

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 12th March 2026

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Michael Long
Councillor Sarah Bunting
Councillor Áine Groogan
Councillor Séamas de Faoite
Councillor Natasha Brennan

Apologies: Alderman Sonia Copeland, Councillor Ciaran Beattie

Officers:

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
David Sales, Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services
Sinead Grimes, Director of Property & Projects
John Tully, Director of City & Organisational Strategy
Keith Forster, Director Economic Development
Wendy Langham, Programme Director, Belfast Stories
Jim Girvan Director of Neighbourhood Services (*for Item 3*)
Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty (*for Item 3*)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Public Health Agency

The Deputy Chief Executive welcomed Dr Joanne McClean and colleagues from the Public Health Agency (PHA). Members were presented with an overview on vulnerability and homelessness in Belfast including an overview of the support and engagement work that the PHA lead on in collaboration with partners in promoting health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities. Members also discussed the key priorities and many challenges currently being faced in Belfast specifically in relation to homelessness, complex lives and the co-location of services in a city centre location. There were a number of queries raised by Members for which the PHA provided clarity, and it was noted that given the legislative constraints discussed consideration is given to a letter of support from the Council for consideration of co-location of services in a city centre location. The Director of City & Organisational Strategy to further explore and an update to be brought back.

Some queries were also raised in relation to substance use and testing measures particularly at festivals and concerts and the current process for reporting concerns was outlined with contact details provided.

All agreed continuing to work closely with PHA colleagues and noted the importance of a multi agency approach to provide holistic support for the issues discussed mindful that no single agency can progress in isolation. The importance of ongoing collaboration on emerging initiatives and communication was also highlighted.

It was agreed a copy of the presentation would be circulated following the meeting and Members noted that they can contact the PHA directly with any further queries or for any points of clarification on the information presented.

2. Finance Update

The Director of Finance referred to the current issues impacting the clawback from Land and Property Services (LPS) and the financial pressures for the organisation in the coming year. Members noted the current financial position and year end forecast.

The Director also provided an update in relation to the criteria previously agreed by Members for the management of discretionary payment requests. He outlined for Members the detail of current requests received including the request deferred at February SP&R Committee and subsequent applications received. Members discussed alternative funding streams for some of the applications outlined and noted that recommendations will be included in the report to March SP&R Committee for consideration.

3. Area based community planning

The Director of City & Organisational Strategy presented for Members the background to the area-based community planning programme funding allocation via two interrelated programmes. Members previously agreed the two strands of funding namely the Local Community Ownership Fund to support the acquisition of community assets or existing derelict sites for viable and sustainable community use and the Area-based community planning fund supporting a community led inclusive process for area-based community plans.

The Director of Property and Projects presented the proposed purpose, outcomes and eligibility for the Local Community Ownership Fund programme along with an outline of the assessment pathway for applications. The Director advised that the fund will be an open call for applications via an expression of interest and it is anticipated this will go live end of April 2026 subject to Council approval. Some queries were raised in relation to the boundaries used for the funding allocations for which the Director provided clarity and noted that the points

raised will be considered for area based funding allocations for future programmes going forward.

The Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty then outlined the proposal for a community led approach for the Area Based Community Planning programme including the proposal for an administrative and convening lead partner role to bring forward the area-based planning process. He outlined the role the convening lead partner could help facilitate and Members noted the rationale for the approach outlined and the proposals for whom the convening lead partners would be. Members also noted the design principles, scope and eligibility of the fund. In relation to a point raised by a Member around specific wards in the South and East of the city, the Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty to consider in the next stages of the programme.

It was noted a report to be submitted to March SP&R Committee for consideration outlining the proposals and pathways discussed and it was agreed that the presentation is circulated to Members following the meeting.

4. Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026

The Director Economic Development presented a summary update in relation to the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann work programme and outlined the work underway across a number of core workstreams including campsites, licencing, business engagement and procurement requirements in order to ensure the effective hosting of the event in 2026

The Director of Finance outlined the emerging budgeting and resources challenges in relation to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 and the income strands that would contribute to offsetting some of these challenges.

Members reiterated previous points raised in relation to late night bus services and other city wide operational issues to ensure the effective hosting of the event. The Director of Economic Development advised that discussions were ongoing with Translink and the relevant Government Departments.

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services referred to the additional options for the waste management workstream recently considered at February SP&R Committee. The Director advised that following further exploration of the alternative options suggested by Members engagement with other Councils had suggested that this would not a feasible option.

Following consultation with Trade Unions the tender will now be issued in order to deliver this essential part of Fleadh operations in a timely manner.

5. Belfast Stories

The Programme Director Belfast Stories provided an update for Members in relation to key programme milestones including the submission of the planning application, the next steps in relation to the addendum to the Outline Business Case and the implications of decision changes. Members also noted the process outlined for expressions of interest following March Council.

Members discussed the financial implications of design changes, the usage and operating models. In relation to queries raised by Members the Director and Deputy Chief Executive provided clarity.

It was noted a site visit and design update is to be organised, and it was agreed that the invitation would include both the Members of the Belfast Stories Working Group and Party Group Leaders. The visit to take place in advance of the planning application submission in April.

6. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on a number of planning matters which were currently live.

7. AOB

Parks/Open Space Improvement Programme

The Director of Property and Projects provided a briefing on the proposed parks/open space improvement programme for this year and next financial year. Members noted the proposed projects and the works to be undertaken. A copy of the list of projects to be circulated to Members following the meeting.

Official Announcements

The City Solicitor provided a briefing in relation to the order of business for Council meetings and outlined proposals to amend the parameters around requests for official announcements.

The City Solicitor noted the feedback provided from Members and will further consider in advance of a report being brought to SP&R Committee.

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.

- **World Down Syndrome Day 2026** – 21 March 2026
- **74TH Belfast Scouts Centenary** – 28 March 2026
- **Italian National Day** – 2 June 2026

Members also noted King Charles Birthday is on the same date as the scheduled Christmas lights switch-on event this year and therefore there will be no illumination.

Pitches Strategy

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services referred to the Pitches Strategy and highlighted that it was anticipated that this report would be considered at March SP&R Committee alongside the Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy report. However given the delays in securing dates for party group briefings in relation to the Physical Activity and Sports Development Strategy it was proposed that the two reports be presented to April SP&R Committee for consideration together. This will also allow the reports to be considered alongside planned updates to April SP&R Committee on Boucher Road Playing Fields and Lower Botanic Gardens. Members to further consider and to contact the Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services if any issues with the approach outlined.

Andy Haldane Visit

The Deputy Chief Executive advised that Andy Haldane was visiting Belfast and outlined the timeline for the visit and the proposed itinerary which includes engagement with Members and key stakeholders in the city. Members noted details to follow.