

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 7th February, 2014

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present: Alderman Robinson (Chairman);
Alderman Campbell;
Councillors Attwood, Carson, Clarke, Corr,
Haire, Hendron, Jones, Kennedy, McCarthy,
Mac Giolla Mhín, Mullan, Newton, Reynolds
and Spence.

In attendance: Mr. R. Cregan, Director of Finance and Resources;
Mr. G. Millar, Director of Property and Projects;
Mr. S. McCrory, Democratic Services Manager; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors Hargey, McCabe and McVeigh.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 10th and 24th 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 3rd February.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Local Government Reform

Update on Future Governance Arrangements for the Council

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1 Relevant Background Information

- 1.1 The Committee, at its meetings on 13th December 2013 received an update on the three options for governance structures in the new Councils laid out in the Reorganisation Bill. The Committee also agreed a process of engagement with Members to facilitate discussions on possible new political management arrangements.**

- 1.2 This included a high-level overview of the range of options: (i) Traditional Committee System, (ii) Cabinet System, (iii) Streamlined Committee System.
- 1.3 The first stage in the process was to hold party group briefings facilitated by Jonathan Huish to outline the various models in more detail and outline some of the issues in operating the different structures.
- 1.4 Members also agreed to re constitute the Governance Steering Group to allow detailed discussion on some of the complex issues before bringing these to committee for decisions.
- 1.5 The party group briefings were held in February and nominations have been made to the Governance Steering panel with its first meeting scheduled for the 10 February 2014. This paper provides an update on the process to date including feedback from the party group briefings and proposal for next steps including specific workshops with the Governance Steering Group and further feedback to party groups and committee.

2 Key Issues

2.1 Feedback from Party Group Briefings

- 2.2 Jonathan Huish will be in attendance at the Committee to provide feedback from the party group briefings on Governance held in January 2014. A summary of the emerging points are set out at Appendix One.

The preference would be for an inclusive governance model. The broad feedback is that a Cabinet / Executive model would create two tiers of Members, and is unlikely to get support. A more efficient version of the current system has received positive feedback and a more strategic way of working is to be welcomed

Area working is seen as positive, but the model needs to be clear particularly in relation to remit and relationship with committees - internal and external.

Qualified Majority Voting - the principle is welcomed but there was some concern about the 80% level. The question was raised about what decisions will require QMV.

Call-In was seen as a positive. There was concern that, without limits, it may slow / halt Council business.

Proportionality was viewed as essential and there is a need to think through protection of rights of smaller groups in terms of inclusivity.

Appendix One provides a summary of common queries and responses is set out below.

2.3 Establishment of Shadow Council

A consultation document is due to be released within the next week on the functions and powers of the Shadow Council. This is likely to state that the role of each Shadow Council should be to;

Prepare itself for the assumption of its full functions and powers on 1 April 2015 by

- establishing governance arrangements - committees and sub-committees;
- appointing staff and
- preparing budgets, plans and schemes as are or will be needed for that purpose

They will also be required to liaise with the existing Council for the purposes of ensuring continuity in the exercise of its functions on and after 1 April 2015

There is a requirement on the STC to recommend for approval to the first meeting of the Shadow Council governance arrangements for the term of the Shadow Council. These arrangements will only be in place for one year and the new Council, when it officially comes into existence on 1 April 2015, will have to agree new governance structures to take account of the extended boundary, new powers and transferred functions. These will be developed by the Shadow Council during their term.

The role for members now, through the STC, is to recommend to the Shadow Council interim governance structures which will take into account the functions to be delivered by the Shadow Council and possibly test some decision making processes relating to new areas, such as planning, in advance of them transferring in April 2015.

At the same time consideration will need to be given to the operation of the existing Council and its role in relation to the Shadow Council including balance of work flow and time commitments on Members.

It is therefore recommended that the work of the Governance Steering Panel focuses on detailed discussions on possible governance structures for the Shadow Council and how this will impact on the work on the current Council. The out workings of these discussions would then be brought back to Party Groups, SP&R and STC.

3.0 Next Steps – Process of Engagement

The first meeting of the Governance Steering Panel has been scheduled for the 10th February 2014 to begin to discuss the possible governance structures for the existing Council and Shadow Council.

Options will be presented to Party Groups in March for discussion and consultation.

Draft proposals on the governance arrangements will be brought to SP&R and STC in April 2014 for consideration.

Final governance structure to be agreed at the first meeting of the Shadow Council not more than 21 days after the election on 22 May 2014.

The Shadow Council will, during their term, develop governance structures for the adoption by the new Council when it comes into operation on 1 April 2015.

4 Resource Implications

4.1 All costs associated with this have been included in the previously agreed budget for Local Government Reform.

5 Equality and Good Relations Implications

None.

6 Recommendations

6.1 The Committee is requested to note the contents of the report and

- (i) To agree the proposals for the development of governance structures for the Shadow Council as outlined above.”

It was reported that Mr. J. Huish, Consultant with iESE, was in attendance to provide an update in relation to the feedback from the Party Briefings.

Mr. Huish outlined the purpose of the briefings which had been held with each of the Political Parties on the Council and summarised the feedback which had been received from the Members in this regard. He then reviewed the transition process and outlined the work which would be undertaken by the Statutory Transition Committee, the Shadow Council and the new Council which would come into existence in April, 2015. He then provided details on what the Shadow Council would be required to do and reviewed the next steps in the overall process.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and approved the proposals for the development of governance structures for the Shadow Council as outlined in the report.

Councillors' Remuneration Panel

The Committee considered a report in relation to the report of the Councillors' Remuneration Panel and the Department of the Environment's response to that report.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and noted also that the Political Reference Group was continuing to discuss the matter before the final proposals were submitted to the Environment Minister.

Investment Programme

Belfast Connection Voucher Scheme Launch

The Director of Finance and Resources reminded the Committee that the Belfast Connection Voucher Scheme allowed small businesses and social enterprises within the new Belfast City Council boundary area to apply for grants of up to £3,000 in order to get high-speed broadband connections into their premises. Following a successful market test phase which targeted seven areas in the City, the Voucher Scheme had now been opened up across the whole City. The official launch of the Scheme, to which all Members had been invited to attend, would take place in the City Hall on 14th February.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Belfast Super-connected City

Arising out of discussion in the above-mentioned matter, the Director of Finance and Resources reported that he had, earlier that day, received correspondence from Transport NI, Department for Regional Development, confirming the use of street lighting for wi-fi connections as part of the Belfast Super-connected City project. Accordingly, given the agreement of the Department, the Director of Finance and Resources sought the Committee's authority to commence work on developing a digital strategy for the City of Belfast.

The Committee granted the authority sought.

Chairman