

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 22nd February, 2008

Meeting of Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Members present: Councillor Dodds (Chair); and
Councillors Hartley, Adamson, Browne, Browne,
Browne, Convery, Crozier, Hanna, Kirkpatrick, Lavery,
Maginness, Maskey, McCann, Newton, Rodway, Smyth
and Stoker

In attendance: Mr. P. McNaney, Chief Executive;
Mr. G. Millar, Director of Improvement;
Mr. C. Quigley, Director of Legal Services;
Mr. S. McCrory, Principal Committee Administrator; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Committee Administrator.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 8th and 25th January were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 4th February.

Freedom of Information Request

The Chairman (Councillor D. Dodds) referred to a report on a BBC radio programme earlier in the day in reference to the Council's response to a Freedom of Information request. A BBC reporter had sought details on the extent and cost of travel outside Northern Ireland by members of staff and City Councillors over the past three years. The request had been responded to within the 20 working days time limit, as required by the Freedom of Information Act. In a follow up query, the reporter had requested for a spokesperson to respond to issues arising out of the response.

After a lengthy discussion, the Committee agreed that, since the Council was a political organisation and Councillors were the public face of the Council, the reporter should be informed that the Chairmen of the Council's main Committees would make themselves available for interview if required.

It was also agreed that issues arising out of the Freedom of Information query should be referred to the Audit Panel to scrutinise the costs and reasons for all journeys being undertaken by council employees and ensure that existing controls and systems continue to be reviewed and tightened. The Panel should report to the Committee in the near future.

Furthermore, it was agreed that the Council would move towards publishing all details of staff trips, as currently is the case with Councillor trips, under the publication scheme as a matter of course in order to become more transparent and open to the public.

Modernisation and Improvement

Review of Public Administration - Update

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 25th January, it had been advised that the Northern Ireland Executive was due to consider a final Review of Public Administration Recommendations Report at its meeting scheduled to be held on 31st January. The report was to address the key issues in respect of the number and functions of Councils, the timescale for implementation, severance arrangements for Members, modernisation/capacity building and functional and transitional arrangements. The Committee had also been informed that the Department of the Environment had applied for £30 million of modernisation funding in the draft budget. In addition, the Committee had endorsed the approach that the Council should start to develop dialogue with the Government Departments on the development of pilot transitional arrangements and capacity building programmes for a number of functional areas which might transfer to local councils.

The Chief Executive reported that the Northern Ireland Executive had not considered the Review of Public Administration findings paper at its meeting on 31st January. It had been rescheduled for consideration on 13th February but had not been considered at that meeting either since there had been no political agreement on the future number of Councils. The Department now expected that the matter would be considered at the Executive meeting on 28th February. He pointed out that the latest reports had indicated that serious consideration would be given to the eleven Council model but that no firm decision had been taken.

Additionally, in the budget which had been announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, no provision had been made for the £30 million modernisation funding to build the capacity of Local Government. However, the Local Government Branch of the Department of the Environment had now commissioned Deloitte Consultants to prepare a strategic outline case for modernisation funding and that organisation was presently seeking information on current capacity from Councils. The indication was that, depending on the case put forward, modernisation funding might be found from in-year monitoring money. The Chief Executive stated that it was important that the Council participated in this process and put forward proposals on how joint initiatives might be developed to build capacity and joint working before functions formally transferred. The timetable for the implementation of the Review of Public Administration proposals remained at 2011. However, unless the Northern Ireland Executive report was agreed by Easter it was likely that this timetable would slip. This would have implications on whether or not it would be necessary to hold Elections in 2009 to the existing twenty-six Councils or whether the term of the current Councils would be extended.

Noted.

Northern Ireland Assembly Liaison

The Committee noted the contents of a report providing an update in respect of the work which was being undertaken by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Democratic Services and Governance

Somme Pilgrimage 2008

The Committee was advised that correspondence had been received from the Somme Association enquiring whether the Council would wish to be represented on the 2008 Pilgrimage to the Somme, France from 28th June until 2nd July, 2008. The Pilgrimage to mark the 92nd Anniversary of the battle would follow the route taken by the 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) Divisions during their service in the First World War. Services of Commemoration would be held in both Thiepval and Guillemont.

The Committee was reminded that, in 2007, on the 91st Anniversary of the battle, the Committee had authorised the attendance on the Somme tour of a representative of each of the Party Groupings on the Council. It was pointed out that the Somme Pilgrimage tour coincided with the Council's own Somme Remembrance Ceremony as well as the monthly meeting of the Council on 1st July and, accordingly, Members who attended the Pilgrimage would be unable to be in attendance at those events.

The Committee agreed that one Member from each of the Party Groupings represented on the Council, together with the Chief Executive (or his nominee), be authorised to participate on the Somme Pilgrimage 2008 and approved the payment of the appropriate fees, travel and subsistence allowances in connection therewith.

**National Association of Councillors –
Spring Seminar 2008**

The Committee was informed that the National Association of Councillors, Northern Ireland Region, was holding its Annual Spring Seminar in Cookstown on Friday, 14th March. The focus of the Seminar would be the Review of Public Administration and, in particular, the future of Local Government in 2009 and beyond. In addition, attendance at the Seminar would present Members with an opportunity to explore and discuss, with other Elected Representatives from across Northern Ireland, areas of mutual interest and concern and to explore in detail the implications of the changes anticipated from the Review, including the enhanced role for Local Representatives.

The Committee authorised the attendance at the conference of the Chairman, the Deputy Chairman, the Council's representatives on the National Association of Councillors, Northern Ireland Region, the Head of Committee and Members' Services (or their nominees) and a representative of each of the Party Groupings on the Council not represented by the aforementioned Members and approved the payment of the appropriate fees, subsistence and travel allowances in connection therewith.

Requests for the Provision of Hospitality

The Committee was advised that the undernoted requests for the provision of hospitality had been received:

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
British Computer Society	British Computer Society Conference 2008 17th March, 2008 Approximately 60 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception	It is estimated that 30 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £180 Approximate budget remaining £132,322
National Pensioners Convention	First Northern Ireland Pensioners' Parliament 20th March, 2008 Approximately 100 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a finger buffet	It is estimated that 30 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a finger buffet reception Approximate cost £1,000 Approximate budget remaining £131,322
Belfast Festival of Music, Speech and Drama	Centenary Gala Dinner 31st March, 2008 Approximately 300 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a pre-dinner drinks reception	This event will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Belfast Festival of Music, Speech and Drama. The Festival provides the opportunity for children from schools and societies throughout Belfast to compete in a safe and structured environment in public speaking, prose, poetry and musical recital.	Provision of a pre-dinner drinks reception Approximate cost £900 Approximate budget remaining £130,422
Queen's University Belfast	Royal Astronomical National Astronomy Meeting 31st March, 2008 Approximately 450 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception	It is estimated that 400 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £1,350 Approximate budget remaining £129,072

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
National Union of Journalists	Annual Delegate Conference 3rd April, 2008 Approximately 150 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception	It is estimated that 150 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £450 Approximate budget remaining £128,622
Liberal International	55th Congress of Liberal International 16th May, 2008 Approximately 350 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception and canapes	It is estimated that 350 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £1,750 Approximate budget remaining £126,872

The Committee adopted the recommendations.

Nomination to the Northern Ireland Policing Board of Independent Members

The Committee was reminded that, under Schedule 3 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 as amended by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2003 and by the Northern Ireland (St. Andrews Agreement) Bill, the Council had been requested to establish the Belfast District Policing Partnership and its four Sub-Groups before the expiration of a three-month period following the Commencement Role for the legislation on 4th September, 2007. Accordingly, the Council, at its meeting on 1st October, 2007, had nominated the Political Members to the District Policing Partnership and its four Sub-Groups.

The Principal Committee Administrator advised the Committee that the legislation required that a Public Appointments process be undertaken in order to appoint the Independent Members to the Partnership and, in accordance with the Statutory Code of Practice on the Appointment of Independent Members to District Policing Partnerships, the Council had appointed a short listing and interviewing panel for the purpose of determining which of the independent applicants were deemed to be suitable for appointment. The interview panel had now completed its work and had drawn up a list of appointable candidates. The Statutory Code, at paragraph 79, required the Council to nominate formerly to the Policing Board those persons found suitable by the interview panel, though the Council was required also to maintain the confidentiality of the names of the persons considered to be appointable. Accordingly, he submitted for approval a list, copies of which were tabled at the meeting, of applicants considered appropriate for nomination to the Belfast District Policing Partnership.

The Committee approved the list of Independent Members to be nominated to the Northern Ireland Policing Board as suitable for appointment to the Belfast District Policing Partnership and its four Sub-Groups.

Titanic Signature Project

The Committee agreed that a special meeting, to which all Members of the Council would be invited, be held at 10.30 a.m. on 29th November to receive from representatives of the Titanic Quarter Limited a presentation on the Titanic Signature Project.

Finance

City Investment Strategy - Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report which provided an update in relation to the City Investment Strategy:

“Relevant Background Information

As part of their strategic planning for 2008 and beyond, Members have considered the concept of a City Investment Strategy and Fund to give expression to the Council’s leadership role at this time of opportunity for Belfast. On 19 October, Members agreed to the general approach being taken to the creation of a City Investment Strategy and Fund and asked that further reports on the resourcing and governance of the fund be submitted to Committee. Members also considered, at their meeting on 14th December, criteria which should underpin the development of the strategy, including that projects taken forward as part of the strategy should:

- Create a focal point for the Council to play a leading role in the development of the city; create a ‘can do’ attitude amongst its citizens and create a sense of place and pride in Belfast.
- Encourage investment from and engagement of public, private and voluntary sectors, in the achievement of that aim.
- Contribute to the Council’s priorities and vision for the city.

The fund will be a clear demonstration of the Council’s propensity to action and its wish to contribute to the vibrancy, prosperity, culture and attractiveness of the city.

Members have sought assurances about a number of aspects of the City Investment Strategy which are under development at present; in particular that;

- The Council should not commit to funding in advance of that funding being identified and realised;
- The funding strategy includes a realistic analysis of realizable assets;
- The strategy is taken forward within the context of the Council's corporate objectives for 2008 and beyond and informs priority setting within this process.

This purpose of this paper is to inform Members about the progress that is being made with respect to these issues and the stage of development at which the strategy now sits. Appended to the paper is a summary of some of the criteria that are informing the development of the strategy, together with an outline process intended to allow Members to take the production of the city investment strategy forward alongside the development of the Council's overall strategy for 2008 and beyond. It is important that these are seen not as separate processes but as mutually reinforcing, with the Council's strategy giving expression to the impact and that Members want to make in the City and the investment strategy providing a key mechanism through which this can be realised.

Key Issues

A draft City Investment Strategy report is being finalised and it is intended that this will form the basis of party group briefings during March. Officers are fully aware that Members need to take decisions on the basis of a clear rationale and evidence base that ensures rate-payers money is being invested for the benefit of all citizens and to avoid the danger that the City Investment Strategy becomes a 'super grant' rather than a proactive and deliberate way of ensuring that the projects most likely to take forward Members vision of the city happen. Therefore the report on the Investment Strategy will include the elements set out below:

i Aims – alignment of the City Investment Strategy with the Council's overall strategy

The aims of the City Investment Strategy will align to the priorities and ambitions of the Council which are currently in draft form and which formed the basis of party briefings during January. The strategic objectives, as they currently sit have been framed as :

- **Strong Leadership** - providing and growing city leadership;
- **Economic Growth and wealth creation** – creating a prosperous city;
- **Community Cohesion and Well-being** - promoting and improving the well-being of communities and individual and building good relations between communities and individuals.
- **Environmental Sensitivity and Sustainability** - creating a clean, green, attractive and safe city.

These sit within Members' overall philosophy of leaving a legacy for the city - '*Today's Actions, Tomorrows Legacy*'. Underpinning these objectives are a number of principles including those of financial prudence and using and investing rate-payers money wisely. A key characteristic of the future strategy, identified by Members, is the idea of growing and maximising revenue from the city's rate-base. Members have set out that a key tenet of the Investment Strategy is that it provides the potential to create a virtuous cycle whereby investment grows the rate base and provides income to improve services and connect more people to opportunities thereby improving quality of life in the city and attracting further investment.

Officers are currently working up programmes, projects and performance information aligned to these objectives and will work to finalise these will Members during March and April.

ii. Process

The development, control, management and delivery of the city investment strategy is a key priority for the Council to ensure that public money is used wisely, best value is secured, maximum impact achieved (social, economic and environmental), equality legislation is pursued and the decision-making process is clearly understood and taken at the right level. Details in relation to a overview of the initial process necessary to take forward the development of the City Investment Strategy with members and to ensure maximum engagement on this key issue have been provided for the information of the Committee. More detail with respect to proposals for the realisation of the strategy will form part of party briefings during March.

Members will be aware that the Committee has already set some guidance in terms of the criteria underpinning the strategy and fund and these have been circulated for the information of the Members. It is to be stressed that these are presented only to give Members a steer on emerging thinking; the criteria may need be further augmented after consultation with the parties. In addition, any final agreed criteria need to be reflective of our overall objectives, once finalised and the impact the Council wishes to make in the City. They will also have to reflect a balance between economic, social and environmental outcomes and take on board legal and accounting arrangements to meet legal vires, equality and audit requirements.

iii. Funding

Members are asked to note that the Council will not expend monies in respect of the City Investment Strategy until the funds for the strategy are realised.

The funding arrangements include a 1% contribution from the rates for the next three years; however Members have agreed, as part of the rate setting process to finance the 1% contribution from reserves rather than the rate for 2008/09.

The efficiency programme will contribute £500k per annum and a detailed report on efficiency will be taken to Committee in the Spring.

The largest contribution is expected from a more proactive approach to the management of the Council's assets. A detailed draft asset management strategy and associated policies is being developed together with a comprehensive schedule of Council assets. The schedule of assets is broken down into –

- Short term potential disposals - those already declared surplus
- Medium term possibilities – largely non-operational assets
- Longer term possibilities – operational assets that may have development potential

Current valuations are being independently validated; however, Members will understand that there will be wider social and environmental issues related to a number of these sites. Consequently, political judgement will be essential in determining the best way forward to take account of economic and technical considerations along with wider societal impacts.

The above deliberations will affect timing which also needs to take account of market conditions. In addition, Government has created a Capital Realisation Task Force to review the wider public sector asset base with a view to disposal of assets to help fund additional investment in priority areas. We have been in contact with the Task Force to ensure we can deliver a co-ordinated approach that does not flood the market and allows collaboration rather than competition between Belfast City Council and central government.

A further consideration is the need to align the overall strategy with the Council's emerging capital programme, work is underway on this aspect of the task which will form part of the briefing for Members in March.

Resource Implications

N/A

Recommendations

The draft City Investment Strategy/Fund is a substantial policy issue which requires sufficient time and consideration by Members before it can be finalised and will then require engagement with the private sector and other sectors.

It is therefore recommended that Party Groups consider the paper in detail during March and arrange for briefings as necessary."

The Committee agreed that briefings on the City Investment Strategy be held with the Party Groupings on the Council during March.

Authority to Seek Tenders

The Committee granted authority for the commencement of tendering exercises in respect of the following:

- (i) the supply of catering foodstuffs for the Atrium Restaurant; and
- (ii) a measured-term contract for general building works.

Adjournment of Meeting

The Committee agreed, in view of the large number of Agenda items remaining to be considered, that they be deferred to an adjourned meeting to be held at 12.00 noon on Tuesday, 26th February.

Chairman