

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 11th June, 2021

SPECIAL MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

(HELD IN THE GREAT HALL, CITY HALL)

Members present: Councillor Groogan (Chairperson);
The High Sheriff (Councillor Long);
Aldermen Dorrian, Haire, Kingston and Sandford; and
Councillors Beattie, Black, Bunting, Carson, Garrett,
Heading, Lyons, McLaughlin, McReynolds, Murphy,
Pankhurst and Walsh.

In attendance: Mrs. S. Wylie, Chief Executive;
Mr. R. Cregan, Director of Finance and Resources;
Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor;
Mr. R. Black, Director of Neighbourhood Services;
Ms. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer; and
Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors McAllister and McDonough-Brown.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Delegated Authority/Restricted Item

The Committee was advised that, in accordance with Standing Order 37a - Duties of Committees: Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, it had full delegated authority to take decisions in relation to bonfire-related issues.

The Committee agreed, in accordance with the Council's Bonfire Governance Arrangements, that, given the sensitive nature of the business to be discussed, the Press and the public be excluded from the meeting.

Bonfire-Related Issues

The Committee was provided with an update on the current status of a number of bonfire sites across the City, following which it was presented with a report setting out a number of issues for consideration.

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Clonduff Bonfire Site

The Director of Neighbourhood Services reported that a Council officer had received a request on behalf of Clonduff Residents' Association to level a small piece of land in the centre of a green area upon which a bonfire was built each year. The land, which was located between two 3G pitches, had been landscaped as part of the overall development of the Lisnasharragh Leisure Centre site. The person who had made the request had pointed out that the work would allow the bonfire to be constructed in a more stable way, thereby improving safety and further developing the goodwill between the Council and the local community.

Council officers had reminded the person that, despite the size of the bonfire having been reduced in recent years, bonfire builders had, in 2020, found it necessary to erect wooden boards along the side of the 3G pitches to prevent heat damage. It had been established that they intended to put the same mitigation measures in place this year.

After discussion, the Committee agreed, given the limited timeframe between now and July, that Council officers enter into discussions with the Residents' Association:

- i. to ensure that mitigation measures would be put in place and that those would protect Council property; and
- ii. to assess the potential benefit to be derived in future years from levelling the land and the cost which would be incurred.

Provision of Bonfire Beacons

The Director of Neighbourhood Services reminded the Members that beacons were a key element of the Council's Bonfire and Cultural Expression Programme. In 2019, the Council had provided a beacon for sixteen sites, three of which were on its land, six on Department for Infrastructure land, five on Northern Ireland Housing Executive land and two on land under private ownership.

He reported that, due to the Covid-19 restrictions in place in 2020, the beacon programme had not been rolled out and reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 19th March, it had agreed that those groups which had, in 2019, been provided with a beacon be requested, through an expression of interest exercise, to indicate if they would require one for this year. He pointed out that all requests for beacons must be made by a properly constituted community group and that it would assume responsibility for the beacon and for complying with the associated terms and conditions.

He explained that Council officers had since contacted all sixteen groups and that the following seven groups had responded positively:

Organisation	Beacon Site	Site Landowner
Charter N.I. Diamond Project	Haig St/Lord St junction	DfI
Highfield Residents Association	Field beside c. centre, Highgreen	NIHE
WBACS - Ainsworth Avenue Beacon	Hardcore area off Ainsworth Avenue - end of Ceylon Street	Private Ownership

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WBACS - Mountjoy St Beacon	Green area between Mountjoy Street/ Bellevue Street	Private ownership
Wheatfield Action Project	Ballysillan Park- facing Wheatfield Drive	BCC
Charter N.I. Clara St Beacon	Clara Street	DfI
TBC	Blackmountain Grove	NIHE

The Director confirmed that the groups listed above had been advised that the Council had yet to make a final decision on the provision of beacons, with factors such as the number available, public health restrictions and health and safety requirements to be taken into consideration and land agreements drawn up. In the meantime, an inspection of beacons had indicated that there would be a sufficient number to cover the seven groups and an assessment of each site would be undertaken by a fire engineer.

After discussion, the Committee approved the provision of bonfire beacons to the seven groups/sites listed above, subject to them signing up to terms and conditions which would include responsibility for compliance with the public health regulations in place at that time.

Request for Bonfire Beacon – Grove Street East

The Committee was informed that a request had been received from a group seeking to place a beacon on a site in Grove Street East, where a bonfire had previously been constructed. An inspection report which had been prepared by a fire engineer and subsequent legal opinion had both highlighted the potential for significant damage to be caused to adjacent properties, should the request be granted for that site. Council officers had since been advised by the local community that they were unaware of any other site which would be suitable.

Accordingly, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of the request to allow for further discussions to take place with the local community to be fully assured that no other site could facilitate a beacon.

Severn Street/Tamar Street Site

The Director of Neighbourhood Services informed the Committee that, as a result of positive engagement between bonfire builders and the EA Youth Service, there had in recent weeks been a reduction in the amount of bonfire material on the above-mentioned site.

He pointed out, however, that there remained a significant amount of material there and that, whilst it was hoped that this could be further reduced through the ongoing engagement process, it was too early to determine if a bonfire would still pose a threat to property/life.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

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Bloomfield Walkway Site

The Director of Neighbourhood Services informed the Members that Council officers had yet to establish who was responsible for constructing a bonfire at the Bloomfield Walkway.

He reported that the EA Youth Service, which was carrying out engagement on the site, had advised bonfire builders of the agreed position that it was not a suitable site on which to place a bonfire. Elected Members for that area had also carried out engagement to highlight the fact that there was political consensus around the unacceptability of the site, given the problems which had been encountered in previous years. Council officers had also requested representatives of the local community initiative to use their influence. However, despite all their best efforts, no progress had been made and the base of a bonfire was now being built in the middle of the car park, although there had been no significant increase in the amount of bonfire material on the site.

After discussion, the Committee:

- i agreed, in principle, to commence an intervention process for the removal of bonfire material from the Bloomfield Walkway site;
- ii agreed that Council officers engage immediately with the contractor and relevant agencies to plan the intervention process and that an update, based upon the outcome of that engagement and including an indicative timeframe, be submitted to its next meeting; and
- iii agreed that Council officers initiate the planning for any request from other public sector bodies for the use of the Council's contractor to remove bonfire material from their land; and

Correspondence

The Chief Executive sought and was granted approval by the Committee:

- i to write to the Secretary of State and to The Executive Office highlighting the fact that bonfires were a Northern Ireland-wide issue and that, whilst the Council had some responsibilities, it should not be regarded as being the sole focal point for all bonfire-related issues; and
- ii to write to the Department of Health, the sponsoring Department for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, expressing concern in relation to the Fire Service's stated position that there would, this year, be a reduction in its engagement with bonfire builders and in the extent of the mitigation measures which it would be putting in place around bonfires.

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Call-In

The Committee agreed, in accordance with Standing Order 48 (a) (2) (c), that the aforementioned decisions would not be subject to call-in, on the basis that an unreasonable delay could be prejudicial to the Council's or the public's interest.

Chairperson