

Minutes of Party Group Leaders Consultative Forum

11th February 2021

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Christina Black (Chair)
Councillor Billy Hutchinson
Councillor Peter McReynolds (for Cllr Nuala McAlister)
Councillor Donal Lyons
Councillor Anthony Flynn (for Cllr Mal O'Hara)
Alderman Brian Kingston
Alderman Sonia Copeland
Councillor Matthew Collins (for Councillor Fiona Ferguson)
Councillor Ciaran Beattie
Councillor Dale Pankhurst (Joined the meeting for Alderman Kingston)

Officers:

Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive
Ronan Cregan, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources
John Walsh, City Solicitor
Siobhan Toland, Director of City Services (Item 3)
Nicola Lane, Good Relations Manager (for Item 4)
Sinead Grimes, Director of Physical Programmes (for item 5)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Covid 19 Implications

The Chief Executive provided an update on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on council services. Members discussed the ongoing response to the tightened restrictions and noted that the focus continues to be on sustaining critical and vital services, workforce planning, and addressing any service re-prioritisation as required. The NI Executive Office is due to review the current restrictions on 18 February. Following the review by the Executive Office any changes to restrictions will be assessed along with potential impact on operational provision, Members will be updated accordingly. Members also discussed proposals for the suspension of requests to hold third party events on or within BCC assets, such as parks, Belfast Castle, Malone House etc and noted that this will be kept under review. The Chief Executive advised a report will be presented to February SP&R outlining these proposals along with an update on current position.

Members also noted that Inverary Community Centre is currently being used by the Department for Communities Food Pallet scheme and is therefore currently unavailable.

2. Finance Update

The Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Finance and Resources presented to members an update on the rate setting process for 2021/22. He advised that the regulations have now been changed to allow the setting of the district rate by 1 March 2021. The cash limits for People & Communities and the City Growth & Regeneration committees have now been agreed, with the Planning committee due to consider their cash limit on 16 February. A report will then be presented to February SP&R for Members to agree the cash limits for Committees and the level of the District Rate to be set for 2021/22. The report will also outline the impact of the regional and domestic rate to the ratepayer (annual, monthly & weekly) categorised by property type.

The Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Finance and Resources also highlighted that once the district rate is set for next year, there will be a need to review the overall financial strategy of the Council. A further report on the Council's financial strategy will be presented to March SP&R committee.

3. Port Health

Members discussed in detail the current issues and challenges faced by the Port of Belfast as a result of Brexit, specifically in relation to the new inspection responsibilities for Council Port Health staff in making sure the port meets environmental health standards. The City Solicitor outlined that he was currently seeking clarity on legal issues associated with the new requirements. The Chief Executive advised that the Brexit committee (11 February) would be provided with a full update and that it was intended that a report would also be brought to February SP&R committee for members consideration.

Members noted the difficulties currently being experienced by Port Health staff, and a Member asked that acknowledgement of support was expressed to these staff, the Director of City Services to pass this on to the relevant staff.

4. Decade of Centenaries

Members noted the update on the Council's Decade of Centenaries programme 2017- 2022 which was developed in line with the set of principles previously agreed by Council. The Good Relations Manager provided an overview of the proposed revisions for the Council event schedule given current restrictions. Some additional suggestions were requested by Members, the Good Relations Manager, where possible to incorporate into the report to February SP&R committee for Members consideration. Members also discussed requests

for illuminating City Hall on specified dates in June to mark the Northern Ireland Centenary, Good Relations manager to consider alternative options including possibility of animation.

The Good Relations Manager also outlined options as to how Council could mark the 80th Anniversary of the Belfast Blitz on 15th April in the context of Covid-19 restrictions. She advised that the NI War Memorial are organising a significant programme for the 80th anniversary predominantly via virtual means. It was agreed the Council take the approach of supporting and promoting the NI War Memorial programme with a contribution up to £1,000 made from existing Good Relations budgets. A Member made some suggestions for other options to mark the anniversary and the Good Relations Manager to consider if feasible.

5. Living with Water Programme Consultation

The Chief Executive updated Members on the proposed draft response to the Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan (SDIP) which will be considered by February SP&R committee. Members noted that NI Water and representatives from the Living with Water Programme board have been invited to present to February SP&R Committee. The City Solicitor and the Director of Physical Programmes outlined for Members the content of the draft response and emphasised the importance of long term investment in drainage and waste water infrastructure in order to meet the ambition for growth of the City and to alleviate the impacts of climate change. Members noted the comprehensive response.

6. Planning Update

The Chief Executive updated the Forum on the live planning applications and informed the Forum of the applications that were being presented to the Planning Committee in February. She also advised that the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) Independent Examination (IE) hearing sessions in relation to the Belfast Local Development Plan draft Plan Strategy 2035 were progressing well with completion due in the coming months.

7. AOB

Council Licences - Fee Update

As requested at January SP&R committee Members noted a report would be brought to February SP&R Committee to address the issues raised as to whether, alongside support could the Rent Relief Fund equally apply to licence holders who are normally charged fees. Recent correspondence from the Department for Communities will also be included in the report.

However it transpires that waivers have already been rolled out.

Bonfire Approach 2021

The Chief Executive advised the Forum that the programmes of work associated with bonfires would need to commence shortly in order to consider approach given that restrictions may continue for some time. Members discussed some options of how this may progress and stressed the need for early community engagement. A report will be brought to February SP&R committee with potential options for Members consideration around the reallocation of money to support cultural expression. Some Members raised queries in relation to summer schemes and possible proposals for alternatives in line with restriction guidelines at that time, this will also be considered and a report brought to a future SP&R meeting.

Investigation Timeframes

Councillor McReynolds raised a question in relation to the timeframe for the independent investigation being carried out by Peter Coll QC. Members noted that a special PGL's meeting would be arranged imminently.