

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 10th April 2025

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Michael Long

Councillor Ryan Murphy

Councillor Sarah Bunting

Councillor Séamas de Faoite

Councillor Áine Groogan

Apologies: Councillor Ciaran Beattie, Alderman Sonia Copeland

Officers:

John Walsh, Chief Executive

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

Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place & Economy

David Sales, Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services

Wendy Langham, Programme Director, Belfast Stories (for Item 4)

Eimear Henry, Strategic Lead, Belfast Stories (for Item 4)

Jim Girvan, Director of Neighbourhood Services (for Items 6,7 & 9)

Pól Hamilton, Lead Officer, Community Provision (for Item 6)

Stevie Lavery, Programme Manager(for Item 9)

Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. ICC Belfast, Waterfront and Ulster Hall

The Chief Executive welcomed Rob McConnell, the new Chief Executive of ICC Belfast, Waterfront and Ulster Hall who officially took up the role in January this year. He outlined for Members the work he has been prioritising since taking up his appointment and provided a detailed brief on his vision for driving the organisation's strategic direction and business transformation in ICC Belfast, alongside the Waterfront Hall and Ulster Hall entertainment venues. Members discussed the ongoing engagement with key stakeholders and the new approaches being adopted for future use of all venues along with an update on access for the Community & Voluntary Sector. It was noted that regular updates will be brought back to the Forum going forward to keep Members informed.

2. The Open

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy presented some visual concepts to support delivery of animation and activation in Belfast for the upcoming Open at Royal Portrush. Following discussion on the proposals including the format and resources required it was

agreed a report would be brought to April SP&R Committee for Members consideration. The Director to link in with Rob McConnell to explore possibility of collaboration with ICC.

3. Finance Update

The Director of Finance provided an update on the Department of Finance supplementary consultation on Domestic Rating Measure which is due to close for responses on 25th April 2025. He outlined the detail of the two proposals being looked at by the Department in the supplementary consultation and advised that a draft response will be submitted to April SP&R committee for Members consideration. In relation to a number of queries raised by Members on the options within the consultation the Director provided clarity and outlined previous response submitted. The Director to review the consultation template to ascertain if it allows for additional commentary and include an update in the report to SP&R Committee in April.

The Director also presented the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) which would be presented to members at the April SP&R Committee. He outlined the budgetary pressures and outlined the need to ensure integration with both the corporate planning process and capital strategy. It was noted that consideration needs to be given to the future priorities and sustainable funding so that any budgetary gaps can be identified in a timely manner. Highlighting the need for a longer-term, forward-looking approach to rate setting.

The Deputy Chief Executive referred to the issue raised at March SP&R Committee for a Bi Monthly Meeting of the Committee for Efficiency/Consultancy matters. She outlined potential terms of reference, workstreams and proposed approach in terms of the meeting format. It was noted that given the linkages to the MTFP an update would be included in the April SP&R Committee report with the recommendation for an initial workshop to scope out in the first instance.

4. Belfast Stories

The Programme Director and Strategic Lead for Belfast Stories referred to the recent Party Group Briefings which took place in order to update Members on the progress achieved to date on the project and the activity that was undertaken to support the submission of the Outline Business Case.

The Director presented the timeline for the Outline Business Case submission and the key milestones for the year ahead. A report outlining the detail discussed will be brought to April SP&R Committee for consideration.

5. Support for businesses affected by August disorder

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy provided an update on the options presented to March SP&R Committee for direct support to the businesses affected by the disorder in August. He also outlined the detail of the suggested approach for engagement with eligible businesses. Members noted that the report will be reconsidered at April SP&R Committee.

In relation to a query raised by a Member on other Council funding streams the Director of Neighbourhood Services provided clarity on the timescales involved and it was noted information on the funding once it opened would be sent to Members for onward circulation.

6. Summer Community Diversionary Programme

The Director of Neighbourhood Services declared an interest and left the meeting during the discussion.

The Forum had previously discussed the detail of the assessments undertaken by officers for the Summer Community Diversionary Programme for both July and August applications and the recommendations and options being presented for the 2025 programme. Subsequently a report was submitted to March SP&R Committee and after review was deferred for further consideration.

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services provided an update following deferral at SP&R following review and outlined the proposed recommendations to be considered by Members at April SP&R Committee. He also confirmed that it would be possible to revert to a single year programme if Members so desired. There were a number of specific issues raised by Members including some on the process which the Director noted, and it was agreed he would further explore and consider for the funding model for next year. It was also agreed that Dr Jonny Byrne was invited to a future meeting in order to review options/recommendations in relation to the programme going forward.

7. Social Supermarket Fund 25/26

The Director of Neighbourhood Services advised that an independent assessment had been undertaken in relation to the points previously raised by Members in relation to the Social Supermarket Fund open call grants round for 25/26 following deferral at March SP&R Committee. He advised that the outcome of the assessment was that there were no identified issues with the approach undertaken. Detailed discussion followed on the funding

criteria, the scoring matrix and the geographical spread of funding and the impacts this might have in relation to the duplication of resources in some parts of the City. Some Members also highlighted that the delay in allocating the funding was causing difficulties for some organisations. The Director to consider the feedback provided and the options discussed in advance of a report to April SP&R Committee.

8. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on the live planning applications and provided an update on the applications to be considered at the April Planning Committee.

Some issues were raised by Members in relation to the closure of Connswater and current applications linked to the Strategic Site Assessments in that area and the Strategic Director of Place & Economy to follow up with the Director of City Regeneration & Development and Director of Planning and provide an update to a future meeting.

9. AOB

Asset Management

The Chief Executive provided an update on an asset related estates matter in relation to the Gasworks Estate. It was noted that a report will be brought to April SP&R Committee seeking approval for an in-principle consent to the change of use outlined.

Illuminate Requests

The City Solicitor outlined for Members an illuminate request from the Lord Mayor for the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) Day in May 2025. Members noted the request would be agreed under the City Solicitors delegated authority.

Community Support Plan 2025/29

The Director of Neighbourhood Services and the Programme Manager outlined the Community Support Plan consultation timeline, the questions to be included in the consultation and the detail of the process to be undertaken. It was noted that the consultation will go live on Monday 14 April and the information and detail discussed will be forwarded to Members for onward circulation.

Annual Day of Reflection Joint Statement

The Director of Neighbourhood Services referred to the joint statement on behalf of Party Group Leaders for the Day of Reflection in June 2025. There was consensus that the statement is circulated to Party Group Leaders for review prior to issue in June.

Extended Cultural Support Programme

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy provided an update on the funding allocation for the extended Cultural Support Programme previously agreed by SP&R Committee to provide co-design support for groups requiring additional assistance to overcome barriers to accessing funding. There were some queries raised in relation to the allocation of the funding and the Director to follow up and provide an update to the relevant Members. It was also agreed that some representatives from Belfast Pride be invited to a future meeting.

Committee Meetings

The City Solicitor advised that she is aware of some concerns raised and current issues with the technical equipment used within the Committee Rooms for hybrid Committee meetings. It was noted that an upgrade of the equipment was imminent and that a report on this and the option to stream Council meetings on YouTube would be brought to May SP&R Committee.

Issues Raised by a Member

It was agreed the following issues raised by a Member to be followed up by the relevant Director:

- Events in Parks – report for Committee
- Meeting with DfC in relation to the Strand Cinema
- Feedback on outcomes from MIPIM 2025