

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 19th March, 2010

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

- Members present: Councillor Hartley (Chairman);
the Deputy Lord Mayor (Councillor Lavery); and
Councillors Adamson, Attwood, Austin, D. Browne,
W. Browne, Campbell, Convery, Crozier, Hendron,
N. Kelly, C. Maskey, McCann, Newton, Rodgers
and Stoker.
- Also attended: Councillor Jones.
- In attendance: Mr. P. McNaney, Chief Executive;
Mr. C. Quigley, Director of Legal Services;
Mrs. J. Thompson, Director of Finance and Resources;
Mr. L. Steele, Head of Committee and
Members' Services;
Mr. R. Cregan, Improvement Manager; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Committee Administrator.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors M. Browne and Rodway.

Transition Committee Business

Review of Public Administration – Local Government Response on Efficiency and Collaboration

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Relevant Background Information

- 1.1 Members will recall that as part of the PriceWaterhouseCoopers Economic Appraisal which identified potential options as to how the RPA reform programme could be funded, the establishment of a Business Support Organisation (BSO) to deliver a number of core functions on a shared services basis had been proposed. PwC reported that the RPA reform programme (including the establishment of the proposed BSO) would require £118m funding with a return of £438million over 25 years.

- 1.2 In responding to the PwC proposals, the local government sector challenged the financial assumptions and projections contained within the PwC report and stated its consensual opposition to the proposed establishment of a BSO.
- 1.3 At the Strategic Leadership Board meeting in December 2009 and recent NILGA Annual Conference, the Environment Minister, Edwin Poots set the challenge for local government to provide an alternative solution to establishing a BSO and delivering in the order of £438million efficiency savings. Work has been ongoing over recent weeks (with BCC engaged) on preparing an initial response to the Minister's challenge.
- 2.0 Key Issues
- 2.1 On 12th March, NILGA held an engagement event with representatives from Transition Committees to update them on the emerging local government proposals in regards to efficiency and collaboration. A copy of the initial local government position paper has been circulated.
- 2.2 At the event it had been suggested that the key principle in moving forward should be the willingness of local government to accept an efficiency figure which is linked to the draw down of necessary up-front seed funding from central government to enable the RPA reform programme to happen. It was further suggested that as phase II detailed work would need to be undertaken by individual Transition Committees, in liaison with the DoE, to:
- i. assess the up-front investment required by Transition Committees to enable the reform to happen; and
 - ii. identify the associated level of efficiency savings required.
- 2.3 Such an approach would provide Transition Committees and councils the autonomy to deliver their own efficiency programme to meet the agreed targets for a specified period, rather than having a centralised BSO imposed upon them.
- 2.4 It should be noted that the level of discussion at the engagement event on 12th March was somewhat limited and tended to focus on the unsubstantiated nature of the PwC projected efficiency figures and the parochial issues facing individual Transition Committees and not the broad principles being considered e.g. local government:

- **accepts that it would be required to contribute towards the funding of local government reform;**
- **is committed to working in collaboration to deliver potential efficiency savings; and**
- **accepts that detailed design and financial modelling work is required to establish the efficiency savings to be secured.**

2.5 Following the engagement event, NILGA intends to write to each Transition Committee requesting that they consider the emerging proposals. It was agreed that the financial officers within Transition Committees be requested to undertake detailed work around quantifying potential costs attached to the RPA reform and potential efficiency and collaboration opportunities.

2.6 Notwithstanding, it is suggested that the Council now needs to establish its own position in regards to the RPA; stating that it is up for the challenge of reform; is willing to work in collaboration, where appropriate, to secure greater efficiencies; but is not willing to pick up the convergence costs of other local authority areas.

2.7 It is suggested that the Council continues to proactively engage with the Eastern Seaboard councils within arc21, and other willing councils, to explore potential collaboration opportunities as part of its wider efficiency programme.

Proposals for 'voluntary' Regional Transition Committee and Management Team

2.8 There remain a number of key decisions still to be made, particularly pertaining to funding, which need to be considered and negotiated at a regional level. With the anticipated delay until at least June 2010 for the necessary legislation which will create the 'Statutory' Transition Committees, it is unlikely that the proposed Regional Transition Committee (RTC) would be put in place until some time thereafter. It would be the intention that the RTC would provide the regional forum to discuss and negotiate key matters and would comprise of political representation from each of the Transition Committees.

- 2.9 On the 25th February 2010 the Strategic Leadership Board agreed that interim arrangements would be put in place to establish a voluntary Regional Transition Committee (vRTC) and supporting Regional Transition Management Team (vRTMT) so as to enable progress to be made.
- 2.10 At the engagement event on 12th March 2010, NILGA presented a range of options for the composition of the proposed vRTC and vRTMT a copy of the options paper has been circulated. It was agreed that NILGA would formally consult with individual Transition Committees to establish the preferred options.
- 2.11 In terms of the vRTC, it was suggested that Option 2 (i.e. the vRTC to comprise of one nominee from each voluntary Transition Committee and the five NILGA Strategic Leadership Board representatives) be recommended as a preferred option. It is suggested that the Council should state that it would have no difficulty with either options 1 or 2, however, that further clarity be sought as to the rationale for the addition of the NILGA SLB representatives and their associated voting rights (i.e. would they hold observer status).
- 2.12 In terms of the proposals for the vRTMT, it is suggested that the Council should consider option 1 (i.e. vRTMT will comprise of one Chief Executive from each Transition Management Team and representatives from key Departments including transferring functions) as its preferred option for moving forward.

3.0 Resource Implications

There are no Human Resource or financial implications contained within this report

4.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- (a) note the contents of this report;
- (b) agree that the Council actively pursues collaborative opportunities presented by the RPA as recommended at paragraph 2.6 above;
- (c) consider the options put forward for the establishment of interim voluntary regional governance structures;

- (d) consider and agree that options 1 & 2 put forward for the proposed vRTC would be acceptable, however, seek clarity on the addition of NILGA SLB representatives and their associated voting rights; and
- (e) consider and agree that option 1 put forward for the vRTMT would be the preferred option of the Council.”

The Chief Executive tabled for the information of the Members a copy of the correspondence which had been received from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association outlining the proposals which had arisen as a result of the Engagement Event which had been held on 12th March.

The Chief Executive highlighted the costs which would accrue to the Council if the cost of the Local Government reform programme was attributed on the basis of the Council's rateable income and emphasised the need for the Council to pursue collaborative opportunities on a sub-regional and regional basis.

After discussion, the Committee adopted the recommendations.

Review of Public Administration – Transfer of Functions

The Committee agreed that a special meeting be held to enable the Members to be updated fully on the ongoing discussions with regard to the Transfer of Functions which would result from the Review of Public Administration and any potential implications for the Council.

Big Lottery - Applications for Funding to deliver Community Planning Projects in Northern Ireland

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“Relevant Background Information

On 22nd January, the Committee was advised that the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) had commenced a tendering process for the delivery of three pilot projects on community planning in Northern Ireland with a separate but linked support contract to capture the learning and good practice. The overarching aim is to provide a model and a toolkit of good practice in community planning that will help to ensure the genuine engagement of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the new / emerging formal processes.

The first phase in the process was a pre-qualification stage, following which only those potential contractors that BIG deemed to have the suitable skills and capacity would be invited to tender. At its meeting on 22nd January, the Committee agreed that the Council should submit an expression of interest, and as BIG's preferred method of delivery appeared to be a partnership approach with the voluntary and community sector (VCS), it was further agreed that this should be done in collaboration with the five Area Partnership Boards (APBs) and, the non-profit organisation, Community Places.

The Council's consortium application has since been short-listed and we have now been invited to submit a tender for the pilot community planning project. The closing date for completed submissions is Monday 29th March.

The purpose of this report is to present for approval an outline project proposal for that will form the basis of the submission that will be made to BIG in line with the formal tender requirements. Owing to the very tight timescales, work is underway to produce a detailed and comprehensive submission document, in the hope that resources can be secured to carry out a pilot in Belfast.

Key Issues

BIG - Scope and Process

As previously reported to Members with respect to the scope and process of the BIG project:

- Each project must be based in a different council area, based on the boundaries of the 11 new council areas planned for Northern Ireland.
- The areas chosen will be decided by BIG from the bids received, based on rank scores. BIG have stressed that there will not be more than one pilot in any council area.
- The total contract value for the three projects will be in the region of £380,000 to £420,000. BIG have confirmed that the final breakdown per area will be negotiable.
- The contract term is a maximum of 18 months, commencing in May 2010 and ending in November 2011

BIG has indicated in the tender papers that a successful pilot project will be one that:

- (i) enables local councils, the VCS and other stakeholders to gain a fuller understanding of community planning, through testing and modeling community planning processes**
- (ii) engages key stakeholders in pilot community planning projects ahead of formal structures due to be introduced in 2011**
- (iii) builds and increases networks and strategic alliances**
- (iv) enables meaningful collaboration between the proposed Statutory Transition Committees and various partners in the community planning process**
- (v) increases understanding of the role of the VCS in community planning**
- (vi) empowers the VCS to participate in community planning.**

Council Position

On 22 January, the Committee agreed that in making a Council-led or Council-involved expression of interest the Council could seek to ensure that the pilot encompassed as many parts of the city as possible with ideally a city-wide perspective; that it addressed one or more of the council's key priorities for the city; and that it supported longer term relationship building and the development of a more effective framework.

In line with meeting the requirements of BIG as set out in the tender, it is proposed that the pilot should seek to:

- Incorporate work and test engagement mechanisms at strategic, thematic and local levels**
- Test one thematic area in order to manage volume, time and resource constraints**
- Build on existing work and mechanisms**
- Apply city-wide, but with scope for particular elements to be tested within specific geographic areas**

- Focus on delivery
- Take into account the leadership role of Members and the on-going context of the council's emerging approach to community planning.

Each of the Area Partnership Boards have endorsed the partnership approach to the BIG bid; as have Community Places who confirmed that their role would be to act as a technical 'critical friend' assisting with facilitation and evaluation.

Proposed Pilot

It proposed that the chosen pilot theme should be 'health' with the exact scope to be clarified as part of the pilot project in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders, including the new Belfast Health Development Unit. For example; it may be that during the delivery of the pilot the focus may be directed to a specific priority (or priorities) as identified through the new Belfast Health Development Unit so that particular priority area(s) become more manageable and deliverable at a local level. BIG has indicated that there will be a degree of flexibility permitted in terms of the implementation of the contract, subject to the negotiation and agreement of BIG, in order to reflect emerging developments within the RPA and community planning guidance.

The proposed high level project outline as follows:

- *Strategic Planning* – seek to ensure that local priorities are reflected in relevant plans of key agencies/ partners and that Government priorities are meaningfully translated into and reflect local need. This will involve the early engagement and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders, and specifically the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) as facilitated through this pilot, to the development of:
 - The Belfast Health Inequalities Plan;
 - The joint Health Development Unit business plan; and,
 - Existing/emerging plans within Council and other statutory agencies.

The focus will be on developing further a number of agreed themes and priorities in relation to Health in order to reduce the gap that exists between the health outcomes of different people and communities across the city. The primary focus in the first instance will be

aligning local need through engagement and capacity building with the VCS to the work of the new joint Health Development Unit. But ultimately this work should mean changes to the plans and policies of agencies across the city in a way that creates real health improvements and the development of an effective health partnership and strategic health inequalities plan for the city.

- *Local Level* – seek to introduce a number of visible outcomes on the ground for local people by contributing to the planning of local programmes and enabling the VCS to support statutory agencies in more effective and joined-up implementation. It is intended that the pilot project will inform the further development of the new Joint Health Development Unit business plan and also contribute in practical ways by utilising local level VCS contacts to support specific work streams. This should therefore help ensure that Unit delivers meaningful projects at local level which are responsive to local need and which make a stronger impact by maximising collaboration with local communities.
- *Engagement* – seek to ensure that VCS are able to engage in meaningful discussions and planning at strategic and local level. This will be crucial to the development and implementation of successful quality of life improvements for local people. Engagement will focus on a number of strands – strategic planning; thematic and area based issues, and local delivery. Testing the effectiveness of this engagement will be a critical element of the project. The new joint Health Development Unit has indicated that the connection with the VCS is a key gap; therefore, the proposed pilot will help bridge that gap delivering both practical and process related learning for the Unit and the Health theme generally.
- *Capacity Building* – seek to develop VCS understanding and awareness of the wider system and how they can influence and contribute as an equal partner. This will only be achievable if meaningful discussion and implementation is secured through the development of a real partnership approach with capacity building supported across all sectors, with work rooted in practical action plans. As work to develop joined up plans is at an early stage within the Health theme, it provides an opportune time to develop and test capacity building for all partners involved.

- *Engagement with the political process* – the pilot will also seek to clarify and build on the role of Elected Members, both as civic leaders and community representatives, within the engagement and community planning process.

Establishment of a Member Community Planning Reference Group

The leadership of Members in the community planning process is vital to its success, with the Transition Committee in particular having a pivotal role in the development of the community planning process. As part of the submission bid, it is suggested that the Council would establish a cross-party 'Community Planning Reference Group' which will provide a political forum to discuss and test emerging ideas/concepts as required. It is recommended that this group would comprise of up to 2 elected Members from each Party.

It is envisaged that this group would act also as a reference panel in the wider development of the Council's community planning framework and the work streams which need to be undertaken, including:

- Agreement of a working definition of community planning for Belfast;
- Establishment of necessary engagement mechanisms and an influencing strategy;
- Considerations of issues around partnership development;
- Identification of areas of best practice and expertise and establishing learning from these;
- Identification of capacity issues and ways these can be addressed;
- Identification of ways in which current partnership successes can be built upon.

In doing so, assurance can be given that the pilot sits within and informs the overall community planning framework for Belfast and that the lessons learnt from this pilot are transferred to other related processes. The Member Reference Group will be supported by an officer working group; this group has already been established and has undertaken preliminary work on community planning and its implications for Council and services.

In addition, it is intended that there will be continual engagement with the Council's Transition Committee (i.e. Strategic Policy and Resources) throughout the developmental stages of the pilot project so as to ensure that there remains a direct link with the wider work being taken forward by the Council in relation to developing a community planning process for the city.

Regional Developments

Work has been ongoing for some time to develop policy proposals for the introduction of a council-led community planning process. This work had culminated in the creation of a 'Community Planning Foundation Programme' which had been issued by DoE in November 2009. A copy of the information circulated with respect to the Foundation Programme has been circulated for the information of Members.

The purpose of the Foundation Programme is to support Transition Committees to prepare for the introduction of the Community Planning Duty and, inter alia, identify the key issues that should be addressed in guidance which will be developed to support the operation of Community Planning. It is the view that the Foundation Programme will build upon the work already happening by councils in partnership with other stakeholders.

It is understood that the Environment Minister and DoE are to hold an awareness raising event for Transition Committees and Transition Management Teams to discuss the Foundation Programme and its implementation. DoE had indicated that this event would be arranged in January 2010, however, no date has yet to be confirmed, we will keep Members informed should any further developments arise.

Potential for Other Pilot Bids within Belfast

With respect to the BIG pilot, currently we are aware that a NIVCA bid has been successfully short-listed, NICVA have approached the Council to say that if successful they would intend one of the pilots to happen in the Belfast area. This would provide an alternative option should our own, Council-led bid be unsuccessful.

Resource Implications

Financial

None at present. The Council has already committed resources to the development of the Joint Health Development Unit and it is envisaged that this Unit together with other existing officers responsible for supporting community planning will be expected to contribute to the pilot project. Additional support costs for managing and coordinating the project will be met from within the BIG funding if successful.

Human Resources

For successful implementation of the project, it is envisaged that a fixed-term co-ordination and support role will be required. This will be included in the funding application and would be a fully funded post with no additional cost to the Council.

Recommendations

Decision required

The Committee is asked to note the above report and to approve 'Health' as the proposed theme and to authorise the development of a formal bid in collaboration with the Area Partnership Boards and Community Places for submission to the BIG Lottery by 29th March.

The Committee is also asked to agree to the establishment of a cross-party 'Community Planning Reference Group' for the purposes of taking forward the pilot project and agree that the proposed Reference Group would comprise of up to 2 Members from each Party.

Officers to contact for further information:

Sharon McNicholl, Planning & Performance Manager, ext 6207
Barbary Cook, Policy and Business Development Manager,
ext 3620

Abbreviations

APBs – Area Partnership Boards
BIG – Big Lottery Fund
VCS – Voluntary and Community Sector”

The Committee adopted the recommendations and agreed that a report on the effectiveness of the Area Partnership Boards be submitted to the Committee in due course.

Democratic Services and Governance

Members' Declarations of Interest

The Committee was reminded that the Council, at its meeting on 1st March, had agreed that a Notice of Motion on Members' Declarations of Interest be referred to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for consideration and report.

The Head of Committee and Members' Services explained that there was no doubt that the public in general and the press and media in particular were focusing more than ever before on the behaviour of all publicly elected representatives. That could be demonstrated by the protracted press reporting of the expenses which Members of Parliament claimed and the subsequent damage which had been caused to the public perception of the democratic process. The Council had recognised that increased public scrutiny and had agreed recently to revise and enhance the information which was published on payments made to Members.

He pointed out that another area of public life where scrutiny by the press and media had been increasing over recent months was the requirement for elected representatives to be seen not to seek personal advantage by virtue of the public office which they held. For Councillors elected to local Councils that was dealt with under the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, whereby Councillors were expected to declare both pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests in any matter being considered by the Council and, where such an interest existed, not to take part in the discussion or vote on the matter.

The Head of Committee and Members' Services explained that Members of the Council had been abiding by that principle. However, Members were increasingly being asked to represent the Council on a range of Outside Bodies and it was not always clear when such membership gave rise to pecuniary or, more frequently, non-pecuniary interests. It was accepted that the guidance available to Members in helping them to determine when such an interest existed was somewhat sparse and not easily understood and it was considered that the issuing of a Members' Guide to Declarations of Interest would help Members to ensure that they always abided by the highest principles of behaviour in public life and would provide practical assistance to Members.

The Head of Committee and Members' Services indicated that there was another related but separate matter which the Council might wish to give some consideration to which was the possibility of publishing a Members' Register of Interests, which would require Members to declare all business and other interests which they held. Such registers were used in Westminster, in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in most Councils in England and Wales.

The Committee agreed the draft Guide to Members' Declarations of Interest be submitted in the first instance to the Audit Panel, together with a report on the steps to be taken to establish a Members' Register of Interests, with a view to such a Register being introduced with effect from the commencement of the next Council term.

Publication of Information on Payments made to Council Officers

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“Relevant Background Information

Members will recall that the Committee, at its meeting on 19th February, 2010, agreed to the following revised headings under which the details of Councillor's allowances and expenses would be published:

Allowances

Basic
Special Responsibility
District Policing Partnership
Transition Committee
Civic Dignitaries Personal Allowances

Conferences/Visits

Subsistence (including the cost of accommodation and out of pocket expenses)
Travel (by public transport or car)
Conference Fees

Travel and Other Miscellaneous Claims

Mileage, etc., to and from meetings
Home Phone Rental/Broadband Fee
Hands Free Car Kits

At the Council meeting on 1st March, concerns were expressed in relation to a perceived differential in respect of the information being published for Councillors and that being published for officers and it was agreed that a report be presented to the Strategic Policy & Resources Committee setting out the extent of the information included currently in the Council's Publication Scheme in relation to payments made to Council officers and comparing and contrasting this with the information to be published in relation to elected Members.

Key Issues

At its meeting on 19th September, 2008, the Committee approved the publication of costs incurred by the Council as a result of employees attending events outside of Northern Ireland so as to demonstrate the Council's commitment to accountability and openness.

This information, which is published annually, details payments made to employees in connection with expenditure incurred on travel which is outside their day-to-day operational duties.

The following details are included:

- *Department*
- *Job title and staff number*
- *Date of event*
- *Description of event*
- *Event location* - for example, Great Britain, Republic of Ireland, Europe or Rest of World
- *Travel Costs*

- **Accommodation and subsistence** - hotel and meal costs
- **Gross cost** - the total cost before any deductions are made in respect of funding received from external bodies
- **Percentage actual funding** - the percentage of any external funding received, for example, EU funding or charges to customers
- **Funding body** - organisation which provided the external funding
- **Net cost**

The following table illustrates for comparison purposes the information which is published currently in relation to payments made to Councillors and those made to officers:

<u>Councillors</u>	<u>Officers</u>
<p>Allowances</p> <p>Basic Special Responsibility District Policing Partnership Transition Committee Civic Dignitaries Personal Allowances (Members identified individually by name)</p>	<p>Salaries and Wages</p> <p>This information is published within the Annual Financial Report in respect of the number of employees within specific £10,000 salary bands from £50,001 upwards.</p> <p>(This information does not identify individual officers either by name or employee number)</p>
<p>Conferences/Visits</p> <p>Subsistence (including the cost of accommodation and out of pocket expenses) Travel (by public transport or car) Conference Fees (Members identified individually by name)</p>	<p>Conferences/Visits (outside of Northern Ireland)</p> <p>Subsistence (including the cost of accommodation and out of pocket expenses) Travel (by public transport or car) (Officers are identified by Job Title and Employee Number but not by name)</p>
<p>Travel and Other Miscellaneous Claims</p> <p>Mileage, etc. to and from meetings Home Phone Rental/Broadband Fee Hands Free Car Kits (Members identified individually by name)</p>	

The Council does not publish the specific details of officers' personal salaries in order to protect the rights of individuals under the Data Protection Act. Furthermore, a difference exists in terms of the legal status of Members as opposed to officers. Members are elected for the full term of the Council, and because they are elected they are subject to a higher level of accountability to the public. Officers on the other hand are employed under contract of employment and are subject to a different level of public scrutiny, which is reflected by the provisions of the Data Protection legislation.

The information which is published in respect of officers' attendance at conferences and visits is restricted currently to those which take place outside of Northern Ireland, whereas the information in relation to Councillors is in respect of attendance at conferences and visits regardless of their location.

Options

1. The Publication Scheme should remain unchanged so long as Members are content with the current level of information being published.
2. Extend the Publication Scheme to include payments made to staff for attendance at events within Northern Ireland.
3. Extend the Publication Scheme to include payments made to staff for attendance at events within Northern Ireland and to include payments made to officers in respect of miscellaneous items, namely, home phone rental, broadband fee and hands free car kits.

Members should be aware that, in respect of Options 2 and 3, there will be a cost associated with the compilation and publishing of this information and that because of data protection legislation, this information would have to be provided by job title and employee number and not by individual name. Furthermore, the extension of the Publication Scheme to include this additional information will require consultation with the trade unions, as was the case before the current policy was agreed by the Committee on 19th September, 2008. This will require a future report to be submitted to the Committee on the outcome of the consultation before any change can be made to the existing scheme.

Variation of Previous Decision

In carrying out this exercise I have had to scrutinise closely each of the elements listed in terms of both Members and officers and to satisfy myself that the entry is relevant. In doing so it has become apparent to me that the publishing under 'Payments to Councillors' of conference fees is misleading in that while it may be useful to capture and publish that information as part of the Council's Publication Scheme it is not accurate to include those amounts on the Council's website under 'Payments to Councillors' since these monies are not paid to them. Accordingly, I would apologise for this inaccuracy and would seek the Committee's authority, irrespective of any other action which may be felt necessary in terms of the perceived differential between Councillors and officers, to vary the decision taken by the Committee at its meeting on 19th February in order to omit the insertion of Conference Fees from the Section on the Council's website referring to 'Payments to Councillors'.

Resource Implications

N/A

Recommendation

To agree to omit conference fees from the section on the Council's website referring to "Payments to Councillors" and to determine which of the available options is the most appropriate having taken account of all the relevant information.

Decision Tracking

- Option 1 – No change required.
- Option 2 or 3 – The Director of Finance and Resources to submit a further report to Committee by June, 2010."

The Committee adopted the recommendation in relation to the omission of conference fees from payments to Councillors and agreed to adopt Option 1 in that the Publication Scheme should remain unchanged in so far as it related to attendance at conferences and visits by officers.

National Association of Councillors Spring Conference and Local Authority Members' Association Annual Conference

The Head of Committee and Members' Services reported that the Council had received notification of two conferences, both of which were taking place over the weekend commencing Friday, 9th April. The first was the National Association of Councillors Spring Conference which was being held in Scarborough from 9th till 11th April. The second was the Local Authority Members' Association Annual Conference which was being held in Sligo on 9th and 10th April.

The theme of the National Association of Councillors Spring Conference was 'Supporting our Communities – Delivering Housing and Regeneration'. The conference would focus on the challenges faced by Local Government in responding effectively to the needs of local communities by helping to deliver high quality and attractive places for people to live, work and enjoy. Delegates would consider also the interventions which could be made by Local Government to bring about sustainable growth and renewal, thereby ensuring successful economic development and the benefits to citizens which were intrinsically linked to it. All of the Council's Elected Representatives were members of the National Association of Councillors.

The main focus of the Local Authority Members' Association Conference was to consider how Local Authorities could best respond to climate change and specifically the role which Members had to play in dealing with the environmental impact caused by such change. The keynote speaker at the Conference was Mr. John Gormley, TD, Minister for the Environment.

The estimated cost of attendance at the National Association of Councillors Conference was approximately £615 per delegate and the cost of attendance at the Conference in Sligo was approximately £620 per person.

The Committee agreed to authorise the attendance of one representative of each of the Party Groupings at both the National Association of Councillors Spring Conference and the Local Authority Members' Association Annual Conference in Sligo.

**Requests for the Use of the City Hall
and the Provision of Hospitality**

The Committee was informed that the undernoted requests for the use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality had been received:

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date Number Delegates/ Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	Launch of Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Carers' Strategy 14th June, 2010 Approximately 80 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of tea/coffee and biscuits.	This event will launch the Carers' Strategy which aims to develop support for carers and to promote and protect their health and well-being. The event also seeks to recognise the vital role played by carers in contributing to the life and well-being of the city. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Themes of 'City Leadership - strong, fair, together' and 'Better support for people and communities'.	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of tea/coffee and biscuits. Approximate cost £160

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/ Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
Arts Care Ltd	A Celebration of Older People through the Arts 29th June, 2010 Approximately 90 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of tea/coffee and biscuits.	This event will celebrate the conclusion of a programme organised by Arts Care Ltd which sought to introduce and involve older people in music, dance, creative writing and visual art. The event will showcase the success of the project by displaying the work completed by the participants during the programme. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Themes of 'City Leadership - strong, fair, together' and 'Better support for people and communities'.	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of tea/coffee and biscuits. Approximate cost £180
European Connected Health Campus	European Connected Health Summit 15th June, 2010 Approximately 200 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of a pre-dinner drinks reception.	Delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Theme of 'City Leadership – Strong, Fair, Together' and 'Better support for people and communities'	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of red/white wine and soft drinks. Approximate cost £800
University of Ulster	'Benefiting Belfast Through Investment' Conference 6th August, 2010 Approximately 400 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of a pre-lunch drinks reception.	Delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Theme of 'City Leadership – Strong, Fair, Together' and 'Better opportunities for success across the city'.	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of red/white wine and soft drinks. Approximate cost £1,600

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/ Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
Queen's University Belfast	Transforming, Managing and Resolving Conflict in Divided Cities Conference 22nd May, 2011 Approximately 200 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception.	Delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Theme of 'City Leadership – Strong, Fair, Together'.	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of red/white wine and soft drinks. Approximate cost £800
Common Purpose	Common Purpose Meridian Awards Ceremony 12th August, 2010 Approximately 70 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of tea/coffee and biscuits.	'Meridian' is a leadership programme that brings together a diverse group of leaders from the private, public, voluntary and community sectors. The participants learn how to improve their capacity to lead, effect change and expand their networks through the investigation of real-life challenges. This event will recognise the achievements of those individuals which have successfully completed the Meridian Programme. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Themes of 'City Leadership - strong, fair, together' and 'Better opportunities for success across the city'.	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of tea/coffee and biscuits. Approximate cost £140

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/ Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety	The Military and Civilian Health Partnership Awards 2010 25th November, 2010 Approximately 220 attending	The use of the City Hall.	This event seeks to recognise those individuals who have made a significant contribution, in partnership with the relevant Health and Social Care Services, to the provision of healthcare to military personnel, their families and veterans. The event also aims to promote the innovation and development of healthcare within the military that has had a wider application for the benefit of the civilian population. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Theme of 'City Leadership – Strong, Fair, Together' and 'Better support for people and communities'.	The use of the City Hall.
Energy Institute	50th Anniversary Dinner 9th March, 2011 Approximately 300 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of a pre-dinner drinks reception.	This event seeks to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Energy Institute and to acknowledge its contribution to the general life and well-being of the city. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Themes of 'City Leadership – Strong, Fair, Together' and ' Better care for Belfast's environment.	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of red/white wine and soft drinks. Approximate cost £1,200

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/ Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
Belfast Music Society	Belfast Music Society Celebratory Concert 24th November, 2010 Approximately 175 attending	The use of the City Hall.	This concert seeks to celebrate and contribute to the success of young musicians and composers who have made significant achievements during the Society's Masterclasses and Workshops which were delivered in schools and community groups across Belfast. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Themes of 'City Leadership - strong, fair, together' and 'Better support for people and communities'.	The use of the City Hall.
The Belfast Boxing Ring	Reception to mark the launch of 'The History of the Sport of Boxing in Belfast' 6th September, 2010 Approximately 200 attending	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception.	The Exhibition, which will be on display in the City Hall East Entrance, seeks to recognise all those citizens who through skill, dedication and boxing excellence, have brought success and pride to the city. Furthermore, the exhibition will seek to acknowledge the individuals who have dedicated their lives to the sport in support of boxers and boxing clubs. This event would contribute to the Council's Key Theme of 'City Leadership – Strong, Fair, Together'.	The use of the City Hall and the provision of hospitality in the form of red/white wine and soft drinks. Approximate cost £500

The Committee adopted the recommendations.

Finance

Minutes of Meeting of Budget and Transformation Panel

The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting of the Budget and Transformation Panel of 9th March.

Rates Appeals

Arising out of discussion of the foregoing item, the Director of Finance and Resources undertook to provide at a future meeting of the Panel information on Rates Appeals.

Budget Monitoring Report

The Director of Finance and Resources submitted for the Committee's consideration the undernoted report:

"Relevant Background Information

The Strategic Policy and Resources Committee needs regular updates on capital and revenue expenditure throughout the year. The most recent report on the 2009/10 position was presented in December 2009. This report updates Members on the current year's position at Period 10, the forecast outturn for the current year and reserves position.

Key Issues

Revenue Budget Position to January 2010

BCC has a net departmental budget of £106m for the period to January 2010. Outturn for the period is £103.1m giving an under-spend for the period of £2.9m.

Forecast Outturn

The forecast out-turn for 2009/10 reported at period 7 was an under-spend of £1.6m, after the application of some £2.3m to fund the council wide voluntary redundancy exercise. At period 10, the current forecast under-spend for 2009/10 has increased to £1.9m, an increase of some £300k from the previously reported position. There have been several factors that have contributed to the £300k improvement in the forecast, most notably the improvement in the forecasts for both the Development and Parks and Leisure departments, which were mitigated by a reduction in the forecast income from LPS. Such movements are to be expected given the size of the BCC total budget.

Impact on Reserves

As reported at SP&R Committee on 20th November 2009, the planned reserves at the end of 2009/10 were £2.7m (after planned contributions from reserves of £2.4m to ease the rate burden). If the forecast under spend of £1.9m above is achieved, this would lead to reserves at 31 March 2010 of £4.6m (compared to £5.3m at 31 March 2009). This is some £300k higher than the position used to inform the rate setting exercise for 2010/11 and therefore does not represent a significant change.

A paper on the strategy for replenishing the reserves in 2010/11 and future years was taken to SP&R on the 11th December 2009. As a result of this, a contribution to reserves of £4.5m was included in the 2010/11 rate, of which some £1m could be used to fund the capital programme.

Capital Programme 2009/10

The draft Capital Programme for 2009/10 and future years outlines total budgeted expenditure for the year of £12.3m.

Capital expenditure for the period to 31st January 2010 amounts to £13.9m. The most significant areas of expenditure were Ulster Hall Major Works of £2.077m and City Hall Major Works of £3.1m.

Forecast Capital Out-turn 2009/10

The total actual capital expenditure for 2009/10 is forecast to be £18.3m. This is £6m over the approved budget and relates mainly to an under spend of £5.1m in 2008/09 that has rolled forward into 2009/10.

There have also been a number of new schemes added to the capital programme since the original capital programme was planned. However, due to the timing of taking out loans, the forecast capital financing requirement for the year including this additional expenditure can be met by the existing budget.

Resource Implications

As outlined above.

Recommendations

Members are asked to note the current revenue and capital financial positions to date, the forecast out-turns, and the implication for the reserves position.

Decision Tracking

Regular updates on the financial position in 2009/10 have been provided to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee. A final report on the year end position for 2009/10 will be presented in the first quarter of 2010/11.”

The Committee noted the contents of the report.

Efficiency Programme Update

The Committee was reminded that, as part of the rate setting process for 2010/11, it had been agreed that officers should continue to work with the Budget and Transformation Panel on the development of a medium term efficiency programme. The Committee had stressed the importance of that work given that the organisation had already delivered £9 million efficiency savings and the necessity to avoid the following risks when developing further savings:

- major conflict between the drive for efficiency and having sufficient funds to deliver Members' ambitions for the City;
- damaging front line services; and
- cutting services rather than realising genuine and sustainable efficiency savings.

The Director of Finance and Resources explained that since the foundations had put in place for the Council to deliver a programme of sustained efficiency savings, she had been working with the other Directors, in liaison with the Budget and Transformation Panel, to identify potential areas where further efficiency savings could be achieved. Through that work, a number of potential work streams had been identified, including assets and land, procurement, challenge to budgets, ICT, Service reviews and income generation. She pointed out that those areas had been identified also as the key efficiency drivers in the latest HM Treasury report on efficiency.

The Director explained that there was a limit to the amount of efficiency savings which could be achieved without making major changes to how the Council operated. The Council had now reached the point where most of the quick wins had been captured which meant that for a sustained programme of efficiency to be delivered then, for the most part, efficiency and change would need to go hand in hand. That meant that alongside the efficiency programme there would also need to be an overall organisational development programme. That work would involve a range of issues such as delivering the capacity of the organisation to cope with change, for example, through increasing flexibility and changing values and behaviours to be further aligned to efficiency and service transformation. It would also explore options for further collaborative working across both Local Government and the City and further integrate the linkages between efficiency and performance management.

As well as deciding on the detailed proposals for the efficiency programme, the Members needed also to consider the indicative target for efficiency savings to be delivered for future years, starting with 2011/12. That decision needed to be made in the context of the overall rate setting process for 2011/12 which had also been the subject of debate at the Budget and Transformation Panel. In this regard, the Committee would be requested to consider indicative rates and efficiency targets for 2011/12 during one of its meetings in May.

The Committee agreed that the efficiency programme be based on those areas as set out in the report and agreed that detailed reports on the Council's efficiency programme and organisational development programme be submitted for consideration at a meeting in May.

Office Accommodation

Arising of discussion, the Committee agreed that a report providing costs and other detailed information on the Council's office accommodation be submitted to the Committee in due course.

Belfast City Council/Land and Property Services Memorandum of Understanding Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

"Relevant Background Information

Members are aware that 75% of the council's income comes from the district rate. A key factor, therefore, in discussions about the rate setting for 2011/12 and the efficiency programme is how the council can maximise the level of collectable rates income. The council, however, is not responsible for valuation, billing and rates collection - these are the job of Land and Property Services (LPS). In the past Members have raised concerns about the performance of LPS in the areas of:

- Rates collection levels
- Vacant property control
- Timeliness and accuracy of the Estimated Penny Product (used at the time of rate setting)
- Timeliness of the Actual Penny Product (after the closure of the accounts)
- Cost of collection
- Level of debt

Over the past two years council officers, with support from Members, have been working closely with LPS. This relationship has been formalised through the agreement of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two organisations.

It was agreed that the Budget and Transformation Panel should meet with officials from LPS to discuss the implementation of the on-going implementation of the MOU. The purpose of this report is to update Members on the outcome of this meeting to agree a number of actions arising.

Key Issues

The Budget and Transformation Panel met with officials from LPS on 9 March 2010. At the meeting Members stressed the importance of the work of LPS both in terms of the overall finances of Belfast City Council and for individual rate payers. The improvements which have already been made were acknowledged by Members but it was stressed that much more can be done and that the council is keen to continue to work in partnership with LPS to make further improvement happen.

One of the key items discussed was the development of a suite of indicators which would allow Members to better hold LPS to account for its performance. The Budget and Transformation Panel agreed that the indicators should concentrate on the following areas:

- Rates collection
- Vacant properties
- Timeliness of Estimated Penny Product and Actual Penny Product notifications
- Deviation from Estimated Penny Product and Actual Penny Product
- Cost of Collection
- Debt recovery

The Members also stressed to the LPS officials the need for councils to have an input into policy decisions that have an affect on collections.

The Strategic Policy and Resources Committee is requested to agree to the recommendation of the Budget and Transformation Panel that performance indicators in relation to the rates should be developed and be concentrated on the areas as listed above.

LPS officials indicated there were a number of areas where legislative change would aid rate collection. Members are asked to approve the creation of an Agenda for Change, to work with other local authorities and the LPS to lobby for legislative change.

In order for Members to compare performance of LPS with other local authorities, it is important that benchmark information is provided. It is recommended that the council enter into a framework agreement with the Institute of Revenue Rating and Valuation (IRRV) to provide this information and the supporting analysis. The IRRV is the leading institution in this area and has worked closely with the council on rates work in the past. The cost to the council has already been budgeted for as part of the 2010/11 estimates.

If Members are in agreement to the above, regular rates performance update reports will be brought to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to note the contents of the report and to agree to the following:

- 1) Performance indicators to be developed in relation to:
 - a. Rates collection
 - b. Vacant properties
 - c. Timeliness of Estimated Penny Product and Actual Penny Product notifications
 - d. Deviation from Estimated Penny Product and Actual Penny Product
 - e. Cost of Collection
 - f. Debt recovery
- 2) The use of the Institute of Revenue Rating and Valuation (IRRV) to provide the council with relevant benchmark information in order to allow comparison of LPS performance.
- 3) To develop an agenda for legislation change
- 4) To receive regular reports on rates performance.”

The Committee adopted the recommendations.

Tender for Annual Property Asset Revaluations

The Committee granted authority for the commencement of a tendering exercise for annual property asset revaluations for a four-year term.

The Committee noted that the tender would be evaluated using pre-agreed criteria based on cost and quality, with the contract being awarded to the most economically advantageous tender.

Major Projects

Lyric Theatre - City Investment Fund

The Chief Executive reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 14th December, 2007, it had agreed to provide to the Lyric Theatre, £1.25 million funding from the City Investment Fund, subject to a number of funding conditions.

He advised the Members that the discussion on the funding conditions had been taken forward by the Development Department and a report on those issues had been considered by the Development Committee at its meeting on 9th March. That Committee had received a presentation from representatives of the Lyric Theatre on its education outreach work, fundraising and the current state of the construction of the new theatre and had decided that the funding conditions had been met to a satisfactory standard and had agreed to recommend to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that the funding agreement now be completed and that finance be released for the project in accordance with the funding agreement.

The Committee noted that the Development Committee had indicated that it was satisfied that funding conditions had been met and authorised the payment of three tranches of £416,667, which would be payable to the Lyric Theatre in the years 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12, subject to the completion of the necessary legal/funding agreements.

The Members noted also that a report concerning governance in relation to the Council's representation on Outside Bodies was being prepared by the Director of Legal Services and would be submitted to the Committee in due course.

Asset Management

Connswater Community Greenway Contract

The Committee was advised that the Parks and Leisure Committee, at its meeting on 11th March, had considered a report in relation to the Council assuming the role of "Employer" under the Connswater Community Greenway contract. That Committee had been informed that, as the project development had progressed, it had become clear that there could be a significant reduction in the overall project risk and simplification in many areas if the Council were to become the employer for the main works contract, and had agreed accordingly.

The Committee endorsed the decision of the Parks and Leisure Committee that the Council become the employer under the main Connswater Community Greenway Contract and agreed also that officers continue discussions with the East Belfast Partnership Board and other Funders of the Greenway to enable that to happen.

Connswater Community Greenway Update

The Committee was reminded that the Council, as part of the City Investment Strategy, had agreed to co-ordinate the acquisition of land to enable the Connswater Community Greenway Programme to proceed. The Council would secure rights over the land needed for the Greenway and would be responsible for the management and maintenance of that land and any assets on it. The Greenway would have to be accessible for forty years to comply with the Big Lottery Fund Letter of Offer, although the intention was to secure rights for longer if possible.

It was reported that two areas of land had been identified as being required to help complete the Greenway route and associated landscaping. The first was an area of 0.133 acres of land located at Elmgrove Manor and Council officers had agreed, subject to the Committee's approval, to purchase from Trinity Housing a 99-year lease, subject to a peppercorn rent. The second was an area of 0.756 acres of land to the rear of the Elim Pentecostal Church. Subject to Committee approval, Council officers had agreed to purchase from the Church the area of land at a cost of £50,000, subject to the Council obtaining vacant possession of lands.

The Committee granted approval for the purchase of the two areas of land as outlined.

Human Resources

Request to Address the Council – UNISON Northern Ireland

The Committee was advised that a request had been received from the Trade Union UNISON Northern Ireland for permission to address a meeting of the Council in order to seek the Council's support in opposing the pay freeze for Local Government workers.

The Head of Committee and Members' Services informed the Committee that he had been advised that UNISON had only a small number of members working for the Council and as such were not one of the Unions recognised for negotiation purposes. However, if the Committee were minded to accede to the request, it was felt that it would be more appropriate for representatives of UNISON to address the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee as it was within its remit to consider Human Resources issues.

The Committee agreed to accede to the request and to receive at a future meeting a presentation from representatives of UNISON Northern Ireland.

Good Relations and Equality

Minutes of the Memorabilia Working Group

The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting of the Memorabilia Working Group of 4th March.

Good Relations Partnership

The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting of the Good Relations Partnership of 12th March.

Commission of Artwork to reflect Irish History and Heritage in Belfast

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 18th September, it had agreed that artwork, not to exceed a cost of £20,000, be commissioned to reflect Irish history and heritage in the City. This was to be displayed in either the City Hall Reception Hall or the East Entrance.

The Good Relations Officer reported that quotation documents had been drawn up and artists had been invited subsequently to make submissions. At the closing date, a total of fifty-six submissions had been received. A short-listing panel had been drawn up consisting of Councillors, officers and an independent consultant, with five artists having been shortlisted to the next stage. Those artists had been invited to provide further submissions and attend an interview, following which the Panel had agreed to recommend that the commission should be awarded to Mr. Keith Drury.

The Committee agreed that the commission for artwork to reflect Irish history and heritage in Belfast be awarded to Mr. K. Drury for a sum not to exceed £20,000 and that the artwork be placed on the wall immediately to the left of the Chief Executive's office on the City Hall ground floor East corridor.

Cross-Cutting Issues

Consultation Response – Meeting the Demands for a Modern Public Library Service in Northern Ireland

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 16th March, it had agreed that the Council's proposed response to the Libraries NI consultation on "A Modern Public Library Service for the Greater Belfast Area" be revised to include comments which had been made by the Members and that the response be re-submitted to the next meeting of the Committee for approval.

Accordingly, a revised response in this regard is set out hereunder:

"1.0 Introduction

Belfast City Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the review of the provision of libraries in the Greater Belfast Area. Libraries are very important and therefore this consultation which seeks to take stock of the strategic position of libraries is of great interest to the Council.

The Council has made comment on a number of occasions about the role of libraries in local communities and the potential that the service represents in meeting local needs. This response reiterates many of the points previously made and the important role we believe that libraries have to play in terms of building a sense of inclusion and citizenship, as well as developing an understanding of our heritage, cultural diversity and dealing with conflict.

In its response to the RPA Further Consultation Document in September 2005, Belfast City Council stated that it believed that it was essential, when thinking about the future of the public library service, to agree what role we expect the libraries of tomorrow to perform. The Council is committed to the view that successful libraries are not simply about a formal academic understanding of education; they are also about improving quality of life through the provision of a combination of educational, social, cultural, health and general information opportunities for local people. As such they are potentially invaluable as a means of delivering the social outcomes that will be set as part of any community planning process. In Belfast the opportunities for libraries to offer a safe and neutral environment for people from all sections of the community is also an important consideration.

Libraries have a strong role to play, in terms of building a sense of inclusion and citizenship, as well as developing an understanding of our heritage, cultural diversity and dealing with conflict. It is critical that libraries are seen as a public place for community interaction and accessible to all.

The Department of Culture & Leisure in the report '*Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries*' stated that its vision for the public library service is '*A flexible and responsive library service which provides a dynamic focal point in the community and assists people to fulfil their potential*' the Council would strongly concur with this vision.

Response to the current consultation

Given the focus of the current consultation, the Council has a number of specific points to make about the way the proposals will have an impact at the local level and the need to ensure local communities are not disadvantaged.

It outlines some questions about the process that has led to the conclusions reached in the document e.g. the criteria used for decision making and the role that considerations of the condition of the estate played in this process.

The Council is supportive of the values of Libraries NI as outlined in the consultation document, however would add the following points:

- **It is not explicitly clear from this document where the wants and needs of individuals and communities have informed the decisions outlined. Decisions need to be informed by the best available evidence.**
- **The Council endorses the need for innovation and improvement and proposes that Libraries NI should engage with stakeholders including other agencies to identify new and innovative delivery mechanisms.**

The Council is supportive of the vision of Libraries NI, in particular providing opportunities to develop partnerships. However it is not clear in the review what process will be used to make this happen and the Council would seek clarification on this issue.

Belfast City Council would be keen to explore the co-location of library services within Belfast City Council owned buildings. Particularly where Belfast City Council buildings are located in the proximity of libraries facing potential closure.

In Belfast the opportunities for libraries to offer a safe and neutral environment for people from all sections of the community is also an important consideration. As we enter a new phase of the peace-building process, there is a clear need for new innovative delivery mechanisms and creative service delivery by the statutory sector to deliver a truly shared and open city.

There is a growing openness to the concept of shared space and an increased recognition that duplication of services is an inefficient and unsustainable method of delivery and this needs to be considered when making decisions

The consultation states that the Belfast Central Library strategic development will be the subject of a separate paper and the Council would stress how important it is that it is fully involved in considerations about the future of Belfast Central Library.

The Council notes that response is sought against each of the three proposals outlined in the response questionnaire. We have therefore set out our comments in this format. However many of the points made are relevant across all three proposals.

- 2.0 *Proposal One – Libraries NI is of the view that the recommendations, outlined in the Strategic Review, if implemented, will lead to an improved service for people in Northern Ireland.*

The Council understands that the review is being undertaken to improve services and that the focus of the review is about providing a better service to allow for better allocation of existing resources in library stock, longer opening hours, other library services and more outreach services. Notwithstanding the Council would make the following points.

The Council agrees that libraries need to be attractive places to visit, welcoming, and responsive to the community and therefore welcome the recommendations outlined in terms of opening hours, staff, improved stock and improved facilities.

With respect to focus on usage figures it is interesting to note that the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 'What Makes a Good Library Service – Guidelines on public library provision in England for portfolio holders in local Councils' clearly states that 'Libraries benefit everyone, whether or not they use their local library or not. They stand for intellectual freedom, democratic engagement, community cohesion, social justice and equality of opportunity' the guide goes on to say that 'Libraries give identity to a community and provide opportunities for everyone in it'.

Criteria used and analysis of need

The Council notes that in reaching its conclusions, the document focuses on what could be described as physical criteria; this should be balanced by an analysis of the needs of local people and the removal of barriers to accessing services.

Care needs to be taken when representing statistics to put these in the context of the operating environment to which they relate – for example – relating usage to the number of hours open, the Council notes that some of the libraries proposed for closure have reduced opening hours.

It is imperative that there is an assessment of the population needs of the areas where service withdrawal is proposed. This is particularly relevant for Section 75 or other hard to reach groups in the area. Whilst the Council acknowledges the need to find resources to invest in fit for purpose libraries, full consideration must be given to the needs of local people for example; mobility and access issues need to be considered. The older population and those with physical disabilities may for example find distance a limiting issue. Consideration should also be given to the affordability of transport for those on low incomes.

The Council would highlight that The Department of Culture & Leisure in the report 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' stated under the heading 'Access' that 'Static libraries should be located and designed so as to provide suitable access, mobile libraries should serve people where there is no static library, and opening hours should meet the needs of users – with the target – 85% of households have access to a library service within 2 miles'. Libraries NI should be mindful of this when making decisions in relation to proposed closures.

The Council would stress the need to consider the transportation network in the Greater Belfast area especially in relation to bus routes. It is important to recognise that there may not always be a direct bus route available to the proposed alternative suggested within the review. The Council would stress the need to ensure that any relocation, where practicable, takes account of accessibility by public transport.

The Council would highlight the need to consider alternative methods of delivery and it would be worthwhile to note that, across the world, an increasing number of public libraries are being located in, or close to, shopping centres in recognition of the very large numbers of people which shopping centres attract. There is mutual benefit to retailers and libraries of co-location, with the added benefit of parking convenience for library users. In the United Kingdom, research found that placing a library in a shopping centre puts the library where many people can easily visit. This includes people from a potentially larger population than would usually access a public library

One such example is a new £2 million Shepherd's Bush Library which was opened at London's biggest shopping centre in September 2009. Situated at the heart of Westfield Shopping Centre the library was entirely built and fitted out by the centre's owners at their own expense.

The focus of the consultation document is on efficiency and service effectiveness as key drivers in delivering even better public services. The Council is mindful of the current economic climate and agrees that there is a need to provide value for money in delivering services. With respect to this, the Council recommends that a more collaborative approach is taken, between the agencies serving people in Belfast, to the creation of estates strategies. That aim in future should be to co-locate services where possible in a way that is efficient, mutually supportive and better serves local needs. The Council would welcome clarification on what alternative delivery vehicles are being sought to mitigate the impact of any closure on local communities

In summary factors which need further consideration when making decisions on proposed closures include:

- Any plans for the closure of libraries should take into consideration access to public transport. The older population and those with physical disabilities would for example find distance to an alternative library a limiting issue.
- Libraries are regularly used as community spaces and local people use them as such. In particular, older people, younger people and migrant workers use libraries frequently.
- In some of the areas where closures are proposed the library may be the only community space available to residents.
- Some of the proposed closures are situated in areas of high deprivation, where a significant proportion of residents have no or low levels of qualifications.
- There is merit in considering what other community facilities exist within the area in order to look at relocation options if feasible.
- Proposed mobile services to replace existing service may not be suitable for older people or people with disabilities and this needs to be addressed.

- Libraries are an important meeting place for social and community activities many associated with life-long learning outcomes but also just places to drop in, attend thematic events, meet socially and are used by the local community in such a way.
- The Council is of the opinion that libraries, like council leisure facilities, should have opening hours which reflect customer demands, possibly including longer opening hours in the evenings and weekends.

3.0 *Proposal Two – Libraries NI has a vision of providing a network of libraries throughout Northern Ireland with improved resources and facilities.*

Belfast City Council as highlighted previously recommends the need for a more collaborative approach in the creation of estates strategies and the co-location of services in the future. It is important that Libraries NI work closely with other statutory organisations, particularly with the Council, to ensure that a collaborative partnership is adopted. This would help to ensure that the service would reflect the needs of the community by working to incorporate other public services within the facility – based on best practice facilities such as the Grove Well-being centre.

Libraries must be community facilities and for this reason the Council continues to believe that libraries should no longer be stand alone buildings but should be integrated with other public service facilities such as education and health for the ultimate benefit of the whole community.

The benefits of delivering services in an integrated way have already been evidenced through the successful Grove Wellbeing Centre which officially opened in September 2008. Highlighting a commitment to partnership working, the Grove Wellbeing Centre was delivered by Belfast City Council, the Belfast Health and Social Services Trust and the Belfast Education and Library Board. It is this model that we intend to enhance and expand, in terms of delivering a truly shared space which transforms relationships. The Grove Wellbeing Centre offers a range of leisure, community, library and health services, including GP surgeries, dentistry, podiatry, and adult day care in a one stop, open and welcoming environment. With regards to the library

facilities, previously only 16% of the registered users were active users in the old Skegoneil library, since the opening of the new library facilities at Grove this figure has increased to 70%. Additionally overall loans from the Library have increased by 42% and the number of visitors to the facility has increased by 94% as people drop into the library when they are using the other facilities in the Centre.

In terms of planning for the future provision of public estate in the city, Belfast City Council believes that it is imperative that Libraries NI explores options for potential future co-location. The Council welcomes the opportunity to explore the potential for future co-location, particularly in the context of opportunities like the Girdwood Community Hub.

4.0 *Proposal Three – In order to implement Proposals One and Two, it is necessary to carry out a number of major developments across the NI Libraries Estate as well as close a number of libraries in Greater Belfast which are unable to meet the vision of delivering improved services for people in Northern Ireland*

Belfast City Council is concerned to note that some of the libraries that are proposed for closure are situated in areas of high deprivation with communities that are socially and economically disadvantaged where a significant proportion of residents have no or low levels of qualifications.

Research indicates that addressing literacy skills is a key first step in beginning to address and help to overcome other related factors that lock individuals into a cycle of disadvantage.

Libraries are important as a community resource, particularly in disadvantaged areas. They provide a neutral and safe environment for community use and their role as part of the community should be further developed.

As highlighted earlier it is imperative that there is an assessment of the population needs of the areas where service withdrawal is proposed. This is particularly relevant for Section 75 or other hard to reach groups in the area. Whilst the Council are not opposed to the related benefits of improved service provision, mobility and access issues need to be considered. The older population and those with physical disabilities may for example find distance a limiting issue.

Access to the nearest library if the closures proceed is a concern that needs further exploration. The Council would seek clarity in relation to the use of mobile library services and whether these will be designed and utilised to meet identified gaps.

As highlighted previously Belfast City Council would be keen to explore the co-location of library services within Belfast City Council owned buildings. Particularly where Belfast City Council buildings are located in the proximity of libraries facing potential closure.

Whilst the document refers to the need for improved facilities across the city, the consultation does not make clear the vision for this and the benefits improved facilities will bring over and above current provision. The Council would welcome further discussion with respect to the types of services and facilities that are envisaged in a new and improved libraries estate.

5.0 Concluding Remarks

Belfast City Council's comments are intended to be constructive and positive and the Council looks forward to working with Libraries NI to ensure that the review has a minimal impact on communities at the local level.

The Council seeks clarification on what alternative delivery vehicles might be sought to mitigate the impact of any closure on local communities and would stress the importance of being kept informed throughout the process.

It is important to ensure that any decisions on closures are made as a result of genuine engagement with the local community and that the equality implications of this strategy are fully considered.

Belfast City Council seeks reassurances from Library NI that any decisions about future library provision in Belfast should take into consideration the need to maintain shared spaces and would fully address issues relating to need in communities across the city."

The Committee approved the draft response, subject to the inclusion of a comment in relation to the unsuitability of the limited opening hours of the library at the Grove Wellbeing Centre and the need to ensure that, where facilities were provided in a joint facility, it would be important that they shared core opening hours so that the public could derive full benefit from the integrated nature of the facility.

Meeting on 9th April

The Committee agreed, due to the Easter holidays, that the meeting scheduled for 9th April be cancelled.

Chairman