Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	Role of Council Improvement Board - Update
Date:	19 September 2008
Reporting Officer:	Gerry Millar, Director of Improvement, Ext: 6217
Contact Officer:	Emer Husbands, Strategic Performance Manager, Ext: 6186

Relevant Background Information

The role of the Council Improvement Board has been raised recently at both Committee and Council and this report addresses key issues for Member consideration.

The establishment of a Council Improvement Board (formally Member Improvement Board) was agreed by the Policy and Resources Committee in June 2005. The role of the Board in the first instance was:

- To provide political direction and leadership for the improvement and efficiency agenda

- To provide political support in terms of party groupings and committees for the delivery of the improvement and efficiency agenda

- To hold officers to account for the delivery of agreed improvement and efficiency actions

- To track and monitor the achievement of agreed financial savings

- To become involved at an early stage in discussions about how the organisation can best serve the city and improve the lives of its citizens

- To engage with peer members and peer councils from other jurisdictions in order to learn from their experiences and inform the improvement/efficiency agenda

- To make the Council 'Fit for Purpose' to enable the Council to deliver pre and post RPA

Support for the CIB to deliver on the above was provided through the establishment of a Core Improvement Team (CIT) the focus of the CIT workload was initially on the priorities of **Customer Focus, Governance, Performance Management, Resource Allocation and Planning and People Management.**

Membership of the Board

The Policy and Resources Committee agreed that the Board should consist of the six Party Group leaders / or their nominees and the chairmen of the five main committees. The rationale for this was that the Board would have both a direct link into all of the political parties as well as the principle Committees. The appointment of Chairmen was also endorsed in that parties have an additional seat on the Board relative to the D'Hondt allocation of Committee Chairmanships. It was subsequently approved that parties could replace Chairmen with Members who have a particular interest in change and improvement as this would not upset that balance. The membership of the Board therefore consisted of 11 members i.e. Six Party Leaders and the five 'Chairmen' places.

Council Improvement Board Achievements

The Council Improvement Board met approximately on a monthly basis between September 2005 and June 2007 to lead and oversee all aspects of the Council's Improvement Agenda in line with its role detailed above. The Board was a key driver for change across the organisation challenging many of the Council's internal processes which were preventing it from becoming a modern local authority as identified in the I&DeA review. For example this has led to:

➢ The implementation of an efficiency agenda delivering £4m savings to the organisation subsequently passed to the ratepayer

➢ Revisions to Governance and the decision making process – reducing the number of committee meetings by more than 50% from 275 to 127

➢ Changes to how we manage and report on our finances – aligning financial planning to business planning and rationalisation of the Capital Programme

➢ The development of a Member led Corporate Plan

➢ The establishment of corporate indicators and a council wide performance management framework

➢ The development of a City Investment Strategy providing greater leverage to working with other key providers

➢ Managing City Hall refurbishment and consequent decanting and accommodation issues

➢ Redefining our relationships with LPS, publishing cutting edge Rates Guidance for Members and identifying an additional £2-3m of collectables in the rate-base due to vacant properties

(Appendix 1 provides more details of results to date)

The CIB had no decision making powers – with all their work being reported to the Policy and Resources Committee for approval. However it was important at the early stages of the Improvement Agenda to have a small focussed group of Members to lead the

development of such a significant change agenda and to be able to discuss and challenge its implications outside of the formal committee structure.

The work of the CIB also highlighted the importance of having a Committee that allows the Council to make overall strategic decisions based on all the resources it has at its disposal which had been identified as part of the review of the Council's committee structures and reinforced the need for an overarching Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Moving from the Council Improvement Board to Strategic Policy & Resources Committee

Following Council approval new committee structures were implemented in July 2007 and this included the establishment of a Strategic Policy and Resources Committee. This committee has overall responsibility for developing and recommending the Council's policy framework, our Corporate Plan, allocating resources, determining the relative priority of issues, integrating activities and managing overall performance.

It should be noted that there were also a number of changes within Party Groups at this time due primarily to the reinstatement of the Assembly which resulted in a number of Councillors not previously involved in the detail of change or improvement taking up key roles.

Strategic Policy and Resources Committees work plan includes the key aspects of the Improvement Agenda – Governance, Performance and Planning, Finance and Resources and People Management and reflects the need for an overarching management committee to build and drive common purpose.

While the Strategic P&R Committee is constituted in accordance with the application of the d'hondt system, given the nature of the decisions to be taken by this committee and its proposed relationship with the other standing committees, it was recommended that Party Groups should allocate their places in the first instance to the Party Group Leaders, and the Chairs of the main committees within their allocation under proportionality.

This recommendation has been taken on board by the Party Groups meaning the Council Improvement Board as it was constituted has defacto been subsumed into the Policy and Resources Committee. The establishment of this new committee also came at an opportune time in that much of the work within the Improvement Agenda was moving from a developmental to an implementation stage. It was therefore important that these issues were considered directly by an overarching committee to ensure council wide implications of delivery could be assessed and decisions made in accordance with this.

While the Strategic P&R Committee now has a number of the levers and tools necessary to drive the organisation forward, delivering the change agenda remains a huge task and Committee needs to consider if it can make the time available or whether a CIB mechanism should be reconstituted to drive things forward.

The Committee has also authorised the Chairman of the Committee to convene a meeting of the Party Group Leaders to discuss important issues, such as the budget and strike action and reports are subsequently brought to Committee.

Transition to RPA

The success of the Improvement Agenda to date has demonstrated the importance of placing political direction and leadership at the heart of any change agenda. The Council Improvement Board played a key role in leading and developing the agenda both as a group and as individual Members bringing the debate back into their parties for challenge and discussion. This allowed members and officers to fully discuss and develop key elements of work over a number of months before bringing them into the committee for formal debate and decision making.

In the context of developing a performance managed Corporate Plan the scrutiny role of Committees will be critical in ensuring that targets are met and proper accountability is established to hold officers to account.

It is also important to note that over the coming months the Council's input, response and leadership around the Review of Public Administration will become increasingly important. While it is essential that all aspects of RPA are debated and agreed by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee it may be a useful option to replicate the CIB process to now engage in a formal piece of work around the key issues of the Review which can then be fed in through party groups before formal consideration by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

It is the stated aim of DOE Minister Sammy Wilson to have the RPA in place by 2011 with the potential for some pilot areas of work to be transferred to Councils by 2010. Other key issues to be addressed include the Boundary Commission outcome in 2009, the establishment of transition committees, Member severance and governance matters. Transition will be further complicated by the transfer of function, staff and assets from neighbouring Councils and/or NICS and its agencies. Consideration will also have to be given to the shape of any new organisation and its management team.

This is a large agenda to be addressed in 2009/10 on top of moving the existing Improvement Agenda into delivery mode which will include ensuring that the agreed frameworks on finance, human resources, information, asset management, capital programme, better business, customer focus and area working are undertaken with full cooperation across the Council, Committees and Departments.

There appears to be two broad options to address the need to keep a strong political direction on this future shape of the Council and its improved delivery for the citizen.

(i)   The Strategic Policy & Resources Committee could meet more than once a month with additional meeting to specifically address key strategic and RPA issues. The main advantage is that the Committee is established and any consideration feeds directly into the decision making process but this option has a major impact on Members time.

(ii)   Establish a Transition Board outside of the Committee system to address the key RPA issues. The membership could be similar to the CIB although there are strong arguments to use the Party Leaders group as an overall political accommodation will be crucial to making the necessary but sometimes difficult decisions in a timely fashion.

Resource Implications
There are no major resource implications other than realignment of time.

Recommendations
Committee is asked to consider which option best meets future needs.

Key to Abbreviations

Documents Attached
Appendix 1 – Performance Highlights

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