

Minutes of Party Group Leaders' Consultative Forum

11th November 2021

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Billy Hutchinson
Councillor Nuala McAlister
Councillor Donal Lyons
Councillor Mal O'Hara
Alderman Brian Kingston
Councillor Ciaran Beattie
Councillor Fiona Ferguson
Alderman Sonia Copeland

Apologies: Councillor Áine Groogan

Officers:

Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive
Ronan Cregan, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources
John Walsh, City Solicitor
Ryan Black, Director of Neighbourhood Services (for Items 2 & 7)
Sinead Grimes, Director of Physical Programmes (for Item 3)
Alistair Reid, Director of Place and Economy (for Item 6)
Christine Sheridan, Head of Head of Human Resources (AOB – Return to Office)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

Due to the meeting taking place on Armistice Remembrance Day, Members paused the meeting at 10.45am and reconvened at 11.15am.

1. Finance

The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources outlined for Members the ongoing process to develop the revenue estimates and setting of the District Rate for 2022/23. He outlined the business as usual cost pressures and the priority growth proposals following recent Director challenge meetings. Members were also provided with an update on the impact of the Estimated Penny Product (EPP) on the District Rate Income for 2022/23. A report will be brought to SP&R committee detailing the options discussed for Members consideration.

2. Bonfires Review

The Director of Neighbourhood Services provided an update on a recent Motion in relation to proposed Bonfire Procedures. He advised that following consultation with Party Group Leaders a report would be brought to the November SP and R Committee outlining the proposed framework for a review to be undertaken. Members discussed the timescale involved in completing the review given the level of consultation and engagement required, it was noted that a draft report will be submitted to SP and R in January 2022. A query was raised by a Member in relation to a previous review undertaken in 2020, and it was agreed the draft report would be brought to the attention of Party Group Leaders and if appropriate feed into this current process.

3. Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund

Members received a presentation on the Neighbourhood Regeneration Fund designed to support capital projects within the Belfast City Council area. The Director of Physical Programmes outlined the proposed programme framework, next steps and the indicative timeframe for programme delivery. Members welcomed that the fund would be an open call and had a number of queries particularly in relation to capacity building for groups to enable access to the fund. The Director advised that detailed guidance will be issued, consultation events will be held and officers from the Physical Programme department will also provide support for groups throughout the process. It is envisaged the fund will launch in January 2022. A query was raised in relation to the Equality Screening by a Member and the Director will take this into consideration.

4. City Centre Bye-Laws

The City Solicitor provided an update for Members in relation to the city centre bye laws report which was referred back to the SP and R committee following the November Council meeting. Members discussed in detail their specific concerns in relation to the current draft and the City Solicitor advised that Party Group Briefings would be arranged to consider proposals and party issues, in advance of a report going back to SP and R. He noted that Members were keen for this to be progressed, and that briefings will be organised accordingly. In relation to ongoing concerns raised by Members about recent demonstrations outside the City Hall, the City Solicitor advised that he would raise concerns with the PSNI.

5. Brexit Committee – Revised Terms of Reference

The City Solicitor outlined proposed revised Terms of Reference for the Brexit Committee, within a post Brexit environment. He advised that it is proposed that the Brexit Committee be realigned as a Climate and City Resilience Committee with responsibility for oversight of climate and resilience strategies for the city. Members raised a number of points for consideration for the realignment of the committee and it was agreed that Party Group Leaders send their comments to the City Solicitor in advance of November SP and R.

6. Cycling Champion - Proposed Approach

The Director of Place and Economy referred Members to a previous motion for a Cycling Champion within the Council to support active travel and bicycle use. There was detailed discussion around the proposed role, remit of the role and who would be appointed to undertake the role. Members agreed that this needed further consideration before being brought to CG&R Committee. The Director to consult with Party Group Leaders in advance of a report going to a future CG&R Committee.

7. Queen's Green Canopy - Champion Cities

The Chief Executive advised that correspondence had been received in respect of the Council making an application for Champion Cities status under the Queens Green Canopy project (QGCP). The Council's participation in the QGCP was previously considered and agreed by the People and Communities Committee. The request to consider Champion Cities status was only received recently following that decision. The Director of Neighbourhood Services advised the application deadline does not allow sufficient time to bring back to the P&C Committee and therefore approval was sought from Party Group Leaders to enable a decision to be made under delegated authority. There was consensus from Members to proceed with the application.

8. Planning Update

The Chief Executive updated the Forum on the live planning applications and informed the Forum of applications that were being presented to the Planning Committee in November.

9. AOB

Return to the office

The Chief Executive provided an update on the return to the office for those staff still working from home. She advised that as agreed the establishment of the management and trade union working group was underway. The group will review all customer related services in the first instance and agree a service by service process to prioritise the return of employees where required. Members noted that some staff have begun to return on a voluntary basis from the 1 November. Members will be updated as the review progresses.

Marking Human Rights Day

The City Solicitor advised that a request had been received from a Member to fly two flags from City Hall, namely the UN Flag and a Human Rights Flag, on the 10 December, in order to mark Human Rights Day 2021. A report will go to November SP and R committee for approval.

Covid Passport and Checks - Council Approach

The Chief Executive outlined how the council is complying with covid regulations at council events or events being held in council properties and on council land. Council will continue to ensure that regulations are followed however no organised checks for proof of vaccination or tests would be undertaken at this time. Each event and venue has individual risk assessments, and in relation to council organised events where attendance may have larger numbers attending at City Hall, Lateral Flow Test will be encouraged – in the same way we do with staff. The approach will be kept under review in line with emerging guidance from the NI Executive.

Members also discussed the guidance issued by the organisers of the Christmas Market and given the numbers anticipated noted that the front doors of City Hall would be closed whilst the market was operational.

Exhibition of Covid Memorial Stones

Councillor Lyons raised a request for city hall to host an exhibition of painted stones representing lives lost during the pandemic. He shared some recent media in relation to the exhibition which was recently hosted in the grounds of Stormont. The City Solicitor to arrange for Officers to follow up with Councillor Lyons.

Revised Dual Language Street Signs Policy

The City Solicitor Informed Members that the revised Dual Language Street Signs policy consultation will go live week commencing 15 November. Party Group Briefings will be arranged in parallel during November.

Centenary of the Ulster Memorial Tower

Alderman Kingston raised an issue in relation to an invitation to the centenary commemoration of the opening of the Ulster Tower on 18 November 2021 in France. Members noted that the invitation had been sent to an email account that was no longer accessed and this was the reason it was being raised with Party Group Leaders. Alderman Kingston referred Members to a Motion proposed by himself in relation to the marking of the centenary. There was consensus from Party Group Leaders to agree attendance at the event and that given the event was next week a report would go to SP&R for retrospective approval.

It was also agreed that some consideration is given to other events within the Decade of Centenaries programme in relation to the Labour Movement.

In relation to some concerns highlighted by a member in relation to the remit of the Forum, the Chief Executive and City Solicitor outlined the role of the forum and the City Solicitor outlined the consultation process with Party Group Leaders in this forum in relation to delegated decisions. It was highlighted that Members may wish to consider the constitution and decision-making process for Party Group Leaders in the new Council term.

DfC Community Recovery Funding

Councillor O'Hara raised an issue relating to a report that went to November P&C Committee in relation to the additional funding from the Department for Communities to support communities to manage the impacts of COVID-19. Whilst it was acknowledged that the nine

area strategic partners were agreed by Party Group Leaders in the early days of the pandemic so that funding could be utilised within the short timeframes, some Members had some issues continuing with this process without a review for future funding allocations. Members noted that the decision taken at P&C committee would be considered at the December Council meeting and if minded could raise their concerns then.

Alderman Kingston declared an interest in this item in relation to the area strategic partners, however, the City Solicitor confirmed that no decision was being taken. He also clarified a question in relation to conflicts of interest for Councillor O' Hara.