

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 14th November 2024

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Michael Long
Councillor Ryan Murphy
Councillor Ciaran Beattie
Councillor Sarah Bunting
Councillor Gary McKeown

Apologies: Councillor Áine Groogan, Alderman Sonia Copeland

Officers:

Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services
Nora Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services
Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance
Wendy Langham, Programme Director, Belfast Stories (for Item 3)
Eimear Henry, Strategic Lead, Belfast Stories (for Item 3)
David Sales, Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services
Jim Girvan, Neighbourhood Services Manager (for Item 4)
Margaret Higgins, Lead Officer, Community Provision (for Item 4)
Sinead Grimes, Director of Property & Projects
Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place & Economy
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) – Presentation

The Deputy Chief Executive welcomed Fiona Douglas and Tony Bovaird from NILGA who presented a briefing on the NILGA regional leadership programme for elected member development. They outlined the objectives, module content and timescales of the programme and highlighted that the programme is designed to provide elected members with a coordinated toolkit of learning in line with the NILGA Political Skills Framework. Members also noted the accreditation options available should they undertake the leadership programme. It was agreed a copy of the presentation would be circulated to the Forum and Members thanked Fiona and Tony for the update provided.

2. Finance Update

The Director of Finance provided a summary of the Medium Term Financial Plan along with an update on the setting of the district rate for 2025/26 following the completion of the Departmental estimates process. He outlined the significant impact to the setting of the

district rate following the recent Autumn Budget announcement in relation to National Insurance Contributions. Members noted the potential uncontrollable costs which may be incurred as a result, and that given the uncertainty around any potential government subvention that Members will be kept updated as this progresses.

The Director also advised that the growth proposals presented by Departments as part of this process were currently being reviewed and that these would need to be considered by Members as part of the upcoming Party Group Briefings. A full briefing pack will be forwarded in advance of the Party Group Briefings to inform the discussion.

Members also noted an overview of the quarter two 2024/25 forecast position and that a report on both the setting of the district rate 2025/26 and the quarter two forecast position would be submitted to November SP&R for Members consideration.

3. Belfast Stories Design and Consultation 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 update on the activity being undertaken to support the next phase of development up to the end of RIBA Design stage 2 and the submission of the Outline Business Case. It was noted that RIBA Stage 2 represents an important milestone and as such a second public consultation has been planned which will go live next week and run until February 2025 and a consultation briefing pack will be provided for Members. The consultation is being undertaken in order to inform the next stage of project development up to the end of RIBA stage 2 and beyond. As part of the briefing Members were also presented with illustrative concept design images that will be shared as part of the consultation process

In relation to some queries raised by Members in relation to the concept images presented and consultation sessions being organised the Director provided clarity.

4. Community Support Plan 2025/29

The Neighbourhood Services Manager referred to the ongoing work in relation to the development of the Community Support Plan 2025/29 following the recent Party Group briefings. He gave an overview of the outcomes of the engagement with Members following these briefings and the proposed approach following all the engagement to date. The timescales for next steps were noted and also that further community engagement would

take place to update those who had been involved in earlier consultations. A report will be brought to a future meeting of the P&C Committee outlining the approach discussed.

5. Proposal to relocate Knotted Gun

The Director of Property & Projects provided a briefing in relation to the the knotted gun statue which was gifted to the City of Belfast from Stena Line and is currently sited at Girdwood. The statue was unveiled at Girdwood in 2019 and is a well-known symbol of peace and non-violence. She advised that there is now a request from Stena Line that the Council consider relocating the statue to a city centre location where there is more footfall and sought the views of the Forum on the relocation options outlined. There was consensus in relation to one of the options outlined and the Director to further explore and bring a report into a future SP&R committee.

6. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on the live planning applications and provided an update on the applications considered at the November Planning Committee and also informed the Forum of applications that were being presented to the Planning Committee in the coming months.

7. AOB

Belfast City Centre Regeneration & Investment Strategy (BCCRIS)

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy provided an update on the upcoming summit event to launch the key messaging for BCCRIS. He advised that invitations have already been issued and members noted the upcoming event.

Ulidia Playing Fields

It was noted that the Director of Property and Projects would follow up on an issue raised by a Member.

Belfast Chamber

The City Solicitor advised that correspondence had been received from the Belfast Chamber, requesting that the Party Group Leaders agree to receive a presentation from a delegation

from the Chamber. It was agreed that they will be invited into the next Party Group Leaders meeting at the end of November.

Portrait of former Lord Mayor

The City Solicitor provided an update in relation to the ongoing investigation into the damage caused to the portrait of a former Lord Mayor in October in City Hall. It was agreed this item be added to the agenda for the next Party Group Leaders meeting for discussion.