

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

Thursday 10th September 2026

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Sarah Bunting
Councillor Séamas de Faoite
Councillor Ian McLaughlin
Councillor Ciran Beattie
Councillor Ronan McLaughlin
Councillor Brian Smyth
Councillor Emmet McDonagh- Brown (*for Cllr Murray*)
Councillor Brian Smyth

Apologies: Alderman Sonia Copeland

Officer:

John Walsh, Chief Executive
Sharon McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Strategic Director of Corporate Services
Trevor Wallace, Director of Finance
Nora Largery, City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services
David Sales, Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services
Damien Martin, Strategic Director of Place & Economy
Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty
Paul Gribben, Head of Digital Services
Stephen Leonard, Director City & Neighbourhood Services
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. The Belfast Child

The Chief Executive welcomed Kerrylee Weatherall and Gerry Largey from the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust (BH&SCT) and Jackie Redpath from the Greater Shankill Partnership who are all members of the Belfast Area Outcomes Group. Members were presented with an overview of the work that has been undertaken by the group which was convened by BH&SCT to develop the Belfast Child framework, a blueprint pathway setting out a citywide vision to ensure that every child aged 0-8 years in Belfast can benefit from a seamless developmental journey. Members have already considered and endorsed the pathway in principle at the June Council meeting. The purpose of the presentation today was to provide an overview for Members on the collaborative vision included in the document, the new approach outlined and the key next steps for the development of an associated action plan. There was detailed discussion on how vital the work undertaken was, the importance of continued collaboration across all sectors with a focus on outcomes for children in Belfast. Members also discussed the engagement plan outlined to develop a collaborative action plan and the need for officers to consider how elected members are engaged in this process and how we seek to and embed within current programmes of work going forward.

Members commended the representatives from the Belfast Area Outcomes Group for the invaluable work undertaken. Should there be any specific resource considerations emerging from the action plan relating to the Council a report will be brought back to SP&R Committee for Members consideration and approval in due course. The Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty provided clarity in relation to some queries raised by Members around resourcing. It was noted that the formal launch of the document will be held in October 2026.

2. Finance Update

The Director of Finance outlined the budgetary challenges and included an update on the 2026/27 pay rise which has now been agreed, and Members noted the unbudgeted costs of the pay rise which will need to be funded from the 2026/27 growth fund. Consideration will now have to be given to growth fund proposals and funding options.

The Director also outlined the timeframe for the setting of the district rate for 2027/28 and provided an update in relation to the EPP forecast. Members to explore existing and new priorities at the next Efficiency and Income Generation Workshop. The Director outlined the proposed dates and times for the workshop in early October which will be included in the report to September SP&R Committee. The workshop will allow Members and Officers to gain a better understanding of recurring under and overspends and how these can be better aligned in the context of delivering a balanced budget for 2027/28.

The Director also provided a briefing on the strategic review of rating supports being undertaken by the Department of Finance specifically in relation to the introduction of a Business Growth Accelerator and increased Non-Domestic Vacant Rating liability. In relation to some queries raised in relation to dereliction the Director provided clarity. It was noted that the response to the consultations will be brought to September SP&R Committee for consideration.

3. Governance Review

The City Solicitor provided an update on the ongoing programme of work in relation to the Governance Review. Members noted that following party group briefings a report will be brought to September SP&R which will focus on the review of key governance documents, including the Council's Constitution and supporting documents. Members noted the proposal outlined for handling notices of motion and to further consider in advance of Committee.

4. Cyber Assessment Update

The Head of Digital Services briefed Members on the key findings and priority recommendations arising from the Cyber Assessment Framework (CAF) compliance assessment completed earlier this year. Members noted the recommendations emerging from the assessment, the proposed approach and the proposed mitigations outlined. Following detailed discussion, it was agreed that the presentation would be shared with Members after the meeting with engagement with Members to ensue thereafter. A report will then be brought to October SP&R Committee for Members consideration.

5. Planning Update

The City Solicitor updated the Forum on a number of planning matters which were currently live and on a number of consultations which would be considered by the September Planning Committee. In relation to a query raised by a Member the City Solicitor to follow up.

6. Illuminate Requests

The City Solicitor advised that a Call In had been received in relation to the request for Illumination of City Hall to mark International Safe Abortion Day 2026 following September Council. Members noted that requests for illumination that did not meet the agreed criteria would therefore be on hold until legal counsel was received and reviewed.

Members noted the following requests which did meet agreed criteria and therefore would be agreed under the City Solicitors delegated authority.

- **USPCA 190th Anniversary Celebration** – 12th November 2026
- **Cadet Week** – date to be confirmed week commencing 5th October 2026
- **Euston Street Primary School 100th Anniversary** – date to be confirmed

7. AOB

Bye laws – City Hall Grounds

The City Solicitor referred to an issue raised by a Member on the enforcement of the current bye laws specifically in relation to the grounds of City Hall and the display of materials on the gates and railings. The City Solicitor advised that similar issues had been raised on previous occasions and provided an update on legal counsel received. Following detailed discussion

and given the issues raised during the discussion it was agreed that a report would be brought to SP&R Committee for Members to further consider.

Belfast Region AI Adoption programme/AI Update

The Deputy Chief Executive referred to the queries raised by Members at August SP&R and September Council in relation to the Belfast Region AI Adoption programme and the potential environmental and economic impacts. Members noted the update provided and that work was ongoing to further explore the issues raised with a report then to be submitted to a future SP&R Committee including the broader impact of AI.

Members were also presented with an overview of the draft Northern Ireland Artificial Intelligence (AI) Strategy currently out for consultation which has been developed through collaboration with government, business and academia. Members noted the update provided and that Officers are currently preparing a response to the strategy which will be brought to September SP&R Committee.

Belfast Alleyways Transformation programme update

The Director City & Neighbourhood Services presented the work underway in relation to the Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayoral Challenge, alleyways transformation programme. Members noted the work commencing on the piloting and scaling phase including the proposed delivery approaches, timescales and the programme of support for residents. Members also noted the update in relation to the Mid Falls Alleyways programme.

The Director also provided an update on problematic alleyways and the model being considered for this programme of work. A report will be brought to September SP&R Committee to include an update on the programmes discussed and it was agreed the presentation would be shared with Members following the meeting.

Extern Relocation

The Head of Inclusive Growth & Anti-Poverty referred to the ongoing engagement that has been taking place with Extern and partners relating to the relocation of Extern. He outlined the current position including a short extension to the lease at premises on Royal Avenue. There was consensus from Members that engagement continues and that Officers ensure Party Group Leaders are kept updated as this progresses.

Request from the Department for Infrastructure

The Strategic Director of City & Neighbourhood Services referred to correspondence received from the Department for Infrastructure. There was no consensus to agree the request due to the lack of detail provided and Members requested that the Director seeks further detail and that a report is either brought to September SP&R Committee, or a special meeting of Council, as appropriate.