planned future engagement and Members agreed it was appropriate that the Area and Thematic Workshops take place in early 2021. It was also noted that proposals for these workshops be brought into a future meeting of the Area Working Groups for consideration.

## **5. Decade of Centenaries**

Members noted the update on the Council's Decade of Centenaries programme 2017- 2022 which was developed in line with the set of principles previously agreed by Council. The Good Relations Manager provided an overview of the proposed Council event schedule and she highlighted that events will be dependent on Covid 19 considerations and any potential restrictions. The Chief Executive advised that the event programme will be brought to October SP&R for consideration and the report will provide narrative and detail around each event and its audience. Any comments or feedback from Members to be forwarded to the Good Relations Manager.

## **6. Leisure Update**

The Director of Physical Programmes provided an update on the current position of Phase 1 & 2 of the Leisure Transformation Programme and outlined the proposals for Phase 3. She advised that as part of Phase 3 a feasibility study previously agreed by SP&R Committee would be undertaken on the rest of the leisure estate which was not part of the Leisure Transformation Programme given the age of these facilities. An update report on Phase 3 including proposals on how the review will be carried out will be presented to October SP&R for Members consideration. Members noted that no capital financing has been ring-fenced for Phase 3. A number of queries were raised by Members and it was noted these would be longer term issues that would be addressed following completion of the feasibility study.

## **7. DfI Sustainable Drainage Plan**

The Chief Executive updated the forum on The Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan which is being led by DfI. This will be presented to SP&R Committee for review and consideration once complete, at which time the Committee will receive a presentation. Members discussed the issues in relation the impact of underinvestment in the waste water infrastructure in Belfast, previously considered by SP&R committee and the Chief Executive advised correspondence was issued to NI Water on the Council position.

## **8. Dual Language Proposal**

The City Solicitor outlined the content of the report in respect of the notice of motion on Dual Language Street Signs Policy which was circulated to members. Members asked that they have time to consider the proposals contained in the report and it was agreed that a special meeting for Party Group Leaders would be arranged in advance of October SP&R for further discussion.

## **9. Belfast Digital Innovation Partnership**

The Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Finance and Resources provided an update on the establishment of the Belfast Digital Innovation Partnership, a collaborative partnership which includes the Council, Queen's University, Ulster University, Belfast Harbour, Invest NI, and Catalyst Inc. The partnership will develop a shared ambition that will directly address the opportunities and ever-growing impact that digital is having on our economy, jobs, city growth, the quality of public services and our commitment to inclusion. A report outlining the programme of work will be considered at October SP&R committee. Members discussed issues around digital exclusion in the current climate of Covid 19 and the Chief Executive advised this was being addressed both through the City Recovery framework and the Inclusive Growth City Charter.

## **10. Inclusive Growth City Charter – Update on Engagement Process and Materials**

The Chief Executive provided an update on progress of the development of the Inclusive Growth City Charter which was considered by SP&R in August. The overall aim of which is to support businesses & organisations to adopt practices that promote inclusive growth. The Strategy, Policy & Partnership manager provided an overview on the engagement process which will form the basis of consultation with an extensive range of businesses and organisations across the city, to further shape and co-design the Charter. Following the engagement outlined a report will then be brought to SP&R committee.

## **11. Planning Update**

The Chief Executive updated the Forum on the live planning applications and informed the Forum of the applications that were being presented to the Planning Committee in November. She also advised that in accordance with Regulation 22 of the Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, that the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) will commence the Independent Examination (IE) hearing sessions in relation to the Belfast Local

Development Plan draft Plan Strategy 2035 on Monday 16 November 2020 this will be for a 2 week period and the first in a series of sessions.

## **12. AOB**

### **Illuminate request**

The City Solicitor updated Members on a recent request to light up City Hall in March 2021 for Victims of Terrorism Day. Members discussed the request, the current number of requests being received and the criteria for Illuminating City Hall and agreed that this request along with a review of the current criteria be considered at a future meeting of Party Group Leaders. Some Members requested that the criteria for Books of Condolences is also added to the agenda for a future meeting.

### **Remembrance Sunday**

The Chief Executive advised Members that a report would be presented to October SP&R Committee for their consideration outlining the proposed plans for Remembrance Sunday commemorations which will be marked on Sunday 8 November 2020. The report will outline plans based in accordance with current social distancing guidelines and the new restrictions announced.

### **Standards Committee**

The City Solicitor outlined proposals agreed by September SP&R Committee on the introduction of a new Standards Committee, and outlined the proposed Terms of Reference for this committee. Party Leaders to submit any comments on the Terms of Reference to the City Solicitor by Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> October prior to consideration of these at October SP&R meeting.

### **Signage Scheme Proposal for the Gaeltacht Quarter area**

The City Solicitor advised that a report would be considered by October SP&R committee seeking approval for officers to participate in a working group being established by Forbairt Feirste to look at the development of a signage scheme for the Gaeltacht Quarter.