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Department for
Commonities

From: Colum Boyle
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Our Ref: PSC 0604.23

Date: 24 August 2023

Eilish McGoldrick
Democratic Services Officer
Legal and Civic Services Department
City Hall
Belfast
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Via email: democraticservices@belfastcity.gov.uk

Dear Ms McGoldrick,

2023/24 ACCESS AND INCLUSION PROGRAMME

Thank you for your letter of 9 August 2023 in which you highlight Council concerns in relation to the short timeframe available for the delivery of the 2023/24 Access and Inclusion programme.

As you may be aware the Secretary of State announced the 2023/24 Budget for Northern Ireland in late April 2023. The Department and its Arms' Length Bodies faced unprecedented funding challenges and cuts in 2023/24 against a backdrop of political uncertainty, inflation, ongoing Industrial Action and during a Cost-of-Living crisis. Following the completion of the initial phase of the EQIA consultation, final budget allocations for 2023/24 were set. While recognising the effect the reductions will have on the Department and its Arms' Length Bodies, we are committed to engaging with all stakeholders on how we can support our people as we steer through this period and try to protect, as best we can, the important services we provide.

The consequence of this is that some Programmes have been delayed or paused. However, I am pleased to tell you that funding has been secured for the 2023/24 Access and Inclusion programme, supported by DAERA, and the programme launched on 22 August 2023 with project completion no later than 31 March 2024. Whilst the reduced timescale for delivery is acknowledged, we hope that the early engagement with officials has been beneficial and will enable you to deliver projects in the timescales available.

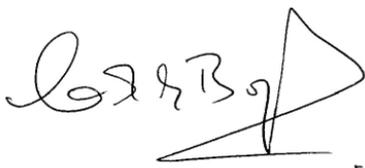
You also note that the Committee has requested that the Department consider the potential for a more flexible approach to in-year funding and to explore with Council any potential mechanisms to carry over funding, including consideration of innovative joint investment or funding models so that opportunities for strategic alignment of joint priorities and projects could be achieved.

Whilst I would welcome the opportunity to discuss a more flexible approach to funding, the Department is currently constrained by annual funding envelopes with no year-end budget flexibility.

You will be aware that Department for Communities officials consult with council representatives each year to look back at the previous edition of the Access and Inclusion Programme and help shape the forthcoming programme. The outcome of the 2023 consultation has been reflected in the 2023/24 programme but officials will contact you to discuss council proposals for strategic alignment of projects and priorities.

I hope this further information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colum Boyle', with a stylized flourish at the end.

COLUM BOYLE
PERMANENT SECRETARY