

SHARED CITY PARTNERSHIP

Monday 7th October, 2024

MEETING OF SHARED CITY PARTNERSHIP HELD REMOTELY AND IN THE CONOR ROOM

Members present: Councillor Duffy (Chairperson); and
Councillors Abernethy and McLaughlin.

External Members: Mr. P. Anderson, Department for Communities;
Mr. J. Donnelly, Community and Voluntary Sector;
Ms. L. Euler, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust;
Ms. J. Irwin, Community Relations Council;
Fr. M. Magill, Faith Representative;
Ms. T. Mimna, The Executive Office;
Mr. M. McBride, Education Authority;
Dr. W. Naeem, Interfaith Forum;
Ms. A. Roberts, Community and Voluntary Sector;
Mr. G. Walker, Department for Communities; and
Ms. A. M. White, British Red Cross.

In attendance: Mr G. McCartney, Good Relations Manager;
Ms. D. McKinney, PEACE Programme Manager;
Mr. D. Robinson, Acting Senior Good Relations Officer;
Ms. L. Dolan, Good Relations Officer; and
Mr. B. Flynn, Committee Services Officer.

Welcome

The Chairperson welcomed Ms. T. Mimna to her first meeting in her capacity as the representative of The Executive Office in the place of Ms. A. Tohill.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Alderman S. Copeland and Ms. B. Arthurs, Community and Voluntary Sector, and Mr L. Gunn, Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 9th September, 2024, were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Presentations

Further to the Partnership's decision of 9th September, the Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Ms. N. Lynch, Mr. T. Salman, Mr. R. McMahon, Ms. M. Magee, Mr. D. Ward, Ms. M. Holmes and Ms. C. Lindsay, who were representing Mears Housing Group. In addition, the Chairperson welcomed Ms. L. Vellem, who was in attendance to make a presentation on behalf of Migrant Help.

MEARS

The Partnership was informed that the Mears Group had been appointed by the Home Office to manage Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract (AASC) in Northern Ireland. The organisation provided support to individuals or families seeking accommodation and was one of several methods by which the government met its duty to provide support for those seeking international protection.

Several representatives outlined the obligations and standards which oversaw the work of the housing group. It was explained that dispersal accommodation was categorised as either family homes or HMO accommodation, whilst housing stock consisted of privately rented properties. It was pointed out that the rise in the number of new arrivals to the United Kingdom since 2021 had resulted in an increase in housing demand, which had resulted in Mears contracting hotel rooms to provide emergency accommodation to service users.

The Partnership was given an overview of the structure and governance of the Mears Group; its partnership working at a local level and on a multi-agency basis.

Migrant Help

Ms. Vellem advised the Partnership that Migrant Help had been appointed by the Home Office to provide support services to asylum seekers through the management of the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE). The key role of the organisation was to provide impartial and independent information, advice, guidance and assistance to help service users currently within the Asylum Support System. The Partnership was informed that Migrant Help assisted families and individuals in applying for accommodation, accessing financial support and any other advice needed during their asylum process. The organisation provided support throughout the post-decision period, regardless of the outcome of the process.

Several Members paid tribute to the work which had been undertaken by both organisations, particularly throughout the disturbances which had occurred in the city over the summer period.

A Member raised issues relating to the levels of guidance provided to both refugee and asylum seekers to assist them to integrate more effectively within local communities, given particularly the divided nature of society in Northern Ireland. The Member suggested that it was concerning that disinformation persisted on the role of Mears in the provision of housing and an erroneous perception that local families were being displaced. It was suggested there was an onus on the organisation to address such perceptions in a robust and transparent manner.

In response, it was acknowledged that there existed a range of unhelpful misconceptions and theories linked to the role of Mears, particularly the manner in which accommodation was sourced and provided. The organisation, it was pointed out, worked actively to discredit such misconceptions and operated in an open and transparent manner. It was clarified that Mears did not provide accommodation to any individuals under eighteen years-of-age and such views, if expressed within the community, were mistaken.

During further discussion, the following points were noted:

- that Mears would be content, should prior notification be received, to facilitate visits by Members, together with community and voluntary representatives, to view accommodation overseen by the organisation;
- that an invitation would be extended to both organisations to attend a future meeting of the West Belfast Partnership Board to enable a wider discussion to take place with stakeholders within that area of the city;
- that information regarding specific contact details for both Mears and the Migrant Forum would be circulated for the use of members of the Partnership;
- that several questions which had been posed in writing by an external Member would be considered and addressed outside of the meeting; and
- that Mears would consider further how levels of community enhancement could be enhanced and coordinated across Belfast.

Arising from discussion, the Partnership agreed, given the levels of race related violence which had occurred across Belfast during the summer period, that it would be beneficial if a member of the Mears organisation be co-opted onto the Partnership on an interim basis. It was agreed that the Good Relations Manager would seek legal advice in this matter and update the Partnership at its meeting in November.

The Chairperson thanked the representative from both organisations for attending the meeting and for the information which had been provided.

Good Relations – Quarter 2 Update

The Partnership considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report/Summary of Main Issues

1.1 To update the Shared City Partnership on the delivery of the Council’s Good Relations Action Plan during Quarter 2 which covers the period July – September 2024.

2.0 Recommendation

2.1 That Members recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that they:

1. Note the contents of the report, including the reprofiling of £7,500 within BCC9 to refresh the Good Relations Strategy and undertake an Audit to inform and develop a 3-year Good Relations Action Plan, through a co-design process. This project will continue as part of the 2025/26 Action Plan; and
2. Agree that the Chair of the Partnership issue the recently launched report, ‘Segregation and the Environment, Breaking Down Barriers’, to all NI Executive Ministers.

3.0 Main Report

- 3.1 Members will be aware that the Council receives 75% of funding from The Executive Office (TEO) for the delivery of its annual Good Relations Action Plan.
- 3.2 The current total value of the Action Plan is £493,079.59. Within this the 75% contribution from TEO consists of £369,809.69 with the remaining 25%, or £123,269.90 being contributed by the Council. Of this overall total, £365,000 is allocated towards programmes.
- 3.3 It should also be noted that the Council contributes more to Good Relations work than merely its 25% match funding to the Action Plan, contributing a total of £413,320.10.
- 3.4 Following confirmation of budgets and a revised Action Plan, delivery continued during quarter 2. In Q1, £181,714.48 was allocated. In Q2, a further £109,420 has been allocated, giving a total allocation thus far of £291,134.48. It should be noted that the Action Plan does not include the £128,000 allocated to the Council for work on refugee integration, or the Asylum Dispersal allocations. These funds are in addition to the Action Plan.
- 3.5 The following is a summary progress update on activity and allocations during Q2:

Code	Project Summary	Budget	Progress in Quarter 1	Total allocated
BCC1	Good Relations Small Grants Programme.	£155,000	43 projects awarded funding for Good Relations projects.	£0 (all allocated)
BCC2	St Patrick’s Day Civic Events programme	£20,000	Programme preparation underway	£0

BCC3	Positive Cultural Expression Programme	£20,000	Beacon Programme delivered. 15 Beacons deployed on 11 July.	£20,000
BCC4	Civic Engagement and Learning Programme	£20,000	Good Relations Week Research Launch event Black History Month projects	£550 £3,000
BCC5	Minority Ethnic Equality and Inclusion Programme	£60,000	September meeting of migrant forum took place. 3 projects allocated support	£27,300
BCC6	Embedding Good Relations Programme	£0	This programme will not proceed because of budget shortfall	£0
BCC7	Interface Engagement and tackling sectarianism and racism	£60,000	Engagement with groups to develop proposals.	£58,570 allocated to 14 projects
BCC8	Shared Education Schools Programme	£20,000	Programme preparation underway.	£0
BCC9	Strategic Connections and Support Programme	£10,000	Proposal to use this resource to undertake a new Good Relations Audit to refresh and update future Good Relations Strategy and Action Plans	£0
	TOTAL	£365,000		£109,420

3.6 Members will also recall that a launch of the recently completed research: ‘Segregation and the Environment; Breaking Down Barriers’, took place during Good Relations Week at 2 Royal Avenue. Following representations from officials at DEARA, it is suggested that the Chair of the

Partnership issue a copy of the report to all NI Executive Ministers.

Financial and Resource Implications

- 3.7 All costs within the District Council’s Good Relations Action Plan are covered within existing agreed budgets.**

Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

- 3.8 All activity within the District Council’s Good Relations Action Plan seek to improve Good Relations between people from different political, religious, and racial backgrounds.”**

After discussion, the Partnership noted the contents of the report and agreed to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that:

1. It notes the contents of the report, including the reprofiling of £7,500 within BCC9 to refresh the Good Relations Strategy and undertakes an audit to inform and develop a three-year Good Relations Action Plan, through a co-design process, and that project would continue as part of the 2025/26 Action Plan; and
2. It agrees that the Chairperson of the Partnership would circulate the recently launched report, ‘Segregation and the Environment, Breaking Down Barriers’, to all Executive Ministers at the Assembly.

PEACEPLUS - Council Local Action Plan Quarter 2 Update

The Partnership considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide Shared City Partnership members with an update on the mobilisation of PEACEPLUS 1.1. Co-designed Belfast Local Community Peace Action Plan (LCAP)

2.0 Recommendations

Members note the contents of the report and recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee to also note the contents of the report.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Application Status

The PEACEPLUS Steering Committee met on 12 August 2024 and fully approved the Belfast PEACEPLUS Local Community Action Plan.

Members of the PEACEPLUS team met with the Joint Secretariat from the SEUPB on 12 September to assist in the progression of the Letter of Offer. A Letter of Offer is expected to be issued in the coming weeks.

3.2 Official Programme Launch

The official project launch was held in the Great Hall of Belfast City Hall on Friday 20 September. Over one hundred people attended the event with Barra Best as compere, engaging speeches were given by our guest speakers including the Lord Mayor, Cllr Duffy, Cllr McLaughlin and representatives from our funders (SEUPB, The Executive Office and the Department of Rural and Community Development). Dr Raja Harun and Fr Martin Magill provided us with some very thought-provoking comments in relation to International Day of Peace and there was also entertainment provided by the North Belfast Youth Choir and later by the South Asian Dance Academy.

The team would like to extend thanks to all speakers and attendees.

3.3 Mobilisation and Implementation

The team have continued to progress the procurement timeframe, the first procurement exercise, which is for TPC3 Empowering Youth project, was advertised on 6 September with a closing date of 8 October 2024. This will allow an approximate contracting date in November.

TPC1 Community Empowerment is now also live with a closing date of 28 October allowing an approximate contracting date in December.

All other procurements will continue to be released in line with the indicative timetable provided at the August SCP meeting.

Pre-market engagement (PME) sessions are now continuing for all other procurements, they will take place at least 2 weeks before the tender advertisement date to allow for any changes required based on feedback from the market.

3.3 Staff Recruitment

Recruitment has concluded for the Project Officer role and an offer of employment made. A start date will soon be agreed.

Interviews for the Programme Support Assistant took place on Wednesday 2 October, and we await the outcome.

Recruitment of the 3 Project Support Officers that will support the Project Managers is likely to commence in the coming weeks.

3.4 Financial & Resource Implications

A Letter of Offer start date of 1 January 2024 has been requested from the JS Case Officer. A £ Sterling Letter of Offer has been requested in line with the direction provided by the Programme Board.

All expenditure associated with the PEACEPLUS LCAP will be eligible from this date and will be claimed retrospectively from SEUPB.

Once the Letter of Offer is processed and returned to the SEUPB, a request will be submitted for the €100,000 lump sum. An advance of 20% of the value of the Letter of Offer will also be request, this will assist with cashflow until the claims process is confirmed.

3.5 Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

Plan has been submitted for equality and good relations screening as well as rural needs assessment.”

Prior to considering this matter, the Good Relations Manager reminded the Partnership that tender processes relating to PEACEPLUS were currently open and, as such, any questions or queries in this regard should be referred to the designated formal procurement processes.

The Partnership noted the contents of a report which provided an update on the PEACEPLUS – Local Community Action Plan, in particular the following matters were drawn to the Members:

- that the PEACEPLUS team had met with the Joint Secretariat from SEUPB on 12th September and the associated Letter of Offer to the Council was anticipated in due course;
- that the official programme launch for PEACEPLUS had taken place in the Belfast City Hall on 20th September;
- that a request for a Letter of Offer start date of 1st January 2024 - and in pounds sterling - had been submitted to SEUPB, in line with the direction provided by the PEACEPLUS Programme Board; and

- that a further request for the €100,000 lump sum, together with a 20% advance, would be submitted to SEUPB once the Letter of Offer had been received and accepted.

Any Other Business

Ms. A Roberts gave an overview of the work which had been undertaken in collaboration with a number of community and voluntary groups in the creation of a 'welcome pack' which was being distributed to new residents in the greater east Belfast area.

At the request of Fr. M. Magill, the Committee agreed that Members would undertake a walking tour, commencing at the Forth Meadow Greenway in west Belfast, at a future date.

Chairperson