

# South Belfast Area Working Group

Monday, 24th May, 2021

## MEETING OF SOUTH BELFAST AREA WORKING GROUP

### HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

- Members present: Councillor McAteer (Chairperson); and Councillors Bunting, Gormley, Groogan, T. Kelly, Lyons, McKeown, Nicholl and Spratt.
- In attendance: Mr. R. Black, Director of Neighbourhood Services; Ms. S. Grimes, Director of Physical Programmes; Ms. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager (Social and Community Recovery); Mr. S. Leonard, Neighbourhood Services Manager (South); Ms. P. Davison, Estates Manager; Ms. D. Smith, Neighbourhood Integration Manager; and Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer.

### **Apologies**

No apologies were reported.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of 25th March were approved.

### **Declarations of Interest**

Councillors Bunting, Gormley, T. Kelly, McKeown and Nicholl declared an interest in relation to the presentation by the Forward South Partnership, on the basis that they were on the Board of that organisation.

Councillor Gormley also declared an interest in relation to the presentation by LORAG, in so far as he was on the Board of that organisation.

As these were Council appointments, there was no requirement for the Members to leave the meeting whilst the presentations were being delivered.

### **Presentation - Belfast Tidal Flood Alleviation Scheme**

The Working Group was reminded that, at its meeting on 25th March, it had agreed to receive at its next meeting a presentation from Atkins Global on the Belfast Tidal Flood Alleviation Scheme.

Accordingly, Mr. P. Aldridge, Atkins Global, and Mr. I. Coulter, Department for Infrastructure (Rivers) were welcomed by the Chairperson.

Mr. Aldridge informed the Members that 1,000 properties in the City were considered to be at risk currently from tidal flooding, with that figure likely to rise to 3,500 by 2080 and to 7,000 by 2117, as a consequence of climate change. The five highest tidal events had, he pointed out, occurred in the last twenty years, with the most significant of these being in January, 2014.

In order to address the issue, DfI Rivers had commissioned Atkins Global to deliver a flood alleviation scheme along the tidal reach of the River Lagan, stretching for 8.5 kilometres from Belfast Harbour to the Stranmillis Weir. The line of flood defences would follow existing boundary fences and walls to the rear of the towpath, with the width of the towpath, current access points and boundary fences being maintained. Flood defences would take the form of walls, gates and demountable barriers and Members were provided with illustrations of the types which were being proposed at various locations along the river.

Mr. Aldridge confirmed that the process of appointing a design and build contractor to deliver the scheme had concluded and that further engagement was planned with landowners and other stakeholders. Work would then commence on finalising designs and it was envisaged that construction would commence thereafter and be completed towards the end of 2022.

Mr. Aldridge then addressed a number of issues which had been raised by the Members in relation to the proposals for the area around Shaftesbury Community and Recreation Centre and from the Belfast Waterfront Hall to Tomb Street and concluded by pointing out that an arrangement would be put in place for the removal of any graffiti on flood defences.

The Chairperson thanked Mr. Aldridge and Mr. Coulter, following which the Working Group noted the information which had been provided.

### **Presentation - Strategic Response Partners**

The Working Group was reminded that, at its meeting on at its meeting on 25th March, it had agreed to receive at this meeting a presentation from the Council's three strategic Covid-19 response partners in South Belfast, namely, Forward South Partnership, LORAG and South City Resource and Development Centre on their Covid-19 response and associated findings.

Accordingly, the following representatives were welcomed to the meeting:

- **South City Resource and Development Centre**

Mr. B. Stoker, Chief Executive

- **Forward South Partnership**

Ms. H. Crickard, Community Director/Chair

Ms. B. Arthurs, Chief Executive Officer

- **LORAG**

Mr. G. Rice, Director of Services

Ms. N. Brennan, Inner South Healthy Living Manager

### **South City Resource and Development Centre**

Mr. Stoker began by commending the Council on the swiftness of its response to the pandemic, the level of support which it had provided and the simplicity of the Covid-19 funding process.

He informed the Members that the consortium already had a plan in place to deal with emergencies such as a flu pandemic, electricity/gas/water shortages, civil disturbances etc. and that it had been quickly adapted to deal with the rapidly evolving and unique circumstances arising from Covid-19.

He highlighted the benefits which the strategic partners and groups had derived from working together and, in terms of sharing responsibility, referred, for example, to the Windsor Women's Centre being responsible for education, older people, health and wellbeing and mental health issues, South City managing food delivery and the Greater Village Regeneration Trust looking after food preparation, exercise, communication and integration.

He explained that referrals had been made via the helpline, groups, Elected Representatives and churches and that an additional two hundred volunteers had joined the response effort. A register of some 600 older people who were viewed as being vulnerable was already in existence from a previous project and an additional database had been created, comprising approximately 4,000 people who had registered as potentially needing assistance at some point. In terms of practical support, over 6,000 food parcels had been delivered to older and vulnerable people, education packs had been produced for primary school children and other services such as medicine collection, transport to appointments, home visits and dog walking had been provided. Significant work had also been undertaken to support local minority ethnic communities, such as the translation of information leaflets, all of which had generated a considerable response.

Mr. Stoker went on to point out that the pandemic had created significant financial difficulties for families, due largely to a reduction in earnings and increasing food and utility bills, and thanked the Council for providing funding through its Covid-19 support programme. However, he stressed that significant work was still required to address high levels of poverty across South Belfast moving forward.

### **Forward South Partnership**

Ms. Arthurs reviewed the role of the Forward South Partnership, which worked with communities across South Belfast, including two Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, three Urban Village Areas and four Areas at Risk.

She explained that the Partnership had, at the onset of the pandemic, established a Covid-19 helpline to connect local people, particularly those who were vulnerable, isolated or experiencing financial hardship, with groups providing support in the form of,

for example, food, heating, essential items and befriending services. The helpline had since dealt with almost 500 calls and the Partnership maintained a database on the type of support provided by groups in South Belfast.

Ms. Crickard drew the Members' attention to an analysis of the calls which had been received through the Covid-19 helpline. That had revealed that the Lower Lisburn Road and Finaghy areas lacked support and capacity, with vulnerable groups and older people being particularly affected. Priority areas needing to be addressed included food and fuel poverty, social isolation, lack of transport provision and digital poverty/lack of skills.

Ms. Arthurs then outlined the work which had been undertaken by the Partnership over the course of the pandemic and highlighted the fact that food, anti-poverty funding and emergency vouchers had been distributed, training had been delivered on fuel poverty, a Warm and Well scheme had been initiated and emails had been forwarded weekly to over 300 partners encouraging collective action.

In terms of ongoing work, the Partnership was continuing to coordinate the South Belfast helpline, provide emergency food vouchers/gas/electricity top-ups, build capacity in areas with weaker infrastructure, identify and tackle health inequalities, produce health and wellbeing packs and coordinate community recovery activities. It was also engaging with the Finaghy community to assess and identify community health needs and services, with healthcare pathways, schools, churches, youth centres and key community leaders in the area to become involved in that process.

The Partnership was also working closely with community groups and the Council to respond to crises in an immediate and strategically planned way, with education, emotional and physical health, as well civic Pride, community participation and core needs for survival being addressed.

Ms. Arthurs went on to outline a number of requirements, based upon the lessons which had been learned over the course of the pandemic, and made specific reference to investment in capacity building organisations, recognising the role played by the community and voluntary sector in the recovery process and for long-term funding to be provided to enable organisation to tackle key issues. She then made a number of suggestions aimed at eradicating food poverty, such as implementing educational schemes and national food poverty strategies and increasing employment opportunities.

## **LORAG**

Mr. Rice pointed out that the support provided by the Council had been essential in meeting the challenges faced by local communities over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ms. Brennan provided details of the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership's community response to the pandemic. She reported that, over the period of that response, there had been 949 referrals for household support in the Inner South area and a further 105 in the wider South area. She provided a breakdown of those referrals and pointed out that the majority had related to the elderly, low income families and issues relating to loss of income, self-employment and the furlough scheme.

She reported that 65 new volunteers had been mobilised across the Inner South area and that fourteen partner groups had been involved in supporting initiatives. In all,

6,998 food parcels and 2,105 dinners had been delivered and 4,320 support calls had been made, mostly to the isolated, elderly and vulnerable. Other practical support had been provided in the form of masks, winter warmer packs, elderly health and wellbeing packs and family activity packs.

She then provided details of a number of thematic programmes which had been delivered around Preventing Isolation, Children and Young People, Civic Pride and Emotional Wellbeing and confirmed that, to date, 612 people and fourteen organisations had been supported.

Ms. Brennan went on to state that the focus, moving forward, would be upon addressing levels of deprivation, poverty, long term unemployment and isolation and improving mental health and wellbeing. With that in mind, she highlighted the need for increased support for the Inner South Belfast Neighbourhood Partnership and its actions, for more co-production of grassroots services, using the experience and local knowledge of volunteers, and for the creation of a positive vision for inner city communities.

### **Expression of Thanks**

The Chairperson, together with the other Elected Members, paid tribute to the three strategic partners for leading the Covid-19 response across South Belfast and it was stressed that the Working Group would continue to work with them to address the many issues which had been raised.

The Members and Council officers were thanked by a representative from each organisation for the significant role which they had played in the response effort.

The Working Group then noted the information which had been provided across the three presentations.

### **Request for Additional Enforcement Powers – Response from Minister of Justice**

The Working Group was reminded that, at its meeting on 25th March, it had received an update on the Wider University and Lower Ormeau ILAB process, which had commenced in November, 2020.

The Working Group had noted the report and had agreed, given the potential difficulties which residents of the Botanic District Electoral Area would be likely to experience once the Covid-19 night time economy restrictions were lifted and beyond, that a letter be forwarded to the Minister of Justice highlighting the limitations of the current enforcement powers relating to noise control and the seizure of alcohol and requesting that the Council be given additional powers.

The Director of Neighbourhood Services reported that the Minister had, in her response, pointed out that currently:

- councils had powers conferred to them under the Noise Act 1996 and the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to deal with noise nuisance; and that

- councils and the Police Service had powers via the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act 1972 regarding the access and availability of alcohol and the Police Service also had powers via the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

The Minister had stated that, in order to ensure that relevant agencies, including councils, had effective and proportionate enforcement powers in place to deal with antisocial behaviour, the Department of Justice was currently leading a multi-agency Anti-Social Behaviour Legislation Review Delivery Group. That Group, on which the Council was represented, was currently exploring several new potential powers, including noise control and on-street drinking.

She had stated further that the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) had overall responsibility for policy and legislation governing noise control. As part of the ongoing work of the aforementioned Delivery Group, DAERA had confirmed that a range of civil powers were currently in place in Northern Ireland for councils to deal with noise nuisance, such as fixed penalty notices, abatement notices, seizure of noise-making equipment and prosecutions. Details of these powers were outlined in the guidance document “The Noise Act 1996 – Guidance to District Councils”, which had been produced to inform councils of amendments made to the Noise Act 1996 by the introduction of the Clean Neighbourhood and Environment Act 2005. The Minister understood that DAERA, as part of the ongoing review of antisocial behaviour legislation, had confirmed that, at present, it had no plans to revise the Act. She suggested that the Council may wish to contact the DAERA Minister directly to request additional noise powers and had undertaken, in the meantime, to share its correspondence with him.

In terms of access and availability of alcohol, the Minister confirmed that the Department for Communities had overarching responsibility for The Local Government (Northern Ireland) Act, which legislated for bye-laws allowing councils to designate areas where consumption of intoxicating liquor is prohibited. Once an area had been designated, the Police Service and council officers had the power to note the name and address of offenders for consideration of prosecution. She pointed out, however, that there was no power to seize alcohol and that councils alone must proceed with any prosecution. The Department for Communities-led Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 also allowed for the Police Service to apply for closure of premises in districts experiencing disorder.

The Minister had gone on to explain that her Department was liaising with statutory partners, via the Antisocial Behaviour Legislation Delivery Group, to ensure that legislation related to on-street drinking was appropriate to address the issue. This included liaising with the Department for Communities on the limitations of the current bye-law system and with the Police Service to explore whether explicit powers to seize alcohol would be feasible, whilst remaining human rights compliant. Following the outcome of discussions with the Police Service around seizure, further engagement with the Department for Communities would be required to assess if there was merit in it extending any potential new power to Councils.

The Minister had concluded by confirming that the Delivery Group was also examining a range of other powers, some of which were of relevance to councils and that further information on this work would be available as it progressed. However, any new legislation, if required, was unlikely to be brought forward within this Executive mandate.

During discussion, several Members expressed their disappointment at the Minister's assertion that legislation would not be brought forward within the current Executive mandate. That disappointment would, it was pointed out, be shared by residents in the Holylands and the wider South Belfast area and by park users, given the emerging problems with alcohol consumption and antisocial behaviour as Covid-19 restrictions were being eased.

The Director of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that Council officers would continue to articulate Members' concerns through the multi-agency Antisocial Behaviour Legislation Delivery Group. In terms of the Holylands, officials in the Department for Communities were drafting Terms of Reference for the Cross-Departmental Ministerial Group, to complement any structure put in place at a local level around engagement with local stakeholders. He pointed out that, in light of the decision to pause the ILAB process due to difficulties which had emerged, Council officers had been engaging with their counterparts in the Department for Communities to explore proposals, in recognition of the area's status as a Special Action Area, which would focus, amongst other things, on reviewing resources, potentially establishing a local management group and building relationships at a grassroots level to meet the various challenges being faced.

After further discussion, the Working Group agreed:

- i. to note the response which had been received from the Minister of Justice;
- ii. to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that a letter be forwarded to the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs highlighting the need for the powers contained within the Clean Neighbourhood and Environment Act 2005 relating to noise control to be strengthened; and
- iii. that the matter be placed on the agenda for further consideration at its next meeting.

Chairperson