



BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	City Hall grounds tours (deferred item)
Date:	23 rd May 2008
Reporting Officer:	George Wright – Head of Facilities Management
Contact Officer:	As above (Ext. 5206/6232)

Relevant background information

Members will recall that a report was submitted to the April meeting of the Committee seeking approval for the introduction, over the summer period only, of tours of the City Hall grounds. The rationale for this proposal was twofold; to maintain the City Hall's position as an important visitor attraction during the closure and to emphasize the fact that the grounds remain open for use by citizens and tourists.

After some discussion members raised a number of queries in respect of the proposal, and it was agreed to defer the matter until these could be considered. The issues raised were that:-

1. some members expressed a wish to see the proposed tour script (which was therefore circulated to all party group leaders some time ago);
2. the issue of charging required further clarification;
3. a question was raised in terms of the potential commercial impact on existing 'blue badge' tour guides; *and*
4. a concern was raised about policing the tours (in the sense of preventing unauthorised hangers-on from tagging on to the tour without paying etc).

A revised proposal has therefore been developed in the light of all of the above, which it is hoped deals adequately with the various issues raised.

The original proposal was based on using dedicated staff to provide a bespoke City Hall grounds tour product twice per day, five days per week. The revised proposal takes a different approach, in that it builds on an existing relationship between the Council's Development Department, the Belfast Visitor & Convention Centre and the 'blue-badge' guides who deliver the existing 'Historic Belfast' walking tour of the city.

It is proposed that the existing 'Historic Belfast' tour be enhanced through the inclusion of the script prepared for the City Hall grounds, and that the tour be extended in length by approx. 30 minutes in order to make City Hall the centrepiece. These tours currently operate once per day at 2pm each Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and are booked through the Belfast Visitor & Convention Centre at a flat cost of £6 per person (no concessionary rates apply). The tours would be available from **June – September 2008** only, and could be reviewed thereafter.

The net cost of the 'Historic Belfast' tours is already being met by the Tourism Development unit of the Development Department, so only the marginal cost of the blue-badge guides would have to be funded by the Facilities unit. Following discussions with the blue-badge guides this additional cost is estimated to be **£1,870** in total, in contrast to the £8,500 costs of the original proposal. This amount could be funded from existing Facilities budgets, and would therefore not need to be passed on to tourists in increased tour prices. There may also be some modest additional costs to amend existing publicity material in order to promote the enhanced tour.

The blue-badge guides are experienced, professional tour staff, and are very capable not only in terms of delivering an interesting and stimulating experience to tourists but also of managing the tour and dealing effectively with any issues around non-payment or attempts to disrupt the tour etc. We have discussed these matters with the guides and are confident of their ability to deal with them. We also have a contracted security presence in the grounds during the summer months, should their assistance be required.

The content of the enhanced City Hall portion of the tour has also been discussed with the blue-badge guides and they are happy to use the script already prepared and to build it into their existing script.

Key Issues

This revised proposal would appear to deal with the various issues raised by members, while still delivering the key objectives of maintaining the City Hall's profile and emphasizing that the grounds remain open for use. It is not seeking to develop a new tour product in competition with the blue-badge guides but rather to build on an existing tour provided by these guides, and can be done in a way which involves very modest additional cost to the Council and no additional cost to the tourist.

Booking, administration and cash-handling etc. would be provided by the Belfast Visitor & Convention Centre. The blue-badge guides are happy with the script, and are confident that they can manage the tours effectively and have an excellent record in this regard to date.

The blue-badge guides have also indicated that they are available to conduct additional tours should the enhanced product prove popular, however it should be noted that the full cost of such additional tours rather than simply the marginal cost would have to be borne by the Facilities unit, and that this may have an effect on pricing.

Resources Implications

Financial

If the revised proposal were to be adopted a modest total additional cost of £1,870 would be incurred by the Council. Some additional expenditure in respect of publicity/promotional material may also be necessary, but it is not envisaged that this would be significant.

Human Resources

If the revised proposal were to be adopted there would be no requirement for the Council to recruit and train agency staff, as the existing blue-badge guides would provide the service.

Asset & other implications

There are no direct asset implications arising from this report.

Recommendations & Decisions

It is recommended that the Committee approve the enhancement of the existing 'Historic Belfast' tour by incorporating the City Hall grounds script and points of interest, and that the existing blue-badge guides be utilized to provide the tours, as outlined above. Approval is sought for the period **01st June – 30th September 2008** only; following this the situation can be reviewed.

Key to Abbreviations

None.

Documents attached

None.