

Minutes of the Party Group Leaders' Consultative Forum

15th April, 2021

Attendance

Members:

Councillor Christina Black (Chair)
Councillor Billy Hutchinson
Councillor Nuala McAlister
Councillor Donal Lyons
Councillor Mal O'Hara
Alderman Brian Kingston
Alderman Sonia Copeland
Councillor Fiona Ferguson
Councillor Ciaran Beattie

Officers:

Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive
Ronan Cregan, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources
John Walsh, City Solicitor
Alistair Reid, Director of Place and Economy (for Item 3)
Wendy Langham, Programme Director Belfast Destination Hub (for Item 3)
Eimear Henry, Senior Manager, Culture & Tourism (for Items 7 & 9)
Joanne Delaney, Portfolio and Programme Coordinator (secretariat)

1. Medium Term Financial Plan

The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources highlighted that now that the district rate is set for 2021/22, there is a need to review the overall financial strategy of the Council. If the Council is going to deliver on priorities additional to business as usual activities, such as inclusive growth, climate and waste there is a need to ensure that the use of current resources is maximised and new sources of income are found. He outlined the current status of the proposed Commercial Plan following Party Briefings that took place in January, and Members discussed some outline proposals in relation to Malone House. The Medium Term Financial plan report and a report on Malone House will be considered by April SP&R Committee.

2. Covid-19 Planning

The Chief Executive provided an update on organisational recovery aligned to the Northern Ireland Executive Pathway and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on council services. In relation to the current easing of restrictions, primarily affecting outdoor provision some

queries were raised on use of MUGA's, the City Service's Manager to provide an update for Members on the issues raised. The Chief Executive advised that discussions are ongoing with the Department of Health to establish a Covid 19 Asymptomatic Workplace Testing Programme on a pilot basis. In answer to a query raised by a Member she advised that the programme would be voluntary. Members will be updated as the programme progresses.

Members discussed the imminent announcement from the NI Executive Office and how the lifting of further restrictions will impact on operational services. A Summary of the announcements will be circulated to Members and a more detailed report on the impact on operational services will be brought to April SP&R Committee.

3. Destination Hub

Members received an update on the preferred site option for the Destination Hub a key project under the tourism and regeneration pillar of the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD). Detailed discussion took place on the proposed acquisition strategy and the Destination Hub programme aims and benefits. The Director of Place and Economy outlined the process to date, and Members noted the external advice including legal advice received. Members also discussed in detail the key milestones involved in order to move to the next stage of the BRCD process. A report will be submitted to April SP&R for site acquisition approval, which will include further detail as discussed for consideration of Members.

4. Belfast Agenda Review

The Chief Executive provided a briefing on the review of the Belfast Agenda. Statutorily, the review of community plans must be completed before the 4th anniversary of the date on which the Plan was published. In light of this the Community Planning Partnership agreed to establish a dedicated sub-group from the Statutory Partners and VCSE Sectoral Advisory Panel to support the co-design and delivery of the refreshed Belfast Agenda by March 2022. This will then set the framework from which future area planning will flow. Members noted the proposed consultation and engagement process and key milestones for the review and that a report would be presented to April SP&R Committee.

5. Dual Language Street Signs Policy

The City Solicitor outlined the key changes to the revised Dual Language Street Signs Policy. The draft policy will be considered by April SP&R Committee and reflects the approach agreed by Members which was ratified by Council in January 2021. Members will be asked to approve the draft policy for the purposes of issuing for public consultation.

6. Language Strategy

The City Solicitor provided an update on a proposed strategic approach for the implementation of the Language Strategy. Members discussed the proposed approach and highlighted some issues in relation to representation on the groups and the format of the external groups proposed. The City Solicitor to further consider these issues raised in advance of the report going to SP&R. Members also asked that there is consideration given to how Members can integrate with these groups when established to allow for meaningful conversation.

7. Heritage Trail Sign Policy – City Hall

The City Solicitor referred to recent discussions held at March SP&R committee in relation to the request received from Redhead Exhibition requesting assistance from the Council in relation a James Connolly Belfast Heritage Trail. He advised that this request has raised questions on whether there is interest from other groups to include City Hall as a location in heritage trails. The Cultural and Tourism Manager provided an update on potential interest for City Hall to be utilised as a key location in cultural and heritage trails and the opportunity for this to integrate into an overall experience plan for the city. In relation to a query raised by a Member it was noted that local communities would be engaged in any trails being considered where relevant. Members noted that two reports would be submitted to April SP&R, namely the request for assistance in relation to the James Connolly Belfast Heritage Trail and a report to consider options for future requests and how they could be integrated into plans for City Hall to be part of an overall Belfast Experience Plan.

8. Standards & Business Committee

Members discussed a proposal to redesignate the previously agreed Standards Committee to a Standards and Business Committee. The City Solicitor advised that this is in response to various political discussions, including a meeting hosted by the Lord Mayor. He outlined the revised terms of reference which would include responsibility for specific roles in relation to managing some Council business, in particular reviewing Standing Orders and a delegated power to receive Notices of Motion. There were differing political views and some queries raised in terms of how the proposed Notices of Motion process would work in practice and further consideration is to be given to this. The City Solicitor highlighted that if agreed by SP&R to include the business element a review of the operation of the Committee and its associated processes would be undertaken after the first six months. Members also asked that when the report is brought to SP&R Committee it outlines the proposed party representation.

9. Freedom of the City – Frontline Workers

The Chief Executive outlined for Members the decision previously made by SP&R Committee in May 2020 to award the Freedom of the City to healthcare workers and all those working tirelessly on the frontline to care for vulnerable citizens during the COVID pandemic. The Cultural and Tourism Manager provided an update on the proposed arrangements for this to include both a reflective event of commemoration as well as a citywide recognition event with community participation. Members will consider the proposals at April SP&R Committee.

10. Peace IV

The Chief Executive provided an update on Peace IV funding issues and updated Members on ongoing discussions with SEUPB. She advised that Members will be updated when clarification is received on funding issues.

Members also noted that SEUPB are currently seeking views on the draft content of the European Union funded Peace Plus Programme (2021-2027) and a draft response will be brought to April SP&R Committee for consideration. A link to the consultation will be circulated to Party Leaders.

11. Planning Update

The Chief Executive updated the Forum on the live planning applications and informed the Forum of applications that were being presented to the Planning Committee in April. Members noted the correspondence sent to DfI in respect of a potential call-in of another authority's "minded-to" decision. This may require further consideration at a later stage and the City Solicitor will update Members if required accordingly.

12. AOB

Remote Meetings

The City Solicitor briefed Members on the legislation that currently allows for remote meetings to be held and advised that it is due to cease in May this year in that new legislation will not be made on time. Members discussed alternative options available going forward and the City Solicitor is to seek clarification on legal implications should Members wish to continue with remote meetings.

Bye Laws

Members discussed draft Bye Laws previously circulated to Party Leaders for Good Governance of Belfast City Centre. Members agreed to a joint meeting to discuss further, City Solicitor to extend out the invitation for a meeting on Thursday 22nd April and arrange alternative meeting for those that can't attend on that date.