

Belfast Waterfront and Ulster Hall Ltd. Shareholders' Committee

Monday, 10th March, 2025

MEETING OF THE MEMBERS OF THE BELFAST WATERFRONT AND ULSTER HALL LTD. SHAREHOLDERS' COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Ferguson (Chairperson);
Alderman Copeland; and
Councillors Bell, Bower, Brennan, R. Brooks,
Collins, S. Douglas, Flynn, Maghie, McCabe,
McCallin, McCann, McDowell, McKay,
Ó Néill and Verner.

In attendance: Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mr. K. Forster, Director of Economic Development;
Mrs. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy; and
Mrs. L. McLornan, Committee Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors Canavan and Doherty.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 20th January were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 3rd February.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Capital and Maintenance Update

(Mr. C. Shields, Programme Delivery Manager, attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 Members have requested regular updates on capital and maintenance works at the ICC Waterfront and Ulster Hall. This paper provides an update since the last report to Committee.

2.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to note the update on capital and maintenance works including the completion of a programme of toilet refurbishments/upgrades in the Waterfront.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Waterfront Hall Toilet Refurbishment/upgrades

Members will be aware that this project is at *Stage 3 - Committed* on the Capital Programme. Members are advised that this work is now completed.

3.2 Waterfront Hall Chiller Units

Members will be aware that this project is at *Stage 2 - Uncommitted* on the Capital Programme. Approval has been received to proceed with the detailed design. The Consultants are currently working on the designs which are due to be completed by May 2025. Members are asked to note that officers from Property & Projects are currently liaising with management from the ICC Waterfront to confirm when the works can be carried out to minimise impacts from an operational perspective. Once the business case is complete the project can be taken forward to the next stage.

3.3 Waterfront Hall Smoke Curtains

Members are reminded that this project is at *Stage 1 - Emerging* on the Capital Programme. Consultants have begun work on a modelling exercise. This exercise should be completed by the end of March and will help inform the extent of works required to the auditorium and the required next steps. This remains a priority for BWUH.

3.4 Financial and Resource Implications

Financial – None at this time; *Resources* – Officer time to deliver as required.

**3.5 Equality or Good Relations Implications/
Rural Needs Assessment**

All capital projects are screened as part of the stage approval process.”

The Committee noted the update provided.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following five items are restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the Press and public from the meeting during discussion of the items as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Section 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

The Members were also reminded that the content of 'restricted' reports and any discussion which took place during closed session must be treated as 'confidential information' and that no such information should be disclosed to the public as per Paragraph 4.15 of the Code of Conduct.

Contracts Update

The Senior Manager (Economy) outlined that three public tender competitions had been completed for the following essential operational services at BWUH Ltd.:

- Provision of Cleaning Services;
- Provision of Control Room Security Services; and
- Provision of IT Managed Services.

During discussion, a number of Members stated that they would like to see the company consider in-house models for some of the operations, in future years.

The Committee noted the contents of the report and approved the awarding of the contracts to the three winning bidders, in line with the requirements of the Shareholders' Agreement.

(Mr. R. McConnell, Chief Executive of the BWUH, and Mr. I. Bell, Finance Director of the BWUH, attended in connection with the next 5 items)

Q3 Performance Report

The Chairperson welcomed Mr. R. McConnell, the newly appointed Chief Executive of BWUH Ltd., to his first Shareholders' Committee meeting.

Mr. McConnell provided the Committee with a detailed presentation on the performance of the company from 1st April to 31st December, 2024. He outlined that quarter three had been much busier than the second quarter of the year, as expected. A large number of business and entertainment events had taken place during the third quarter, including the pantomime and the NI Chamber President's Banquet, which, with 1031 patrons, was the largest dinner ever held in their venues.

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He outlined that the customer satisfaction levels were at an all-time high for the venues and that they provided a diverse range of entertainment. The Committee noted that entertainment made up 30 to 40% of their business. He highlighted that Snow Patrol had recently launched their new album to 1,600 persons at the Ulster Hall and that it had been very well received by the audience.

Regarding sustainability, he outlined that they had been working hard to eliminate single use plastic, installed hydration stations throughout the venue and had increased use of reusable cups, plates and lanyards. He reported that the BWUH led the Venue Sustainability Forum (VSF), which represented the 14 main entertainment venues in the city. The VSF had worked to develop a city-wide reusable cup scheme which would eliminate approximately 1 million single use plastic cups, reduce carbon emissions by 50 tonnes and remove 20 tonnes of plastic waste over six months.

The Committee was provided with an overview of the company's corporate social responsibility, which had included the privilege of welcoming six exceptional students from Mitchell House School to the Waterfront Hall for a unique work experience opportunity, gaining hands-on exposure to the event and entertainment industry. This had been the second year working with Mitchell House School. The Members were also provided with details of the company's money raising events for charity.

The Committee was advised of the Team Engagement survey results which remained high when benchmarked against averages across the world. He outlined that the lowest performing areas had highlighted matters for improvement.

Since joining Diversity Mark NI in September 2022, and having achieved Bronze Award accreditation in May 2023, focusing on gender equality, the company had been dedicated to embedding diversity and inclusion within its organisational culture. The Committee was advised of a number of its key achievements in that regard.

Mr. Bell provided the Committee with an overview of the financial results for the company, including its performance against its targets and the Strategic Outcomes.

Mr. McConnell provided the Members with an update on the Company's governance and the risks and the opportunities that lay ahead for the company.

A number of Members thanked the representatives for the comprehensive presentation and wished Mr. McConnell well in his new role.

The Committee noted the update which had been provided.

Annual Business Plan 2025-26

Mr. McConnell advised the Committee that the company was one year into its five-year Business Plan. He outlined that, since he had only been in post for a number of weeks, he intended to bring an updated Business Plan to the Shareholders' Committee meeting in June, confirming the short to medium-term direction of the company, with achievable goals.

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During discussion, he provided details of a number of different opportunities and event types for the company to get involved with, going forward.

Mr. McConnell agreed to go back to individual Members on queries relating to use of the venues by inner-City communities, arts sector support, autism friendly spaces and apprenticeships on Technology Production.

After further discussion, the Committee:

- Noted the content of the report and the BWUH Business Plan, noting the adjustments and direction of travel for 2025/2026 to fully realise the potential of the venues;
- Approved the plan; and
- Agreed to receive an updated plan at its meeting in June 2025.

Overdraft Facility

The Committee was advised that approval was being sought, as per the Shareholders' Agreement, for the company to draw down from an overdraft facility.

During discussion, a number of Members pointed out that Barclays Bank was on the "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS)" list, a movement promoting sanctions against Israel.

A Member also stated that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee had considered a Motion, in February 2024, to consider adopting a "Rights-based Ethical Procurement Policy". It was noted that a subsequent report was to be brought back to that Committee, outlining a detailed consideration of the Motion and the potential cost implications.

The Director of Finance advised the Committee that BWUH Ltd. had used Barclay's Bank since the company had been set up. He also advised that the request for an overdraft had not been taken lightly.

A number of Members requested that officers would investigate and consider changing the company's choice of bank.

The Strategic Director of Place and Economy requested that the Shareholders' Committee would separate the company's overdraft request from the wider issue of the bank being used, at this stage.

After discussion, the Committee approved drawing down an overdraft, with a value of up to £3million, for BWUH Ltd.

Intention to recruit a new Non-Executive Director

The Committee was advised of the company's intention to recruit a new Non-Executive Director (NED) to its Board, to replace Mr. J. Ward who had recently resigned.

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It was reported that the details of the successful candidate would be brought to a future Shareholders' Committee meeting for ratification.

Next Meeting

The Committee agreed that it's next meeting would take place in the Waterfront Hall.

Chairperson