

MEETING OF SPECIAL HISTORIC CENTENARIES WORKING GROUP

Minutes of the Special Meeting of Wednesday, 26th October, 2011

Members present: Councillor Hendron (Chairman);
Alderman Rodgers; and
Councillors Hanna, Kyle, Maskey and Reynolds.

Also Attended: Alderman Stalford.

In attendance: Mr. A. Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure;
Mrs. H. Francey, Good Relations Manager;
Mr. J. Walsh, Legal Services Manager;
Mr. C. Campbell, Principal Solicitor;
Ms. E. Boyle, Policy and Business Manager;
Mr. R. Corbett, Records Manager; and
Mr. B. Flynn, Democratic Services Officer.

Alderman Stalford

At the commencement of the meeting, Alderman Stalford placed on record the fact that he was a member of the Joint Unionist Centenary Committee and was attending the meeting in an advisory capacity.

Joint Unionist Centenary Committee

The Working Group was reminded that, at its meeting on 17th October, it had considered the following report regarding a request from the Joint Unionist Centenary Committee for the use of Ormeau Park, which had been referred to it by the Parks and Leisure Committee:

“1.0 Relevant Background Information

Members will be aware that this item was considered by the Parks Committee at its meeting on 15th September and referred to the Centenaries Working Group.

The original Unionist Centenary Committee (UCC) request dated 28th August 2011 was to have a parade to Strangford Playing Fields in south Belfast, but at the Council meeting on 3 October this request was amended to refer to Ormeau Park.

The original report to the Parks Committee on 15th September contained very little detail since no contact had been made with the UCC at that stage.

Following the Council meeting, the Good Relations Manager and the Policy and Business Development Manager from the Parks and Leisure Department met three representatives from the UCC on Monday 10th October to ascertain the detail of the application.

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The Unionist Centenary Committee (UCC) was set up at the end of 2009 as an umbrella group and consists of the following stakeholders:

36th Ulster Division Memorial Association

Apprentice Boys of Derry

Confederation of Ulster Bands

Democratic Unionist Party

Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland

Independent Loyal Orange Institution

Progressive Unionist Party

Regimental Bands Association

Somme Association, Conlig

Traditional Unionist Voice

Ulster Defence Union 1893 Committee

Ulster Unionist Party.

The Working Group should be aware that the Unionist Centenary Committee and Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland intend to hold two major events in 2012 to commemorate the Centenary of the Signing of the Ulster Covenant. The first will be on Saturday 19 May (as per original letter from the UCC as submitted to the Parks and Leisure Committee) and the second will be on Saturday 29 September 2011. The request for the second event was made at the meeting with the UCC and followed up in writing by the Grand Orange Lodge in a letter received on 11 October 2011. The request was for the use of Strangford Playing Fields although at this stage there are few details of what is proposed.

These two events are in addition to the usual annual 12 July demonstration held at Barnett Demesne. This report therefore refers to the requests for both these events but contains detail only in relation to the proposed May event.

2.0 Key Issues

The UCC representatives stated that Windsor Park had been their original choice of venue but this was deemed unsuitable; Strangford Playing Fields had been second choice but this was later considered too small to host an event which might attract up to 25,000 people. Barnett Demesne had been considered, since this is the usual destination for the annual 12 July demonstration, but the UCC had decided that the considerable distance involved - 6 miles to and from the city centre - made this impractical.

Their application to the Parks Committee had therefore been altered to Ormeau Park. This was their preferred option, primarily due to its close proximity to the city centre, ease of access for all and in their view would allow the proposed parade and entertainment to have minimal impact on local communities, traffic or policing.

Update on format and programme of proposed event in May 2012

The UCC members stated that the parade would initiate from 4 meeting points from Orange Lodges located at West Belfast/Shankill, Clifton Street, Ballymacarrett and Sandy Row. They envisaged that the main parade would start at 10.00 am, making its way to Ormeau Park for the start of the main events at 12.00 noon.

At Ormeau Park itself a platform party would review a march past of the parade, to be followed by a brief religious service, in accordance with the original 1912 event. Entertainment would carry on through the afternoon with a family funfair and bands playing as well as Ulster-Scots dancing and music. The main parade would leave the Park around 5:00pm whilst the fairground element and entertainment would continue into the evening.

The UCC stressed that this was intended to be an alcohol-free event and would seek assistance from the police and Parks staff in the management of the event; all stall holders, caterers and traders at the event would be certified in the usual manner. The UCC proposed that parking for essential parade traffic, including some vintage vehicles, would be at the Ozone site and they would organise their own event marshals on site.

The key uncertainty around the event is the number expected. Since no other demonstrations in NI were currently planned for that day the event could potentially attract up to 25,000+ attendees.

The Council staff at the meeting noted that among the essential factors to be considered were the size, scope, location and all health and safety aspects of the proposed event. An event of this size would require a full Events Plan and would have to conform to the conditions set out in the Parks policy for “Large scale concerts and music festivals”.

In addition, a ‘bond of intent’ is normally required to be provided when a promoter makes an application to host an event of this size on Council property. This confirms the booking of the venue and associated set-up and take-down time and is refundable, as long as no significant damage is incurred during the event.

The UCC stressed that this was not an Orange Order demonstration; they hoped it would be an open, non-contentious, welcoming community event in which all elements of the local community could participate positively. Their plans were provisional at present but the UCC would keep all interested parties, including the police and Parades Commission, informed of ongoing developments.

As stated above, there are few details at present of the second event proposed for 29th September 2012 for Strangford Playing Fields. These would have to be established before the Council would be in a position to make a final decision regarding that event. However, it is suggested that any approval for the September event be conditional on the May event passing off successfully.

3.0 Funding

The UCC members stressed that they were a charitable not-for-profit organisation, without any internal source of funding, seeking to provide a community based event. They had considered the budget required to provide the essential infrastructural elements like staging, security and portaloos. They might have to charge a small fee for the funfair attractions.

4.0 Media Coverage

There has been substantial media coverage of these proposed 2012 events.

Plans to celebrate the Centenary were formally launched at Parliament Buildings earlier this month by the First Minister, who described the Covenant as “the foundation upon which Ulster fought for her survival” and praised the Orange Order

for its initiative. Orange Order members have been urged “to show by strength of numbers that the Union is still important” and the event on 29 September “is expected to be one of the largest parades witnessed in Northern Ireland in recent times” (News Letter, Friday 7 October 2011).

5.0 Equality and Good Relations Implications

The Centenaries Working Group will be aware that the Centenary of the Signing of the Covenant will be one of the first major events to be marked in the Decade of Centenaries, with the commissioning of an exhibition in the City Hall plus a number of individual events.

The Working Group has agreed that the Decade provides an opportunity for the Council to contribute to a better understanding of the past and to promote respect for the complexity of our shared history.

If this event is undertaken as described by the organisers and outlined above, in a non-exclusive and welcoming manner, it would have positive implications in terms of the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations.

However, the scale of this event gives a potential cause for concern. The Working Group will recall the set of principles it has agreed to adopt in relation to the Decade of Centenaries and should be aware of the potential risk to the reputation of the Council, if this event should be perceived to have “triumphalist” overtones or to “deepen or harden existing divisions”. For this reason, the Working Group may wish to recommend to the Parks & Leisure Committee, in the event that the Committee should decide to authorise the event, that some conditions should be set; since these conditions simply reflect the set of principles already discussed and agreed, they should not present a problem for the UCC if the event is managed and delivered in the way they have described.

I have discussed these with the UCC representatives and they state that they see no problems in complying with them.

6.0 Recommendations

That the Working Group recommends to the Parks and Leisure Committee, in the event that the Committee should decide to authorise the event, that approval to this request be granted in line with the proviso detailed in the September Committee report, subject to some conditions (the first two of these have been in place for some years in relation to the Bonfire Management Programme):

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- **That there are no displays of paramilitary emblems or regalia**
- **That no national flags or symbols are burnt or defaced**
- **That all the requirements of the Council's Events Plan are fully complied with**
- **That approval for the September event is conditional on the May event passing off successfully."**

The Working Group had, at its meeting on 17th October, deferred a decision on this issue in order that additional information could be provided by the representatives of the Joint Unionist Centenary Committee at a special meeting. In addition, the Working Group had deferred consideration of a request by the Centenary Committee to re-enact the signing of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant in the Main Entrance Hall of the City Hall on Saturday, 29th September, 2012.

Accordingly, it was reported that Mr. S. Gough, Mr. D. Hagan, Mr. W. Mawhinney and the Reverend M. Gibson were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman (Councillor Hendron).

Request for the Use of the Ormeau Park

Mr. Gough thanked the Working Group for receiving the deputation and outlined the aims and objectives of the Centenary Committee. He pointed out that, although the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland was one of its stakeholders, the event planned for May 2012 was being organised specifically by the Centenary Committee. He indicated that the event requested for the Ormeau Park would commemorate the centenary of the Balmoral Review. He added that the Review had taken place on the eve of the introduction to the House of Commons of the Third Home Rule Bill and had been a mass demonstration of Unionist opposition to the concept of Home Rule for Ireland. Whilst the original Review had taken place at the Balmoral Showgrounds, the Centenary Committee felt that the Ormeau Park was the only location which could accommodate the scale of the demonstration anticipated.

Mr. Gough indicated that it was envisaged that participants would travel to the Ormeau Park from five Orange Halls in the following locations, viz.,

- Alexandra Park Avenue
- Shankill Road
- Albertbridge Road
- Sandy Row, and
- Clifton Street.

He stated that the participants would use the entrance to the Park along Ormeau Embankment and that the event would be a family fun day with a cultural village provided, together with a stage for religious services. He concluded by pointing out that it was not the aim of the Centenary Committee to antagonise anybody by the holding of the demonstration and that the events commemorated would be based on historical fact. He pointed out that the Centenary Committee had adopted the Community Relations Council's four principles for the holding of such events.

During discussion, a number of Members welcomed the fact that the Centenary Committee had stated that it wished not to cause any division within Belfast through the holding of the event. However, a Member wished to place on record his concerns in respect of the scale and extent of the demonstration and, in particular, the potential for it to create difficulties at a number of flashpoints throughout the City. However, he pointed out that, in principle, he had no objections to the use of the Park by the Centenary Committee for the purposes of the demonstration.

After further discussion, the Working Group agreed to recommend to the Parks and Leisure Committee that it accede to the request from the Joint Unionist Centenary Committee to permit the Ormeau Park to be used on the date specified for the holding of a demonstration to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Balmoral Review. It was noted that any further requests of this nature should be considered within the context of an agreed Council policy on diversity which would be developed.

Re-enactment of the Signing of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant

Mr. Gough then went on to outline the Centenary Committee's plans to re-enact the signing of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant in the City Hall on Saturday, 29th September, 2012. He indicated that the Ulster Hall, which had been the starting point for an anti-Home Rule procession to the City Hall on 'Ulster Day' in 1912, had been booked by the Centenary Committee for Saturday, 29th September. He stated that he was seeking the Council's authority to re-enact the signing of a replica Covenant on the actual Covenant Table in the Main Entrance Hall to the City Hall. He added that the event would take place at approximately 9.00 a.m. and would consist of around 500 individuals in period dress, accompanied by one band and no more than 30 people, processing from the Ulster Hall into the City Hall where a replica document would be re-signed on the Covenant Table.

A prolonged discussion ensued in respect of the request and a Member made the point that, given that the Working Group was unsure of the size and scale of a demonstration which the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland was proposing for the day in question, it would not be prudent to consider the matter until the Working Group had met with the Grand Orange Lodge. Concerns were expressed also that the event would be political in nature and, therefore, not within the terms of the Council's policy for the use of the City Hall. However, a Member made the point that it was anticipated that no elected politician would lead the demonstration that morning, nor sign the replica document.

A Member suggested that, as with the request pertaining to the Ormeau Park, the request for the use of the City Hall should be considered only within the context of an agreed Council diversity policy and, in this instance, the Working Group should not make a decision until such a policy had been established. A Member reminded the Working Group that it had already adopted a set of principles for considering requests for centenary events and, should the Council adopt a further policy that could conflict with any pre-agreed criteria, it could be construed as impacting adversely on one section of the community.

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After discussion, the Working Group agreed to defer consideration of the request to enable representatives from the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland to attend its meeting on 14th November to apprise the Members of its plans for its demonstration on Saturday, 29th September, 2012.

During further discussion, it was noted that copies of the Council's policy for the use of the City Hall, together with the provision of hospitality, and the principles adopted by the Group for the considering of requests would be circulated to the Members of the Working Group in advance of the meeting scheduled for 14th November.

Chairman