

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 12th February 2025

Attendance

Members:

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

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
Jim Girvan Director of Neighbourhood Services
Stephen Leonard, Director City & Neighbourhood Services
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 following deferral to strike the rate at the February Council meeting. The Director referred to the summary report circulated outlining the financial impact for not only 2026/27 but also for medium term planning in relation to the proposal at Council to decrease the rate agreed at the Special SP&R Committee. Members discussed in detail the impact in setting a lower rate in 2026/27 for Members ambitions and for future growth proposals. The Chief Executive in his role as designated Chief Financial Officer also outlined a number of issues that need to be taken into consideration in order to provide assurances to Members on the robustness of the revenue estimates. Members discussed in detail the impacts and risks outlined and it was agreed Parties further consider in advance of the Special SP&R Committee being arranged for Friday 13 February.

2. City Centre Byelaws

The City Solicitor provided an update on the byelaws for special events such as the Fleadh following consultation with the Department for Communities as agreed by December SP&R Committee. The City Solicitor also referred to the remaining city centre byelaws and the

concerns raised by Members at the December SP&R Committee in relation to enforcement and the issues surrounding the display of graphic imagery in the city centre. Members noted the key next steps in relation to the draft byelaws for the city centre, including the recommendations that would be brought to February SP&R Committee in relation to the regulation of graphic imagery in the city centre and enforcement of the current bye laws.

3. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls - Shared Island Event

The Director of Neighbourhood Services advised that correspondence had been received outlining that NILGA along with the Association for Irish Local Government (AILG) will hold a cross-border event on developing the leadership and influence of Councillors in relation to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. The event which follows the successful application to the Shared Island Civic Society Fund is seeking to bring Councillors with experience of tackling this issue together to discuss challenges and opportunities with their counterparts in AILG. Members noted the event was to be held in March and that there was an allocation of two places for each Council Area. It was agreed these places should be offered to the Chair of SP&R and P&C Committee and if they are unable to attend then onwards to the Deputy Chair for consideration. The Director of Neighbourhood Services to follow up.

4. City Innovation Programme Update

The Deputy Chief Executive provided an update on city innovation matters including a funding bid made to the Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayoral Challenge. Members noted the update provided.

Arising from discussion, Members made a number of points about the council's alleyway programme which officers agreed to explore with a view to bringing a further report back to committee.

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 which included an overview of some of the engagement that has already taken place and the subsequent feedback received. The Director also outlined the detail of further and planned targeted sessions with communities and businesses and Members suggested a number of additions for these sessions. It was also noted that should Members feel it would be beneficial to provide sessions for any other organisations or groups they can forward the details directly to the Director.

The Director City & Neighbourhood Services then presented the proposed operational plans for the street cleansing and waste management workstreams for pre event, event duration and post event. Members discussed the resource requirements for street cleansing operations during the event and it was noted that consideration be given to the use of volunteers where possible and the Director to further explore. In terms of waste management arrangements it was advised that a similar approach to that of Wexford and Mullingar was envisaged subject to Committee approval. Following detailed discussion on the financial and resource implications outlined for the waste management model it was agreed that the Director further explore the alternative options suggested by Members in advance of the recommendations being brought to SP&R Committee.

The City Solicitor provided an overview of the outcome of discussions with statutory partners, points to consider and next steps in relation to licensing arrangements for liquor, pavement cafes and street trading for the event. It was noted that update reports on the detail discussed would be brought to both SP&R and the Licensing Committee. The City Solicitor also advised Members that the Licensing Committee may be required to hold special meetings and Council will be asked to provide delegated authority to Licensing Committee for any Fleadh related decisions which would ordinarily require ratification by Council. Members will be kept updated as this work progresses.

Members raised some points in relation to late night bus services and other city wide operational issues in order to ensure the effective hosting of the event and it was agreed that the Chief Executive arranges to meet with The Executive Office to discuss further and explore any collaboration opportunities in light of budgetary constraints.

6. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on a number of planning matters which were currently live. An issue was raised by a Member in relation to a specific application and the role of statutory consultees, the City Solicitor agreed to follow up on this.

7. AOB

International Relations Framework

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy advised that a formal invitation to participate in an international visit to China in April 2026 had been received by the Lord Mayor to include a

delegation from Belfast City Council. Following consideration it was agreed the detail of the invite is circulated to Party Group Leaders to further consider and to be further discussed at a future meeting of Party Group Leaders.

US Consul General

The Chief Executive advised that he had received correspondence from the US Consul General in relation to an initiative to plant trees across the eleven council districts in Northern Ireland in order to mark the upcoming 250th Anniversary of the United States Declaration of Independence. Members agreed to the Chief Executive engaging with the US Consul General to ascertain the details of the initiative and an update to be brought back to Party Group Leaders.

Sunday Openings 2026 – Public Consultation Exercise

The Strategic Director of Place & Economy provided an update on the plans to launch a public consultation exercise in order to seek views on progressing the holiday resort designation across the wider Belfast City Council area to enable extended Sunday trading hours for larger retailers. Members noted the approach and timescales outlined and it was noted the draft survey would be circulated to Members following the meeting.