

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 15th May 2025

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Michael Long
Councillor Ryan Murphy
Councillor Sarah Bunting
Councillor Séamas de Faoite
Councillor Áine Groogan
Alderman Sonia Copeland

Apologies: Councillor Ciaran Beattie

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
Jim Girvan, Director of Neighbourhood Services (for Item 4)
Margaret Higgins, Lead Officer (for Item 4)
Kate Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control (for Item 6, 9 & 10)
Stephen Leonard, Director of Resources, Fleet & OSS (for Item 10)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Northern Ireland Hotels Federation

The Chief Executive welcomed Janice Gault from the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation. The representative body for hotels, guesthouses and other accommodation providers in Northern Ireland. She briefed Members on the work undertaken by the Federation and circulated a copy of a report on the hotel market in Belfast which the federation had compiled. There was detailed discussion on investment in the hotel sector in Belfast and the current opportunities and challenges involved in the market. In relation to enforcement of usage of Private Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) outside of the student market, it was noted that the Director of Planning & Building Control would follow up. The Director to also link in with the Federation in relation to them being added to the list of consultees for PBSA planning applications going forward. A query was raised by a Member in terms of current pricing structures in the City and it was noted that Janice could provide a summary of the data requested. Members also discussed the many challenges and potential opportunities in considering a Tourism Tax model and noted that this would require further discussion. An electronic copy of the report discussed to be circulated following the meeting.

2. West Wellbeing Funding Request

The Chief Executive referred to a request made for funding under a Notion of Motion for the West Wellbeing Suicide Prevention Centre proposed by Councillor Collins. It was noted that Officers had been unable to source a contact for representatives to attend this meeting and it was agreed Officers to follow up in order to invite representatives to attend a future meeting.

3. Discretionary Payments

The Director of Finance provided an update on the criteria for the June round of funding, under the Discretionary Payments Scheme to allocate funding from underspends to groups/organisations. He outlined the current funding requests received and the funding limit and advised a report with the detail discussed will be considered at May SP&R Committee.

4. Social Supermarket Fund

The Director of Neighbourhood Services provided an update following the decision agreed by April SP&R Committee to not proceed with the current process and to reissue the applications for the programme. Detailed discussion followed on the revised approach and the Director outlined three options for consideration. Members also discussed considering other data alongside multiple deprivation data when reviewing the criteria and weighting assessment. The Director to consider the feedback provided in advance of a report going to May SP&R for consideration.

Clarity was sought by a Member in relation to the allocation of the bridging funding and which organisations would receive this funding. The Director to follow up and confirm agreed approach and the update to be included in the May Committee report.

5. Freedom of the City

The Chief Executive outlined for Members a proposed request from a Member for the conferment of the Freedom of the City. The Member provided a subsequent update following the request made which was noted.

6. Overview of Eastern Transport Plan

The Director of Planning and Building Control presented an overview of the Eastern Transport Plan for the city and four of the surrounding Local Authority areas being developed by the Department for Infrastructure. She outlined the approach, delivery timescales along

with an overview of the vision, objectives and general principles. It was noted that the CG&R Committee had agreed to receive a presentation from the Department for Infrastructure in relation to the Plan and a special CG&R Committee has been arranged at the end of May. Members to contact the Director with any queries they may have in advance of the special CG&R Committee.

7. City Centre Leadership & Coordination

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy referred to a previous proposal put forward by the Belfast Chamber for a multi-agency task force in relation to the City Centre. He presented the revised proposed governance model and approach in the context of the City Centre following review and consultation with other key stakeholders. Members also considered the proposed Membership which included Belfast Chamber, and it was noted that representatives from the Community & Voluntary sector from inner city areas should also be included. It was also agreed that there is ongoing engagement with Belfast Harbour in relation to this programme of work. A copy of the proposed model is to be circulated to Members to further consider.

Discussion ensued on some of the current issues in relation to the City Centre and it was agreed that a City Centre walk would be organised for Party Group Leaders and representatives from the relevant statutory agencies to allow for collaborative discussions to take place on key issues currently affecting the City Centre.

In relation to a query raised around the challenges with Commercial Waste the City Solicitor to follow up.

8. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy presented an update in relation to the successful bid from Council in partnership with Ards CEE to host the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in 2026. The Director outlined the key priorities, which included an update on resourcing, communications & engagement, accommodation and regulatory issues to be considered. Members also considered the proposed governance structure and there was consensus given the significance of the event that consideration is given to establishing a Member Working Group. Updates will be brought back to the Forum as this work progresses.

9. Planning Update

The Director of Planning and Building Control updated the Forum on the live planning applications that had been considered at the May Planning Committee. In relation to a query raised by a Member the Director and City Solicitor to follow up and provide an update for the Member. Members also noted the year end performance for 2024/25.

10. AOB

Illuminate Requests

The City Solicitor outlined for Members a number of illuminate requests received. Members noted the following requests would be agreed under the City Solicitors delegated authority.

- **30th Anniversary of the Genocide at Srebrenica – 25 June 2025**
- **Female Gender Related Cancer awareness – 1 October 2025**
- **Black History Month & Show Racism the Red Card – 17 October 2025**

Lighthouse Building

The Chief Executive provided an update in relation to a proposed change of use from office use to residential use for the Lighthouse Building, in the Gasworks Estate which was deferred at April SP&R Committee. Members noted correspondence received following deferral and that this request would need to go back to SP&R for consideration.

Closed Bin Policy/Removal of Liners

The City Solicitor provided an update on the Closed Bin Lid Policy and the removal of liners recently agreed at April P&C Committee and highlighted the legislative requirements in order to ensure the Health and Safety of waste collection operatives as they carry out their collection duties. Members were supportive of the new policy but highlighted some areas of concern in relation to the new process for both staff and residents and outlined steps that could potentially be put in place in order to mitigate for those areas of concern. The importance of ongoing effective communication was also highlighted and the consideration to be given to visual communication products. The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services to consider the points raised in advance of a report going to June P&C Committee. Members to contact the Strategic Director or the Director of Resources, Fleet & OSS with any specific concerns they may have in advance of June P&C Committee.

Land at Boucher

The Chief Executive provided a briefing on an issue that had arisen in relation to a piece of land at Boucher and advised that the Director of Property & Projects was currently reviewing and an update will be provided for Members in due course.

Council Assets

The Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services provided an update on the background around the operating model for a council owned asset. Members discussed the need to consider potential future use before progressing with any new operating model and it was agreed that this would be put on the agenda for the Efficiency/Consultancy workshop being arranged for Members in June.

Members also discussed the use of assets including vacant assets across the Council estate and how they may be better utilised. The Director of Finance advised that work was already ongoing in relation to some of the points raised and that this could also be considered at the upcoming workshop. A Member also made reference to the use of council owned cemeteries for historical tours and it was agreed that a tour would be arranged for Party Group Leaders.

Pilot Sunday City Animation Project

The Director of Planning and Building Control provided an update on the engagement work underway with key stakeholders in relation to the pilot Sunday city animation project and advised that a report will be brought to June SP&R Committee following the engagement process. Members also discussed other potential animation projects both in the City Centre and outside the City Centre and the benefit of looking at the approach by other Local Authorities. The Chief Executive advised that a visit to Dublin City Council was already being considered.

A Member also referred to some enforcement issues that had arisen and how they were being applied during the recent Belfast Marathon. The Director of Planning and Building Control advised that she is following up and arranging a meeting with the relevant statutory agencies to discuss. An update will be provided for Members at a future meeting.

Developer Contributions for Wastewater Infrastructure – Consultation

The Director of Planning and Building Control advised that the Department for Infrastructure is seeking comments on Developer Contributions for Wastewater Infrastructure. She outlined the content of the consultation document and provided a summary update on the proposed draft Council response. The draft response will be brought to May SP&R Committee in advance of submission for Members consideration.

Fly Tipping

A Member raised an issue in relation to fly tipping in South Belfast and given the complexities in relation to the site it was agreed that this would be considered at the next Bonfire Panel which was being arranged.

International Relations Framework

It was noted that the International Relations Framework would be added to the agenda for the Party Group Leaders meeting on 29 May. Consideration to be given to a number of issues raised by a Member for which the Strategic Director of Place & Economy to follow up.