

Development Committee

Tuesday, 2nd September, 2014

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Hargey (Chairman);
Aldermen M. Campbell, Kingston and Stalford;
Councillors Beattie, Convery, Kelly, Kennedy,
Magee, Mac Giolla Mhín, Ó Donnghaile and
Spence.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Wylie, Chief Executive;
Mr. J. McGrillen, Director of Development; and
Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer.

(The Deputy Chairman, Councillor Spence, in the Chair.)

Apologies

An apology was reported on behalf of Councillor Kyle.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Belfast Tourism Strategy 2015/2020

The Committee was advised that Mr. T. Stephens was in attendance in order to provide an update on the development of the Tourism Strategy which he was undertaking on behalf of the Council and he was welcomed to the meeting.

Mr. Stephens informed the Members that tourism was a major contributor to the City's economy and that Belfast accounted for 35% of tourism spending in Northern Ireland. He highlighted a number of positive aspects associated with tourism in the City, such as, its history of accreditation, the availability of marketing resources and the commitment of the Council and Visit Belfast, in association with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland. However, there were issues around, for example, limited air access, duplication of roles and responsibilities and reduced capital funding, which demonstrated that a fresh approach to tourism promotion was required.

He reviewed the extent of the work which had been undertaken to date and suggested that the Council should seek to ensure that, by 2020, it could provide tourists with more reasons to visit and stay in the City. That, in turn, would create additional employment and wealth and enhance the reputation of Belfast as a major tourist destination. He pointed out that that would require leadership and vision on behalf of the Council and he highlighted a number of visitor experiences which were unique to Belfast, such as urban sports, its maritime history, signature festivals and events and contemporary visual arts, which could form the basis of the Tourism Strategy. He

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concluded by stating that approximately £425 million of revenue and capital investment would be required to be provided over the next five years by the public and private sectors in order to progress the Strategy.

During discussion, several Members made a number of suggestions on how tourism could be enhanced within the City, including the need to develop a maritime quarter, to enhance the Titanic Quarter, to promote the City's industrial heritage, H.M.S. Caroline and the C.S. Lewis story and to exploit the potential of the Game of Thrones series. It was suggested also that peace building, medical research, literature/music and hospitality, which were synonymous with Belfast, should be promoted and that the potential for creating additional air routes should be explored.

Mr. Stephens confirmed that the points which had been raised by the Members would be used to inform the further development of the Tourism Strategy and he retired from the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and that the draft Tourism Strategy 2015/2020 would be submitted to a future meeting for its consideration.

Belfast Waterfront Hall

The Deputy Chairman welcomed to the meeting Mr. G. Fenlon, Interim Managing Director, Waterfront and Ulster Halls, and Mr. G. Thompson, Project Sponsor, who were in attendance in order to provide an update on the Belfast Waterfront Hall refurbishment programme.

Mr Fenlon provided an overview of the proposed exhibition and conference facilities. He informed the Members that the venue would, when completed, be one and a half times larger than at present and that the main auditorium, the studio and the extension area would accommodate in total up to 4,600 patrons. It was envisaged that the facility would, by 2020/2021, create an additional 144,300 delegate days and increase spend within the City by £45 million. That, in turn, would create new businesses and employment opportunities within the hospitality, transport and retail sectors. He pointed out that there were now approximately 35,000 associations worldwide and that their conference requirements were growing in terms of their scale and demands. It was, therefore, important to ensure that the Waterfront Hall was fully equipped to compete with other venues worldwide in terms of attracting high profile conferences and other events to the City.

Mr. Thompson reported that all enabling works had now been completed and that the main contractor for the project had now been appointed. He informed the Committee that work would commence later in the month and that it would be completed by December, 2015, in line with the funding condition stipulated by the European Regional Development Fund. The refurbished venue would host its first event in May, 2016 and, to date, seventeen events had been booked provisionally between 2016 and 2020. He confirmed that the venue would continue to operate whilst the refurbishment works were underway and that programmes would be put in place to

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manage any associated disruption and to prepare for the full operation of the venue, upon completion.

In response to a number of questions from the Members, Mr. Fenlon confirmed that the technological capacity of the Waterfront Hall would be enhanced to provide for up to 2,000 delegates to connect simultaneously to three communications devices. He advised that a marketing team would be in place early in 2015 and that they would be working closely with Visit Belfast in order to promote the venue and to examine other issues, including signage. He added that an engagement and communication process, involving the local community and businesses, was underway and that the contractor would be engaging with local schools in order to raise awareness of the role played by the construction sector.

The Director of Development informed the Committee that the existing building and equipment would be reviewed and that any required upgrades could potentially be met from within the corporate maintenance budget. He confirmed that an options appraisal, examining the future service delivery arrangements for the Waterfront Hall, would be completed by December and that the views of Members would be sought as part of that exercise. He added that social clauses, similar to those in place in other Council projects, would be inserted into the construction contract.

The Deputy Chairman thanked Messrs. Fenlon and Thompson for their presentation and they left the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and that it would receive further updates on the project as it progressed.

Chairman