



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	City Hall Tours & Themes
Date:	14 th November 2008
Reporting Officer:	George Wright – Head of Facilities Management
Contact Officer:	As above (Ext.5206/6232)

Relevant background information

Members will be aware that the City Hall is one of the principal tourist destinations in Belfast, and that tour numbers have been increasing significantly in recent years. By way of illustration, in the year ended 31st March 2007 a total of **56,200** visitors took public tours of the building, up by 30% from the 43,070 visitors who took tours in the previous year.

It is clearly important to maintain and indeed enhance the City Hall's position as one of the premier tourist attractions in the city, however a number of factors militate against this which the current closure provides opportunities to address. The main problems are:-

- many areas of the building are in use during the tours and consequently the art & artefacts located in these areas can't be viewed by visitors (86% of tours could not access all areas in a recent survey);
- the current tour route provides a somewhat disjointed view of the building;
- the various items of historical and cultural significance are distributed throughout the building, rather than being drawn together in meaningful themes; *and*
- some items would benefit by being on permanent public display.

Consequently the Facilities Management tours staff have been working on proposals to improve the situation during the closure. In doing so they have been guided by the recommendations of the **Advisory Panel on City Hall Memorabilia**, approved by the Committee in February 2003.

This Panel's recommendations included the following:-

- as the signing of the Covenant in 1912 was one of the most significant events in the history of Northern Ireland the Covenant table should be located in a prominent location and highlighted with appropriate signage;
- the setting up of a "Freemen of the City" exhibit. An interesting display to make history come alive should be centred around a few personalities who have been awarded the honour;
- the Robing Room (which was considered by the Panel to be a very 'bland' area) should be used for displaying art & artefacts currently in storage or not in the public view; *and*
- developing a photographic display or collages depicting contemporary significant figures or local achievers: the display would be of particular interest to the younger people in the city.

While many of the short-term recommendations made by the Panel have already been implemented the above issues remain outstanding, and clearly the closure represents the best opportunity to take them forward. It is therefore proposed that the following themed areas be created within the building:

1. the history of the City Hall (located in the marble area);
2. our 'Freedom of the City' recipients (located in the Rotunda area);
3. Belfast in the 2 World Wars (located in the Rotunda area);
4. notable Belfast citizens (located in the Reception Hall);
5. the Titanic & Belfast's Lord Mayors (located in the Banqueting Hall);

6. the civic regalia (located in the Robing Room); *and*
7. display of gifts received by the city (located in the East Entrance area).

In order to give effect to these themes the a number of changes would be required in terms of the use and positioning of existing art and artefacts, of which the following are the most notable:-

- the Covenant table will remain in the Council Chamber but would be supplemented with archive photographs of the signing of the covenant in 1912, new signage and additional historical material while tours are in progress;
- the civic regalia including maces, chains of office and robes currently stored in the Lord Mayor’s Parlour would be moved to public view in the Robing Room;
- the Seaman Maginness portrait would be moved from the Robing Room to the Rotunda;
- a number of items connected with the Freedom of the City including caskets and scrolls currently in the Reception Hall and crystal in the Lord Mayor’s Parlour and silver keys currently in storage would be brought together in a display on the Rotunda;
- the “No Mean City” display (suitably updated) which was previously located on the ground floor west corridor would be moved to the Reception Hall to form the central part of a Belfast Citizens exhibit;
- a number of items connected with the history of the City Hall including the black and white photographs in the Robing Room and the charters, silver trowel and gavel in the Reception Hall would be brought together and put on permanent display in dedicated display cases in the marble area;
- the portraits of Sir Edward Harland and Viscount & Viscountess Pirrie currently in the Council Chamber & Reception Hall would be moved to the Banqueting Hall; *and*
- a number of crystal and silver items presented to the city and currently in storage or in the Lord Mayor’s Parlour would be brought together in the East Entrance area.

The location of some exhibits is linked to existing fixtures in the City Hall such as stained glass windows. Others such as the civic regalia sit naturally in the Robing Room which is adjacent to the Council Chamber and the Lord Mayor’s Parlour. Having some of the themed displays in mobile cases will allow exhibits to be moved around the building, and this will be particularly beneficial when specific areas are being used for functions.

(It should be noted that, if the proposal to establish a coffee-shop facility in the City Hall and to ‘theme’ the area (e.g. Titanic theme) proceeds, this may have an effect on the siting of some specific items which may consequently differ somewhat from the locations set out above).

The tour script and route will be revised and changed to link in with the themed displays, however the length of the tour will still be approximately 40-45 minutes. The re-displaying of items will give an opportunity to work towards the achievement of a more balanced and inclusive display which represents all aspects of former and contemporary life in Belfast. New signage and free-standing visitor floor plans will also be used throughout the building in order to improve the visitor experience.

Before the City Hall re-opens the opportunity will also be taken to clean and carry out restoration work on many of the Council’s art & artefacts, and also to create an updated inventory of all items held. Over 1,300 art & artefact items were removed from the City Hall and placed in climate-controlled stores. Each item has been checked for damage and many items have been photographed as part of the computerisation of our inventory database, which is now complete.

Key Issues

An opportunity now exists, in the context of the City Hall closure, to improve the tour offering to visitors and at the same time to implement a number of the outstanding recommendations of the Advisory Panel on City Hall Memorabilia.

Resources Implications

Financial

There will be no direct costs associated with the movement of items in line with the recommendations set out above, but additional cost will be incurred in terms of additional bespoke display and signage facilities,

cleaning and restoration work and in the development of a computerised inventory application.

The overall costs are therefore estimated to be in the region of **£71,000**, and provision has been made in the unit's revenue budget for this.

Human Resources

There are no direct human resources implications arising from this report. All tours will continue to be delivered by dedicated BCC personnel, as at present.

Asset & other implications

There are no direct asset implications arising from this report, which does not involve any significant changes to the fabric of the building or its systems & services.

Recommendations & Decisions

It is recommended that the opportunity is taken during the closure to rationalize and improve the City Hall tour offering through the creation of the themed areas and displays outlined above. This will also provide an opportunity to implement some of the outstanding recommendations of the Advisory Panel on City Hall Memorabilia.

To achieve a fully balanced and inclusive display, it is further recommended that the six elected Members of the Good Relations Partnership act as a cross-party reference group in any future discussions regarding the display of City Hall memorabilia in the longer term. This will ensure that the City Hall is as welcoming and as representative of our community as possible, in line with previous Council decisions.

Key to Abbreviations

None.

Documents attached

None.

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