



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Freedom of Information Enquiry on Travel
Date:	22 August 2008
Reporting Officer:	Trevor Salmon, Director of Corporate Services
Contact Officer:	Heather Loudon, Head of Financial Services.

Relevant Background Information

Members will recall that in February 2007 a Freedom of Information enquiry was received requesting details of travel outside Northern Ireland for both Councillors and Officers.

You will also recall that at the Committee meeting on 22 February 2008 a report was tabled outlining the steps the council would take to review current approval and control processes, look for improvements and put in place any new processes to ensure better access to information to enable better scrutiny. This review is now complete and is detailed in The Audit Panel Minutes tabled at this meeting.

Current Position

The council received a further Freedom of Information enquiry on 4 July requesting:-

1. Details of travel made outside Northern Ireland by councillors and staff for the financial year 2007/2008.
2. The titles/designations of the individuals who were neither councillors nor staff who were invited on trips organised by Belfast City Council, e.g. civil servants, executives, academics, public servants, etc.
3. Information on the reason for, purpose, duration, itinerary and attendance of staff and the job titles/designations of any others who participated on any study visit or trip to Chicago or elsewhere organised by Belfast City Council in the latter half of 2007.

The information requested was provided on Monday 11 August 2008.

The information relating to Member trips includes all trips undertaken by Members as this information is published annually on the council's website as part of our Publication Scheme.

A summary of the information provided is detailed below:-

Staff Travel

Year	Cost	No Trips	No Events
2007/2008	£484,427	1081	695
2006/2007	£405,344	971	645
2005/2006	£445,638	1052	687

The analysis of the information for 2007/2008 showed that travel relating to professional and personal was 46% which was similar to 2006/2007 and slightly lower than 2005/2006 (49%). The percentage of trips taken for operational activities, identifying best practice and developing strategic priorities increased to almost 50%; from 38% in 2006/2007 and 39% in 2005/2006. There was a reduction to 4% related to promoting the city. The previous year was 16% and 2005/2006 was 11%

Member Travel – Including Travel and associated costs within Northern Ireland

Year	Cost	No Trips
2007/2008	£67,850	88
2006/2007	£82,725	111
2005/2006	£83,748	141

Review of Approval and Control Process and Travel Policy

You will recall that a taskforce group was established to review the approval and control process and the travel policy. The objectives of this group were to:-

1. Review current approval and control processes and the travel policy.
2. Identify improvements to both processes and policy which matches the new financial systems, takes account of the human resources strategy and workforce development plan's needs and which provides for continuous improvement.
3. Ensure that the new processes enable improved access to information which enables improved on-going scrutiny of value for money and greater accountability, both internally and externally.

The group has met on a regular basis and reviewed the current approval and control processes and identified best practice which informed the draft Policy for Staff Attending Events which was discussed at the Audit Panel on 5 August 2008. The policy is supported by a Travel Protocol for Employees, details of the Subsistence Arrangements and details of the Policy on Publications of Information Relating to Employee Travel.

A new application form has been developed which will capture additional information to automatically collect information which allows the data to be analysed. This information had to be manually collected and analysed to inform the Freedom of Information enquiries. A system is currently being configured to collect this information electronically which will improve efficiency and accuracy.

Guidelines to support the policy and the new application form are currently being developed.

It is proposed, subject to the necessary approvals, that the new policy will be effective from 1 October 2008.

Compliance with the new policy will be reviewed by Audit, Governance and Risk Services approximately six months after the effective date of the new policy.

Resource Implications

There are no resource implications associated with this report.

Recommendations

Members are asked to note this report.

Key to Abbreviations

None

Documents Attached

None

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