

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 13th November 2025

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Michael Long
Councillor Natasha Brennan
Councillor Sarah Bunting
Councillor Brian Smyth
Councillor Ciaran Beattie
Alderman Sonia Copeland
Councillor Séamas de Faoite

Officers:

John Walsh, Chief Executive
Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services
Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance
Nora Largey, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services
Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place & Economy
David Sales, Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services
Cathy Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration & Development
Sinead Grimes, Director of Property & Projects
Jim Girvan Director of Neighbourhood Services (for Item 3)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Finance Update

The Director of Finance provided an update on the setting of the district rate for 2026/27. He advised that Director challenge meetings in relation to the draft departmental estimates, growth proposals and efficiencies were still ongoing. There was discussion on some of the growth proposals emerging and also detailed discussion on short term efficiencies and longer term transformation within the organisation. The issues raised by Members will be discussed in more detail at the upcoming Efficiency and Transformation workshop on 14th November. The Director also advised that the first draft Estimated Penny Product (EPP) is expected in late November with the final EPP to be notified to Councils in early December, therefore the impact on the District Rate Income for 2026/27 is still unknown at present. Officers to consider the frequency of any further workshops in line with the dates already in Members diaries for SP&R Committee.

Members also discussed NI Reval2026, the revaluation process being undertaken by Land & Property Services (LPS) to adjust the rateable value of business properties to reflect changes in the property market. The Director advised that the potential impacts for 2026/27 are still unknown at this time, however engagement was ongoing and further updates will be provided as this work progresses.

Members noted an overview of the quarter two 2025/26 forecast position and that a report on both the setting of the district rate 2026/27 and the quarter two forecast position would be submitted to November SP&R for Members consideration.

2. Draft Amenity Bye Laws

The City Solicitor provided a briefing in relation to the draft amenity bye laws for the city centre following the consultation and engagement process which also included facilitated workshops as requested by Members. The City Solicitor outlined the proposed revisions to the bye laws and the exceptions that will be included within the draft. There was detailed discussion on the proposals outlined including the parameters involved. Members raised a number of issues in relation to the enforcement of the bye laws both currently and in relation to the approach proposed for the revised bye laws for which the City Solicitor provided clarity. The City Solicitor to consider the feedback provided and to follow up with PSNI on the issues of concern raised by Members. Consideration to be given to inviting representatives from PSNI to a future meeting to discuss public order issues in the city centre.

A report will be brought to November SP&R for Members consideration. It was noted that the bye laws must be approved by the Department for Communities before they can be formally adopted.

3. Community Support Plan – Large Grants

The Director of Neighbourhood Services referred to the approach agreed by SP&R Committee for the new large grant funding programme 2026-2029 as part of the overall new Community Support Plan 2025-2029. He advised that the number of applications received, and the value of those applications received far exceeded the current budget. The Director highlighted that the assessment process is still ongoing though and that the final financial position was still to be determined. A Member raised a query in relation to funding for independently managed centres and the Director advised that this would be considered as part of the wider programme of work ongoing in relation to community support provision across the city aligned with work ongoing in relation to the use of council owned assets.

A report on the large grant funding programme outlined will be presented to P&C Committee in December and will seek the views of the Committee in relation to the funding deficit. The report will include a recommendation for Members to refer to SP&R Committee to consider additional funding for the programme as a growth proposal as part of the 2026/27 rate setting

process. It was noted that this will be discussed further at the Efficiency and Transformation workshop discussed earlier in the meeting.

4. Request to present – Belfast Harbour Commissioners

The Chief Executive referred to the request for a deputation from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners to present to Party Group Leaders on the Belfast Harbour 2050 Masterplan. Members agreed to the deputation attending a future meeting.

5. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy presented an update in relation to the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann work programme and outlined the work underway across a number of core workstreams including governance, finance and procurement requirements in order to ensure the effective hosting of the event in 2026. There were a number of queries raised in relation to licensing for which the City Solicitor provided clarity, the Director to also further consider those queries raised in relation to the overall programme of work.

Members also noted the consultation and engagement that was underway and the timeline for upcoming engagement. Members to contact the team directly with any stakeholders they wish to be added to the engagement schedule. A detailed report will be brought to November SP&R Committee.

6. Belfast Place Based Growth Proposition

The Director of City Regeneration & Development provided an update on the work ongoing in relation to a regeneration place based growth proposition for Belfast. The Director outlined the emerging proposed asks from Government following significant consultation with UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government. Members noted that the business case is now finalised and will be circulated as outlined in advance of the upcoming November budget statement. A summary document has also been compiled and will be circulated to Members. Members noted their continued role in terms of political party engagement. A report outlining the detail discussed and next steps will be considered by November SP&R Committee and the report will also include a request for Member representation at a government roundtable discussion being organised by Scottish Cities Alliance.

As part of the discussion held it was also agreed that the Director of City Regeneration & Development continues to explore European funding opportunities.

7. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on the live planning applications that were considered at the November Planning Committee. Some issues were raised by Members in relation to short term lets, the City Solicitor to follow up with the Director of Planning.

Members also discussed the ongoing resource issues in relation to Environmental Health connected to planning applications which was noted by the Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services.

8. AOB

Queen's University Belfast (QUB)

The Forum recently received a deputation from Queen's University in September and had agreed that there would be merit in continuing the joint engagement. Members considered the frequency of the meetings going forward and it was agreed to invite the deputation to future meetings on a half yearly basis. It was proposed that the next meeting is hosted at Queen's University and that a tour of Friars Bush graveyard previously discussed be arranged to coincide with that meeting. .

Pecuniary Interests

The City Solicitor outlined to Members a pecuniary interest, and a historical interest both of which would be submitted for notation at the December Council meeting. Given the personal information involved these would be considered under restricted session.

Funding Request

The City Solicitor referred to a request that had been received from the Ulster Scots Agency in relation to the use of Council owned playing fields in 2026 and potential financial support for the event. Members to further consider in advance of a request being brought to SP&R Committee.

Windows 11 Upgrade

The Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services reminded Members of the imminent deadline to have all computers upgraded to Windows 11. Members agreed that they would communicate the deadline and the importance of upgrading to party

colleagues. It was also noted that support was available for any technical issues that may occur as a result of the upgrade from the Digital Services team.

There were some other issues raised by Members and the Deputy Chief Executive advised that the Head of Digital Services would contact those Members directly to discuss.

2 Royal Avenue

The Director of City Regeneration & Development provided an update on the new Expression of Interest exercise to be undertaken in respect of the future use of the ground floor of 2 Royal Avenue. Members agreed to contact the Director should they wish to add any contact names.

City Centre Regeneration Scheme

The Director of City Regeneration & Development advised that there is ongoing Ministerial and political engagement being undertaken by the developers in relation to the site previously known as Tribeca and Members noted the engagement taking place. Members to contact the Director for further information if required.

Visit to Dublin City Council

The Chief Executive outlined the proposed itinerary for the upcoming Forum visit to Dublin City Council which has been arranged for 27/28 November 2025. It was noted that the final itinerary will be circulated shortly in advance of the visit.

Gasworks Site

The Director of Property & Projects outlined the specifics of an emerging proposal for an asset located in the Gasworks Site. Members noted the update presented and the Director to consider the community benefit aspects discussed in advance of the report going to November SP&R for Members consideration.

Member Request – Use of City Hall

The City Solicitor advised she had received a request from a Member for an upcoming event in November. Following discussion, it was agreed that further clarity was needed in relation to the request before any consensus could be given. Members also asked for clarification on the use of committee rooms to be brought back to a future meeting. The City Solicitor to follow up and circulate further details once received to Party Group Leaders.

Call In

Members noted a Call In had been received in relation to the decision made at November Council that in recognition of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, that the Council agrees to erect the National Flag of Palestine above the City Hall on 29th November 2025. Legal Counsel is to be sought in a timely manner given the timeframe involved and Members updated accordingly.

Issues raised by a Member

A Member referred to a recent funding announcement made by the Department for Communities. Members discussed other recent announcements, and it was agreed that Officers further explore and a report is brought back to a future meeting.

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