

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 14th August 2025

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Jenna Maghie
Councillor Natasha Brennan
Councillor Sarah Bunting
Councillor Séamas de Faoite
Councillor Brian Smyth
Alderman Sonia Copeland
Councillor Ronan McLaughlin
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
Sinead Grimes, Director of Property & Projects
John Tully, Director City & Organisational Strategy
Adrian Ferguson, Senior Development Manager (for Item 1)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Housing Led Regeneration

The Chief Executive welcomed John McDonald, Investment Projects Managing Director at GRAHAM who have been appointed as the Council's private sector partner to work alongside Council to deliver the housing led regeneration programme of work in order to accelerate city centre living and housing regeneration across the city.

John provided an overview of the company profile and briefed Members on the work portfolio undertaken by GRAHAM with other public authorities in relation to joint ventures. He outlined the work undertaken to date on the programme since formal appointment, the ongoing engagement taking place and the social value principles of the programme. Some queries were raised by Members in relation to the approach to affordable housing across the programme for which clarity was provided and it was agreed a detailed breakdown of units for individual projects would be included in future updates. There was discussion on the challenges around viability of some of the sites and the need to ensure continued engagement with key stakeholders. Members also highlighted the importance of branding, communication and connectivity as this work progresses. John presented some imagery on

site proposals and after detailed discussion it was agreed that a site visit to Loft Lines would be arranged for Party Group Leaders.

2. Finance Update

The Director of Finance presented the Quarter 1 financial outturn for 2025/26 and outlined the income, expenditure and projected underspend for the period. He advised a report with the detail discussed will be brought to August SP&R outlining the Quarter 1 financial position for the Council.

The Director also outlined the timeframe for the setting of the district rate for 2026/27 and highlighted challenges that will need to be considered as part of the process. He advised that Members would explore existing and new priorities at the upcoming Efficiency and Income Generation Workshop in September. In relation to some queries raised by a Member the Director clarified that detailed profile spend will be shared at the Workshop and potential solutions to issues identified. The workshop will help ensure that growth proposals submitted through the 2026/27 estimates process are aligned to the Corporate Planning process.

3. Multicultural Hub

Members discussed the amendment made at the July Council meeting in relation to the allocation of the underspend included in the Quarter 4 2024/25 finance report specifically in relation to the allocation for the resilience fund for newcomer families and communities. In relation to a Member suggestion that some of the monies could be allocated to a feasibility study for a Multicultural hub it was noted that consultation with the relevant organisations and groups should take place before any decision was made on how the monies would be allocated. The Director of Property and Projects to follow up with Director City & Organisational Strategy and then an update to be brought back to a future meeting.

4. Request to present

Members agreed to the request for Peter Sheridan to attend the September meeting in order to brief Members on the Good Relations Strategy Refresh & 3 Year Action Plan alongside the update to the Shared City Partnership.

5. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on the live planning applications that were considered at the August Planning Committee. There was an issue raised by a Member in relation to Environmental Health resources connected to planning applications. The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services provided clarity in terms of current resourcing, and it was agreed he would follow up. The City Solicitor also provided clarity on a number of issues raised in relation to ongoing Pre-Application Discussions.

6. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy presented an update in relation to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and outlined the priorities and resource requirements now that the official hand over from Wexford County Council has taken place. The Director advised that Officers shadowed colleagues across a wide range of operations at Wexford County Council during their event delivery of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2025 and noted how invaluable the learning from Wexford had been. Members noted the proposed governance arrangements to be established, the initial budgetary requirements and that a report will be brought to August SP&R Committee for consideration.

Members also highlighted the learning that they had gathered whilst in attendance at Wexford and it was agreed that a special Party Group Leaders meeting is arranged to capture Member feedback.

7. AOB

Somme Commemoration 2026

A Member requested that engagement takes place with The Somme Association regarding representation from the Council at the Somme Commemoration 2026. The City Solicitor to follow up.

Climate Change and Sustainability Training

The Director City & Organisational Strategy referred to a report that was considered by the Climate & Resilience Committee in June in relation to climate change and sustainability training for Members. He advised that delivery of a pilot course is planned for September and

it would be open to all Members. It was noted that Party Group Leaders would communicate within their own parties in relation to attendance.

Programme for Government - Transformation Fund bid

The Director City & Organisational Strategy provided a briefing on a recent submission made to the Programme for Government Transformation Fund via the Department for Communities to support vulnerable people in Belfast. Whilst the bid was unsuccessful, he advised that work continues to explore alternative funding routes. Members highlighted the importance of the vulnerability programme and discussed the many challenges involved in securing funding and welcomed the ongoing engagement taking place with Permanent Secretaries. In terms of the multi agency approach already in place it was noted that linkages to communities is also key and the Director to follow up. Details of the programme to be circulated following the meeting in order that Members can advocate given the importance of the issue and Party Group Briefings will be organised to explore potential funding routes.

A query was raised by a Member in relation to the ongoing programme of work in the city centre to support vulnerable people and the Director provided clarity. It was also noted that the planned visit to Dublin City Council for Party Group Leaders which is to include a visit to Merchants Quay would be followed up.

Draft Irish Language Policy Update

The City Solicitor provided an update on the draft Irish Language Policy outlining the findings from the consultation process, key issues for consideration, resource implications, financial commitment and the proposed timelines for implementation. Discussion ensued on some of the issues outlined and Members to further consider in advance of report being considered at August SP&R Committee.

Equality Commission's intent to apply to the High Court Re: Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers

The City Solicitor provided an update on a paper published by the Equality Commission in June giving its views on the legal position in Northern Ireland, following a review of the Supreme Court judgment in 'For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers'. She advised that consultation had commenced but that ultimately, the ECNI intended to apply to the Court for a declaration on the legal position in NI in light of the judgement which would

provide legal certainty. The City Solicitor to circulate the paper following the meeting so that individual parties could consider whether they wished to respond to the ECNI consultation.

Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) Update – Industrial Action

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services provided an update on the current status of the ongoing Belfast leisure centre staff pay dispute with GLL (Greenwich Leisure Limited) and the recent industrial action. Members noted the update provided.

Notice of Motion – Safeguarding Belfast Playparks

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services advised that the Notice of Motion, Safeguarding Belfast's Playparks was referred to Party Group Leaders from P&C August Committee to allow further information to be provided on the consultation and policy process. Following detailed discussion there where a number of concerns raised by Members in relation to the motion and issues which had arisen as a consequence. The City Solicitor to reconsider whether the motion is competent in the first instance and then a report to be brought to a future P&C Committee outlining existing powers and policies around safeguarding, as well as the consultation process. It was also noted that the process in relation to Notice of Motions in general needs to be reviewed in the longer term.

Assets Update

The Director of Property & Projects outlined some of the recommendations that will be included in the Asset Management report to August SP&R Committee specifically in relation to a tenancy agreement at the Belfast Stories site and an ongoing issue in relation to a piece of land at Boucher which Members had previously been briefed on. Members also discussed the longer term strategic approach to maximise the use of council owned assets.

FIFA Women's World Cup in 2035

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy provided an update on the UK bid to host the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2035. He advised that whilst mindful that the event is not until 2035, FIFA are expecting certain commitments from host cities by the Autumn 2025. Officers are working closely with the central bid team for Belfast and a report will be brought to September SP&R Committee for consideration.

There was discussion in relation to the Big Screen that was previously positioned in City Hall grounds, and it was agreed that the viability of a temporary/portable screen option is explored and an update brought back to a future meeting.

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.

- **Belfast Diwali 2025** – 25 September 2025
- **Rare Disease Day** – 28 February 2026

Northern Ireland Executive – Collaborative Funding

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy referred to joint correspondence issued to Executive Colleagues from the Minister for Infrastructure and Minister for the Economy in relation to public transport services and outlined the resource request from the Council as part of a collaborative funding package. A report will be brought to a future SP&R Committee in relation to the funding request once confirmation of Executive support has been received.