

East Belfast Area Working Group

Thursday, 3rd December, 2020

MEETING OF EAST BELFAST AREA WORKING GROUP HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Alderman Copeland (Chairperson)
Aldermen Dorrian, Haire, Rodgers
and Sandford; and
Councillors Brooks, de Faoite, Flynn,
Hanvey, Howard, Hussey, Kyle, Long,
McMullan, Mulholland, Newton and Smyth.

In attendance: Ms. S. Grimes, Director of Physical Programmes;
Ms. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Ms. K. Watters, Neighbourhood Integration Manager;
Mr. C. Willetts, Open Spaces and Street Scene Manager;
Mrs. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager; and
Mr. G. Graham, Democratic Services Assistant.

Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Michelle Kelly and Howard.

Minutes

The Working Group agreed that the minutes of the meeting of 5th November were an accurate record of proceedings.

Declarations of Interest

Alderman Sandford declared at interest in that he was the President of the Cregagh Football Club relevant to the item under Strategic and Micro Funding. Given that the item under discussion was for update only and that no decision was required, Alderman Sandford was advised by Ms. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager, that no conflict of interest was relevant in this instance, as the report was merely for notation given that the decision in regard to the allocation of micro funding had been taken at a previous meeting of the Working Group.

Alignment with Community Planning (Verbal Update)

Ms I. Sherry and Mr. J. Girvan (Ashton Centre) attended in connection with this item and were welcomed by the Chairperson.

Ms. Sherry stated that they had been asked to meet with all the Area Working Groups as a means to introduce themselves and provide the Members of those Working Groups with an update on their work. She referred to the composition of the Voluntary and Community Enterprise Sector Advisory Panel, which had been set up to secure links

between the elected Members and the various stakeholders, including the community and voluntary sector, as part of the Community Planning process. She referred to the importance associated with securing community engagement and of the broad skill set provided by the 15 members which comprised the panel. Ms. Sherry and Mr. Girvan referred to the success of the panel's first public conference which had been held recently. She explained the importance of providing a platform to engage with both the Community and voluntary sector and of securing strong links with the various Community Planning boards.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager stated that a report would be presented to the Members on the details of the conference. In that regard, Ms. Sherry stated that the services of Stratagem had been used to support the panel and that a report was being compiled currently, which would be made available in the near future. In response to a question from the Chairperson, Ms. Sherry confirmed that the elected Members would have an input into the decision-making process and would be able to influence the work and decision-making of the panel. In respect of a further question in regard to the Community Wealth Fund, Ms. Sherry stated that, after meeting with the Minister for Communities and the Department for Communities (DfC), the department was in the process of establishing a Communities Health Well-Being Panel and that the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Panel (VCSE) would be invited to participate on the Community Enterprise Sector Advisory Panel. Ms. Sherry offered to provide the Member with an update on the progress of that proposal as and when a formal invite to participate on the panel was received by the Minister.

The Members noted the update which had been provided by both Ms. Sherry and Mr. Girvan and they departed from the meeting.

Social and Community Recovery

Mrs. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager, provided the Working Group with an update on the details of support measures provided by the Council in respect of the support offered to communities and neighbourhoods during the Covid-19 pandemic. She referred to the links between the Area Working Groups and the Council's internal recovery plan which was cross cutting in terms of a range of Council projects, including, amongst other things, planning policy and City Regeneration initiatives. She stated that details of how the Council planned to develop its social and community recovery plan would be provided to a future meeting of the Working Group and highlighted the fact that this required a multi-agency approach involving stakeholders and central government departments.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager referred to the close working relationship which had been forged between the voluntary and community sectors as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. She referred to the different approaches which required to be undertaken, by the Council, in terms of its social and economic recovery plan, given that all areas of the city were not homogeneous in terms of their needs and expectations. She highlighted the fact that there were variations in capacity, at a community level, throughout the city and that the support of the Council and other organisations would be required to take that into account. She reinforced the requirement for evidence-based decision-making to ensure that policies and actions, taken by the Council, in regard to its Social and Economic Recovery Plan were both relevant and proportionate with evidence, including both statistical information and lived experience. The Neighbourhood Services Manager reinforced the need to invest and support the local business community to assist them in surviving the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. She requested from the Members

an insight on how they believed that community engagement should be undertaken in ways which provided a positive contribution towards protecting and supporting local communities through the current pandemic.

The Working Group raised a number of issues in respect of the dis-connect between the Titanic Quarter and East Belfast, including congestion caused by car parking in the Ballymacarrett area of the city. A Member raised concerns in regard to some of the social problems in east Belfast and referred specifically to the issues of drug-misuse, social isolation and debt. He expressed the wish that the Council, in collaboration with central government, might utilise existing structures and provide additional funding to mitigate against those problems which had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Working Group expressed its concern in relation to the timeframe required by the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) to impose car-parking restrictions in the area, including the disruption caused by commuter car parking and the disruption caused to the Council's waste collection service. Some Members expressed concern in regard to the length of time taken by DfI to implement traffic restrictions in the area, while a further Member stated that he was concerned that any short term traffic control measures might not fit with an overall strategic transport policy by that department. The Members expressed concern also that DfI did not appear to address the issues raised by local elected representatives in terms of connectivity and disability access in the east of the city. The Working Group requested that DfI be invited to address the Area Working Group directly, at a future meeting, where the Members would be provided with an opportunity to develop a structured debate over issues in the area which required to be addressed.

The Director suggested that it might be beneficial to invite "Living with Water" representatives to be invited also, which would provide an overview of the strategic drainage plan for the city and, specifically, how that plan might impact on the east of the city. While the Members were aware of limited central government resources to deliver local plans and the fact that some of the aspirations tended to cut across departmental lines, the Working Group requested that DfI, the Department for Communities (DfC), the Active Travel Unit and representatives from Transport N.I. be invited to a future meeting of the Working Group, in March, to answer a structured framework of questions in regard to issues pertaining to East Belfast in particular. The Members agreed further that a structured agenda in preparation for that meeting could be prepared at its scheduled February meeting.

Mrs. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager, referred to the work undertaken, as part of the early stages of the Area Recovery Planning process to address many of the issues associated with central government departmental disconnect which had been identified by the Working Group, under the Community Planning process. She stated that the Council would endeavour to galvanise the needs and aspirations of the Working Group, which had been voiced by the Members, with a view to the provision of an agreed political agenda and set of questions, which could be put to the aforementioned departments and organisations, being invited to the March meeting. She stated that further resources to assist with fuel poverty, Mental Health etc. would be provided by the DfC and that she would bring back proposals to the Working Group, following a future decision, by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, on how those resources would be allocated to various organisations, including the community and voluntary sector, to best address the local issues following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Area Based Update on Strategic and Micro Funding

The Neighbourhood Integration Manager provided the Working Group with an update on the allocation of funding to various groups within the east of the city under the Council's Community Response Funding Programme, which had been provided by both the Council and DfC. The Working Group was informed of the collaborative work undertaken with the East Area Working Team in the delivery of the small grants programme. She referred to the first tranche of the programme which permitted groups to apply for funding up to a maximum of £1000 and of the structural arrangements which had been put in place to ensure the rapid and efficient delivery of funds to those groups which had been successful in their application for financial assistance. She referred also to the various priorities which had been identified to secure funding. To that end, it was reported that 63 groups in East Belfast had applied for funding to the value of in excess of £60,000.

The Neighbourhood Integration Manager provided the Working Group with details of funding under the second tranche of the small grants funding programme. She stated the importance of having a dedicated officer to provide assistance and support the various community groups and of the support provided by the East Belfast Community Development association (E.B.C.D.A.). The Working Group was provided with an overview of the work undertaken in the co-ordination and support of food banks, including the distribution of food allocation to those in most need.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided by the Neighbourhood Integration Manager.

Multi-disciplinary Area Team

Ms. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager, provided an overview of the role of the Area Teams in the support of outcomes which were consistent with the Belfast Agenda. She reported that the creation of the Area Teams would assist in the process of building stronger links with the local community and would allow the Council not only to build capacity, but also to deliver improved local and integrated services. She provided for information purposes a list of named officers with role responsibilities for the East Area Team. She agreed also to circulate email and telephone contact details to the Members of the Working Group.

In response to a question from a Member in regard to responsibility for issues pertaining to the Lisnasharragh District Electoral Area (DEA), the Neighbourhood Services Manager stated that the Area Teams were allocated on a D.E.A. basis and that, if the Member required clarification in regard to officer contact details, for any particular issue within that D.E.A, she would be happy to assist in that regard.

In response to a further question in regard to the vacant position of Good Relations Officer, the Neighbourhood Services Manager assured the Member that one of the benefits of the new area team approach was the ability to provide cover in response to Member and community queries, on any community issue, including Good Relations. She encouraged the Member to contact Ms. Kathy Watters, Neighbourhood Integration Manager, or herself, and stated that she would be happy to assist the Member in regard to directing him to the officer/s, who could provide assistance to address any issues the Member might have.

The Working Group thanked the Open Spaces and Street Scene Manager for his diligence and assistance in supporting the Members in the resolution of issues raised by them in their local area.

A Member sought information on appointments to B.C.C. Community Centre Committees and when those appointments would be implemented. The Neighbourhood Services Manager explained that it was normal practice to refresh membership of the Community Centre Committees after local government elections. She stated that, given changes in community infrastructure across the city, since the establishments of the committees in the early 90s, the community interest in the Council's Community Centre Committees had decreased, resulting in only 8 proactive committees operating currently. She explained that this may have happened for a variety of reasons, including a lack of public or sector interest in that locality. She noted that, in many cases, their role as community hubs has been superseded by the emergence of other community partnership and forums, with local organisations content to engage with the Council via their membership of those networks. She reported that those Community Centres which had transferred to Belfast, under Local Government Reform, did not have Centre Committees. The Neighbourhood Services Manager stated, however, that the ongoing Community Provision review would be revisiting the issue, with a view to giving consideration to refreshing membership of the existing Community Centre Committees, in early 2021.

The Neighbourhood Services Manager informed the Working Group that all of the Council's Community Centres were open for bookings from the Council's traditional user groups. She confirmed that the Council was engaging proactively with other statutory partners and service providers to ensure that it utilised centres as a means to add value in the support of the local community, including the provision of, amongst other things, safe spaces to meet and access services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Noted.

Member Reflections

Ms. C. Taggart, Neighbourhood Services Manager, in response to a question on the roles of the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour Officers as opposed to the Safer Cities Co-ordinators, stated that, the Safer City Co-ordinators supported the work of the Policing and Community Safety Partnership teams, while the former provided the Council's general response to nuisance and elements of anti-social behaviour.

Noted.

Area Recovery Planning and Delivery - Next Steps

Mrs. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager, provided the Working Group with an update on how the Council envisaged making the Community Planning process more meaningful in terms of its aims and objectives to the local community. She referred to its links with the Social and Community recovery process and the intention to translate Community Planning, in general, into more localised plans in terms of the identification of local area needs and priorities.

The Working Group was informed that close partnership links had been formed with a range of stakeholders, including central government departments, with a view to the development of area recovery plans, whereby local needs and priorities would form the basis of action. She stressed the importance attached to the community engagement process stating that a project team had been set up to evaluate area priorities, including ways to encourage community participation in the development of local area plans, as part of that community recovery process. She stated that it was her intention to provide

the Working Group with an implementation time-line associated with the area recovery process, at its February meeting, and that the Community and Voluntary sectors would be an integral part of that recovery design process.

In response to a question from a Member, in regard to the number of City and Neighbourhood Services staff currently working in office and externally based locations, the Community Neighbourhood Services Manager stated that she would consult with Corporate Human Resources with a view to providing the information requested by the Member.

The Working Group noted the information which had been provided.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group agreed that its next meeting would be held on Thursday, 4th February, 2021 at 5.00 p.m.

Chairperson