

Development Committee

Thursday, 30th November, 2006

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

- Members present: Councillor McCausland (Chairman);
the High Sheriff (Councillor Humphrey); and
Councillors M. Browne, Convery, D. Dodds, Ekin, Empey,
P. Maskey, Newton, Ní Chuilín, Smyth and Stoker.
- Also attended: Councillors Adamson, Lavery, McCann, McClenaghan,
McCoubrey, Mullaghan, O'Neill and Rodgers.
- In attendance: Mr. P. McNaney, Chief Executive;
Ms. M.T. McGivern, Director of Development;
Mr. P. Lucas, Head of Community and Leisure Services and;
Mr. J. Heaney, Committee Administrator.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors Kirkpatrick and Maginness.

Development of the Site of the Former Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Barracks

The Director of Development advised the Members that the site of the former Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Barracks was owned currently by the Government and that the North Belfast Community Action Unit of the Department for Social Development was managing the process which would decide how the area should be developed. She reported that a Ministerial Advisory Panel, comprising local politicians, local community leaders and public service representatives, had been established to advance the masterplanning process for the site and to make recommendations to the Government on its future development.

The Director indicated that the site, comprising twenty-seven acres of land, was in a strategic position, located close to the City centre and adjacent to two arterial routes and was of critical importance to the future development of North Belfast, being the largest development site available in that part of the City. The site had great regeneration potential and the vision of the Advisory Panel was to "create a regeneration project of international significance which brings maximum economic, social and environmental benefits to the local and wider community and in so doing creates a vibrant, inclusive and diverse environment which attracts present and future generations of people to live, work and visit". However, whilst the land had enormous potential, there were significant difficulties which needed to be considered prior to any development of the area. The Director reported that the site contained several listed buildings with historical significance which, she suggested, would require to be managed with sensitivity and imagination.

The Committee was informed that, prior to the establishment of the Advisory Panel, expressions of interest in the site had been sought and a number of bodies and the Council had registered their interest. In this regard, the Council's interest had related to the possible construction of a new North Belfast Leisure Centre on the site.

The Head of Community and Leisure Services indicated that, as the planning exercise was due to commence shortly, the Council would be requested to confirm its expression of interest in the Crumlin Road Gaol/Girdwood Barracks site. Accordingly, he suggested that it would be beneficial if the Council were to determine over the coming months its preferred location for the erection of a new North Belfast Leisure Centre. He pointed out further that, whilst the Council's initial expression of interest referred only to the placement of a leisure facility on the site, Members might wish to consider also the social, economic and environmental implications of the regeneration of the site. He advised the Committee that, due to the numerous development proposals for the site, it might be impossible for the Council to secure enough land space to provide for the construction of a stand-alone leisure facility. In this regard, he drew the Members' attention to the development of the multi-agency Grove Wellbeing Centre which was under construction currently. This centre had been developed in partnership with other public agencies and the Head of Community and Leisure Services indicated that a similar type of development at the Girdwood/Crumlin Road Gaol site might stand a better chance of being approved by the Advisory Panel.

The Members were advised that the Community and Recreation (Community and Leisure Services) Sub-Committee would, at its meeting to be held on 9th January, be considering the merits of all possible locations for the construction of a new North Belfast Leisure Centre.

The Chief Executive advised the Members that there were a number of interconnecting issues which needed to be addressed, including responding to the masterplanning process for the area, whilst at the same time considering the resource implications for the Council should it agree to proceed with the development of a new North Belfast Leisure Centre. He referred to the recent changes to the rating system in the Province and to the proposed introduction of water rates which, he suggested, would focus the attention of the general public on the need for public services to achieve better value for money in providing those services. He suggested that Members would be required to decide whether or not the development of a new North Belfast Leisure Centre was a priority for the Council as part of its overall corporate priorities and, if so, a final decision would be required as to the location of such a centre.

During discussion, the Committee expressed the view that the regeneration of the site provided a unique opportunity to revitalise the local area. However, it was considered to be premature to decide at this point in time whether or not a leisure centre should be constructed on the site. Rather, it was suggested that the potential to co-ordinate the provision of several public services in the one facility should be explored in greater detail. In addition, the potential to develop part of the site to boost the heritage and tourism appeal of the area should be exploited.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and agreed that an invitation be extended to Mr. R. Adams, Chairman of the Ministerial Advisory Panel, to provide the Members with a presentation on the proposed development of the site. Accordingly, it was agreed further that a Briefing Session, to which all Members of the Council would be invited, be held for this purpose.

Chairman