

Council

SPECIAL MEETING OF BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

Held in the City Hall on Monday, 16th March, 2020
at 4.00 o'clock p.m., pursuant to notice.

Members present: The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor
(Councillor D. Baker) (Chairperson);
the Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor McReynolds);
the High Sheriff (Councillor Verner);
Aldermen Copeland, Haire, Kingston, McCoubrey,
Rodgers and Sandford; and Councillors S. Baker,
Beattie, Black, Brooks, Bunting, Canavan, Carson,
Cobain, Matt Collins, Michael Collins, Corr, de Faoite,
Donnelly, Dorrian, Ferguson, Flynn, Garrett, Gormley,
Groogan, Hanvey, Heading, Hussey, Hutchinson,
T. Kelly, Kyle, Long, Lyons, Magee, Magennis,
Maskey, McAllister, McAteer, McDonough-Brown,
McKeown, McLaughlin, Murphy, Newton, Nicholl,
O'Hara, Pankhurst, Smyth, Walsh and Whyte.

Summons

The Chief Executive submitted the summons convening the meeting.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Alderman Spence and Councillors Graham, Groves, Howard, M. Kelly, McCusker, McMullan and Mulholland.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor McKeown declared an interest in that he was employed by the Public Health Agency and left the meeting whilst this item was under discussion.

Explanation of the Agenda and the Meeting

The Chief Executive provided the Council with an update on the latest actions and plans which the Council's Emergency Planning teams had been involved in. She also advised the Members that business continuity planning was in place for each of the Council's critical services.

She advised the Council that, in response to the decisions taken at its meeting on Friday, 13th March:

- the City Hall was closed to the public, with the exception of registering births, deaths or marriages, or for weddings and civil partnership ceremonies which had already been booked;
- all other functions or events in the City Hall would be cancelled until further notice;
- Malone House and Belfast Castle would be closed to the public, apart from those functions which had already been booked at those venues;
- The Tropical Ravine, the Palm House and Belfast Zoo were closed to the public until further notice; and

- Pitches and pavilions would be closed until further notice.

She explained that the Special Council meeting had been called by the Lord Mayor to discuss a proposal calling on all Leisure Centres across the City to close, as well as to discuss any other issues relating to the Coronavirus (Covid 19) outbreak.

Moved by Councillor Beattie
Seconded by Councillor Murphy

This Council, in light of the Coronavirus outbreak, calls on Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) to close all of its Leisure Centres in Belfast immediately.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Matt Collins,
Seconded by Councillor Ferguson,

In the interest of public health, and to protect staff and the public, this Council will temporarily close major services to the public, including leisure centres, and events centres like the Ulster Hall and the ICC Belfast. We urge management organisations such as GLL and other organisations to continue to pay staff in line with the Council's approach. Community Centres will also shut, but can remain in use for exceptional or unnecessary meetings and to help the vulnerable where needed. All workers who can be redeployed or can work from home will be facilitated. Parks and Cemeteries will remain open, but playgrounds will shut. Necessary services, such as recycling centres and cleansing will remain open. The Council also calls on bars to shut over the St. Patrick's Day period. While this shutdown occurs, Council management and elected representatives will work with the relevant Stormont departments to develop a relief system for workers and the self-employed throughout this crisis.

Councillor Beattie accepted the amendment.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Long,
Seconded by Councillor Dorrian

In light of the developing coronavirus situation, and in line with current scientific evidence, the Council agrees to request that GLL implements a phased closure of leisure centres with an initial reduction in hours at every centre in line with the policy of social distancing and using a risk mitigation plan.

We recognise that there is likely to be phased closure of further venues where social distancing will not be practical.

We also give the authority to the Chief Executive, in discussion with Party Leaders, to seek closure of all Leisure Centres once the scientific guidance from the Chief Medical Officer advocates this.

We encourage citizens to act sensibly and take sensible precautions and we would encourage pubs to close on St Patrick's Day and follow their industry advice in order to help promote social distancing.

Adjournment

The Council agreed to adjourn for a period of time to allow the Members time to watch the announcement from the Prime Minister and to give consideration to the proposals.

(The Council stood adjourned from 5.00p.m. until 6.15p.m.)

Given the announcement from the Prime Minister, Councillor Beattie withdrew his earlier proposal.

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Beattie

Seconded by Councillor Matt Collins,

In light of the developing Corona virus situation, and the most recent statements from the Government, the Council agrees the following:

- To call on the ICC and Ulster Hall Ltd. to close to the public forthwith with appropriate protection provided to staff;
- To call on GLL to close Belfast Leisure Centres with appropriate protections provided to staff;
- To close community centres to the public but enable them to be used for community support purposes as appropriate;
- To close St. George's market to the public;
- To retain critical services with priority given to:
 - Waste Collection and disposal and household recycling centres
 - Births, Deaths and Marriages registration
 - Burials and cremations – limiting the number of people in the Chapel and at the grave side to 30
- That Parks would remain open but that playgrounds which could be closed would be closed; and
- To delegate authority to the Chief Executive in respect of other venues and staff measures including working from home in discussion with Party Group Leaders.

In light of the updated advice from the Government, Councillor Long withdrew his earlier amendment.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Kyle

Seconded by Councillor Hutchinson,

That the 8th bullet point be amended to read

“Burials and cremations – limiting the number of people in the Chapel to 30 and to encourage social distancing at the graveside.”

Councillor Beattie accepted the amendment.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Kyle,

Seconded by Councillor Hutchinson,

That, given the important of Playparks for the health and wellbeing of children, the Council agrees not to close Playparks at this time.

On a vote by show of hands, twenty one Members voted for the amendment and twenty eight against and it was declared lost.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor O'Hara,

Seconded by Councillor Flynn,

The Council agrees to write to the executive seeking urgent clarity on a package of proposals which will support the most vulnerable in society and those who have or are at risk of losing their jobs; and

The Council calls on all people to stay away from the Holylands area over St. Patrick's Day, following the guidance from government on social distancing. Our health service & first responders do not have the capacity to deal with any gatherings or Anti-Social Behaviour at this time.

Councillor Beattie accepted the amendment.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Matt Collins

Seconded by Councillor Ferguson

This Council calls on bars and clubs across the City to be more responsible and not to open on St. Patrick's Day.

Councillor Beattie accepted the amendment.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Flynn

Seconded by Councillor O'Hara

This Council calls on GLL to freeze memberships for zero charge, for as long as the closures continue.

Councillor Beattie accepted the amendment.

Accordingly, the motion, as amended, was put to the Council in the following form and agreed:

"In light of the developing Corona virus situation, and the most recent statements from the Government, the Council agrees the following:

- To call on the ICC and Ulster Hall Ltd. to close to the public forthwith with appropriate protection provided to staff;
- To call on GLL to close Belfast Leisure Centres with appropriate protections provided to staff;
- To close community centres to the public but enable them to be used for community support purposes as appropriate;
- To close St. George's market to the public;
- To retain critical services with priority given to:
 - Waste Collection and disposal and household recycling centres
 - Births, Deaths and Marriages registration
 - Burials and cremations – limiting the number of people in the Chapel to 30 and that social distancing would be encouraged at the graveside.
- That Parks would remain open but that playgrounds which could be closed would be closed;
- To delegate authority to the Chief Executive in respect of other venues and staff measures including working from home in discussion with Party Group Leaders;
- To write to the executive seeking urgent clarity on a package of proposals which will support the most vulnerable in society and those who have or are at risk of losing their jobs; and
- The Council calls on all people to stay away from the Holylands area over St. Patrick's Day, following the guidance from government on social distancing. Our health service & first responders do not have the capacity to deal with any gatherings or Anti-Social Behaviour at this time.

- This Council calls on bars and clubs across the City to be more responsible and not to open on St. Patrick's Day.
- This Council calls on GLL to freeze memberships for the Belfast Leisure Centres, at no charge, for as long as the closures continue.

Convention on Decision Making During the Covid 19 Outbreak

The City Solicitor advised the Council that, in accordance the meeting which had taken place with Party Group Leaders earlier that day, he had drawn up the following Convention to outline the continuation of decision making during the Covid 19 outbreak. He presented it for the Council's consideration:

"In accordance with Standing Order 41 and paragraph 2.3 of the Scheme of Delegation the Chief Executive undertakes to exercise her powers in the following way and subject to the considerations set out below.

All Standing Committees will be suspended until Party Group Leaders or a majority thereof agree that the normal governance procedures may be resumed.

In any case the Chief Executive reserves the right not to exercise her delegated authority and to require a decision to be taken by committee.

In exercising delegated authority the Chief Executive is not required to but may consult Party Group Leaders. This may be in the form of a collective meeting or by remote means including email, teleconferencing and telephone. In taking decisions the Chief Executive will have regard to party group strengths. On all matters relating to Planning and Licensing the Chief Executive will consult the Director of Planning and Place and the City Solicitor prior to exercising delegated authority.

All decisions will be reported to Members.

Business to be transacted through the operation of delegated authority will be published to Committee Members as per the usual procedures. Members of those Committees will be required to liaise with their Party Group Leader before the decision date. Rules established under the 2014 Act relating to Call-In will continue to apply unless suspended. Any decision by the Chief Executive to suspend Call-In will be taken having regard to the views of Party Group Leaders and the City Solicitor.

The decisions which may be made through the use of delegated authority exclude all or any matters which are required to be considered by the Council and any matter in which third parties have a statutory right to make oral representation before Committee or Council.

Contentious business meetings would be held with Party Group Leaders, or their nominee, to consider significant or politically sensitive decisions.

In the event that the Chief Executive is not content to exercise her authority, and believes that the decision should be made by a Committee, that the Council agrees to delegate authority to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee to exercise that function."

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Beattie,

Seconded by Councillor McLaughlin and

Resolved - that, in the fourth paragraph, the word “will” be replaced with “shall” and that the sentence would read as follows:

“In taking decisions the Chief Executive shall have regard to party group strengths.”

Amendment

Moved by Councillor Long

Seconded by Councillor McDonough-Brown and

Resolved - that, the last line be altered to read:

“that the Council agrees that a Special Meeting of the Council be called to exercise that function.”

Accordingly, the motion, as amended, was put to the Council in the following form and agreed:

“In accordance with Standing Order 41 and paragraph 2.3 of the Scheme of Delegation the Chief Executive undertakes to exercise her powers in the following way and subject to the considerations set out below.

All Standing Committees will be suspended until Party Group Leaders or a majority thereof agree that the normal governance procedures may be resumed.

In any case the Chief Executive reserves the right not to exercise her delegated authority and to require a decision to be taken by committee.

In exercising delegated authority the Chief Executive is not required to but may consult Party Group Leaders. This may be in the form of a collective meeting or by remote means including email, teleconferencing and telephone. In taking decisions the Chief Executive shall have regard to party group strengths. On all matters relating to Planning and Licensing the Chief Executive will consult the Director of Planning and Place and the City Solicitor prior to exercising delegated authority.

All decisions will be reported to Members.

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The decisions which may be made through the use of delegated authority exclude all or any matters which are required to be considered by the Council and any matter in which third parties have a statutory right to make oral representation before Committee or Council.

Contentious business meetings would be held with Party Group Leaders, or their nominee, to consider significant or politically sensitive decisions.

In the event that the Chief Executive is not content to exercise her authority, and believes that the decision should be made by a Committee, that the Council agrees that a Special Meeting of the Council be called to exercise that function.”

Proposal

Moved by Councillor Lyons

Seconded by Councillor de Faoite and

Resolved – That this Council:

- Considers the criteria outlined in Standing Order 41 has been satisfied;
- Authorises officers to place any Council asset or resource at the disposal of the Chief Medical Officer for the purposes of mitigating the Covid-19 virus; and
- Calls for the establishment, by the Executive, of an Emergency Financial Assistance to Local Authorities Fund (i.e. a Bellwin Scheme)

Lord Mayor

Chairperson