



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	ASSAULT IN CITY HALL GROUNDS
Date:	11 th December, 2009
Reporting Officer:	G Wright – Head of Facilities Management
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Relevant Background Information

Members may be aware that Mr Jim McDowell, northern editor of the Sunday World newspaper, was assaulted in the grounds of the City Hall at approx. 5.35pm on Wednesday 25th November 2009, while visiting the Continental Market. Mr McDowell was punched from behind by two assailants; he then fell to the ground and was kicked and punched repeatedly.

This assault was covered fairly extensively by the local media, and was given particular prominence on BBC Radio Ulster's 'The Nolan Show'. In the relevant segment, criticism was aimed at both the PSNI and the council, on the basis that security stewarding must have been insufficient and CCTV footage should have been available to assist in apprehending the perpetrators.

Members will be aware that the security arrangements for the Continental Market are the responsibility of the hirer, Continental Markets (Europe), and are made through local security suppliers on a commercial basis. A risk assessment is also required of the hirer prior to the event and this assessment is reviewed and validated by the council's own Workplace Health unit, although it would appear that the question of the appropriate level of security stewarding is not considered in any great detail.

On the night in question the Markets Development Officer has confirmed that 5 security stewards were on duty, supplied by EventSec Ltd and under the control of Continental Markets (Europe). This is the agreed level of staffing. The council's own security staff have no responsibility for the patrolling of the Continental Market, although reciprocal arrangements do exist to allow co-operation between EventSec staff and the BCC Security Unit at special events (including a radio link and the sharing of telephone numbers for Team Leaders and the Control Room etc) in order to facilitate an escalation process in appropriate circumstances.

However this incident happened very quickly and would have made it impossible for these measures to be triggered on this occasion.

Upon being notified of the assault the BCC security team leaders reviewed the council's CCTV footage of the area and secured footage of the actual assault taking place (although the video quality is not good), and also approached the operators of the Belfast Wheel who were able to provide footage of the two assailants making their escape. All of this material is being copied and collated, for onward transmission to the PSNI in order to assist in their investigation.

The duty officer employed by Continental Markets (Europe) attended the scene shortly after the incident. The PSNI were also called and attended to take witness statements. Mr. McDowell's condition is not known at time of writing.

Key Issues

It is important to note that the council's CCTV system did capture the assault taking place, and also that the agreed level of staffing was in place at the relevant time. Escalation procedures between private sector and council security staff do exist and have been in place for some time, although the sudden nature of this incident would not have allowed them to be implemented.

It is, of course, possible to review and tighten up the risk assessment process and the level of liaison between council and private-sector security even further, and this will be pursued, but overall it is difficult to see what more the council can do in these circumstances to prevent or deter what appears to have been an entirely opportunistic and unprovoked attack.

The Chief Executive has spoken to Mr McDowell to express the Council's regret over the incident and the Council is liaising with the PSNI to offer support to its ongoing criminal investigation.

Resource Implications

There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee note the contents of this report.

Decision Tracking

N/A

Key to Abbreviations

None.