Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	**Publishing of Committee Reports on Modern.Gov**
Date:	14th November, 2008
Reporting Officer:	Liam Steele, Head of Committee & Members' Services
Contact Officer:	Stephen McCrory, Principal Committee Administrator

Relevant Background Information

Members may recall that the Committee, at its meeting on 21st September, 2007, approved a policy to publish Committee reports to the internet at the same time as the publication of the minutes, that is, after the monthly Council Meeting, omitting those reports which could be justifiably excluded.

However, it is considered that the time is now right to reconsider this policy in light of the need for the tracking of Committee decisions, the Council's commitment to openness and transparency as part of its customer focus and the anticipated forthcoming changes to Governance arrangements for the new Councils post 2011.

Key Issues

Governance Arrangements post 2011

The Committee will be aware of the framework which has been established to prepare for the reduction from 26 to 11 Councils in 2011. A number of Policy Development Panels have been established by the Department of the Environment to consider different issues and one such Panel is developing protocols and procedures for Governance, Community Planning and Central/Local Relations.

This Panel has produced a paper setting out its proposals around governance for the new Councils in which there is a clear acceptance of a high level principle of openness and transparency in decision-making. Although there are not yet formal proposals as to how this principle should be applied to Council and Committee meetings, it seems reasonable to assume that, at the very least, Councils will be required to make their Committee reports available to the public prior to the meetings taking place.

It is anticipated that the Council will in 2011 be required to make a policy shift to a system of publishing its Committee reports in advance of meetings and it is considered that it would be better for the Council to lead on this matter of its own accord rather than being forced to comply. In this way, Belfast can again be seen to be leading on policy development and it will place us in a better position to influence the ultimate outcome of the consideration of governance arrangements in the run-up to 2011.

The Council's Commitment to Openness and Transparency

The Strategic Policy & Resources Committee, at its meeting on 23rd May, adopted a set of recommendations of the Audit Panel in relation to a Code of Governance for the Council. Part of that Code committed the Council to "taking informed, transparent decisions which are subject to effective scrutiny….." It is certainly the case that the simultaneous publication of Committee reports would be in line with this commitment.

The Council is also in the process of gathering information in order to review its customer focus. While not wishing to anticipate the outcome of the review, there would certainly be an expectation that members of the public should be provided with as much information as possible about the Council's decision-making processes and the simultaneous publication of Committee reports would be consistent with a customer-focussed service delivery.

Technical Considerations

It should be remembered that the Modern.Gov system has been developed primarily for use by Councils in England and Wales where there is a legislative requirement to publish Committee papers before the meetings take place. One of the key advantages of the system is that it operates on the basis of simultaneous publication to both the intranet and internet sites. Requiring the system to separate the internal publication from the external publication, as we have had to do in order to adhere to the current policy, has led to a number of operating problems. It is anticipated that a decision to move to the simultaneous publication of reports, in preparation for the commencement of the tracking of Committee decisions, would make the operation more straightforward and streamlined and prove to be less time consuming.

Implications for Members

It should be noted that, as the Committee reports will be available publicly before the meetings take place, there will in all likelihood be increased contact with Committee Members, and particularly Chairmen, by the media and the public seeking to either ascertain opinions on issues to be discussed or to elicit a view as to the decision which the Committee may take. Most Members will be happy to receive such enquiries and will be able to respond by merely emphasising that views expressed are either their own personal opinion or that of their Party and ought not to be construed as the stance which the particular Committee might take. However, if Members wish to receive any additional advice or direct training on the handling of such enquiries, then this can be arranged on request.

Resource Implications

There would not be any resource implications arising from a decision to publish Committee reports to the Internet at the same time as the Intranet. In fact, there would be a saving in terms of staff time.

Recommendation
That a policy of openness and transparency in the Council's decision-making processes be adopted by agreeing to publish simultaneously to the Internet and Intranet in advance of meetings taking place Committee summonses and reports (excluding those reports or parts thereof which are restricted under the publications policy).

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