

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 28th June, 2024

SPECIAL MEETING OF THE STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Whyte (Deputy Chairperson, in the chair); and Councillors Bunting, Cobain, de Faoite R-M. Donnelly, Duffy, Ferguson, Garrett, Groogan, Long, Maghie, I. McLaughlin, R. McLaughlin and Nelson.

In attendance: Mr. J Walsh, Chief Executive;
Ms. S. McNicholl, Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services;
Ms. N. Largey, Interim City Solicitor/Director of Legal and Civic Services;
Mr. D. Martin, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Ms. C. Reynolds, Director of City Regeneration and Development;
Mr. T. Wallace, Director of Finance;
Ms. N. Lane, Neighbourhood Services Manager; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Democratic Services and Governance Manager.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors Beattie, M. Donnelly and McDonough-Brown

Declarations of Interest

Councillors Groogan and Garrett declared an interest in item 3 – Update on Social Supermarket Fund in that they worked for or were associated with organisations which received Social Supermarket Funding and left the meeting whilst the item was under discussion.

Restricted Items

The information contained in the reports associated with the following five items is 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 following these items as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Schedule 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.

City Centre Development

The Committee considered a report which provided an update in relation to city centre development issues:

The Committee noted:

- i. the approach to the acquisition/vesting of the Tribeca site, following its previous decision on 19th February 2024, including the initial next steps set out in the report;
- ii. the powers of vesting available to the Council and the considerations outlined in the Council seeking a vesting order; and
- iii. the draft Terms of Reference for the proposed Members Working Group as agreed by the Committee on 19th April 2024.

City Centre Built Heritage

The Director of City Regeneration and Development submitted a report which provided an update in relation to the city centre built heritage.

The Committee:

- i. noted the update in relation to the Assembly Rooms;
- ii. agreed that officers commence a phased process which would address a range of feasibility considerations, including an end use and funding strategy for the Assembly Rooms, utilising specialist support as appropriate; and that a scoping session be held with Party Group Leaders to fully inform this. The Committee noted that the phasing of this work was contingent upon the owner's position in relation to the sale of the building to Council; and
- iii. noted the update in relation to Built Heritage as set out in the report and in the context of the issue raised in advance at the Committee in December 2021.

Regeneration Framework

The Committee considered a report which sought agreement on the use of a Regeneration Framework as a tool to support and assist the prioritisation of catalytic regeneration projects, investment and a pipeline of projects for future funding applications/opportunities, including assessing readiness and to help inform the medium-term financial planning of the Council.

The Committee agreed the proposed use of a Regeneration Framework, alongside the Place Based Growth Proposition (as previously reported to the Committee on 24 February 2024), as a tool to support and assist in the prioritisation of catalytic regeneration projects, investment, and a pipeline of projects for future funding applications/opportunities, including assessing readiness and to help inform the medium-term financial planning of Council.

Request for Council to act as Sponsor for the Active Communities Network

The Committee acceded to a request from the Active Communities Network for the Council to act as a sponsor for the acquisition of a city centre property.

Discretionary Payments

The Committee noted a report which provided an update on the eligibility and assessment criteria and the scoring matrix for funding from the Discretionary Payments Scheme.

Social Supermarkets

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report

This report is to provide Members with further detail on Department for Communities (DfC) funding for Social Supermarkets in 24/25 and to seek their views on whether any level of council funding should be provided to allow increased allocations to successful applicants. The report follows discussion at SP&R meeting on 21st June and a request for further written detail on the issue.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the recent advice from the Department of Communities regarding the 24/25 budget for Social Supermarkets and consider which option they wish to proceed with as outlined in 3.3.**

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Members may recall that at the April committee meeting SP&R agreed to provide £122,627 to fund 21 Social Supermarket Projects (up to 70% of their requested budget) in the absence of a Letter of Offer from DfC to fund this area of work. This allocation was made from the 24/25 Hardship Programme.

3.2 On 18th June DfC advised in writing that BCC will receive £672,687.77 funding for 24/25 Social Supermarket Fund. This is approximately £260k more than was granted last year. No Letter of Offer (LoO) has yet been received for this funding, the department has indicated verbally and in writing that the LoO will be issued by end of June 24.

3.3 This allocation is significantly more than Council was anticipating and would provide budget for awards of up to 85% of the recommended level to successful applicants. Members are asked to consider if they wish to make awards at this level using only DfC funds or if they want to retain a council contribution which would allow awards at 100% of the recommended figure to be made. These options are outlined below and further detail on awards is provided in Appendix 1.

- Option 1

The Social Supermarket Fund will be funded solely through DfC funding and this would allow 21 groups to receive 85% of their allocated funding award. The allocation of £122,627 from the Hardship Programme which was made to the Social Supermarket Fund 24/25 in the absence of DfC funding should be diverted back. This would provide a total budget of £223,400 for the 24/25 Hardship Programme.

- Option 2

Provide £113,057 from Hardship Programme to Social Supermarket budget 24/25. This would allow 21 groups to receive 100% of their recommended allocation and would provide a budget of £110,343 for the 24/25 Hardship Programme.

3.4 Members should note that any recommendations will be subject to formal receipt of a Letter of Offer from DfC.

3.5 Members may also note that it is challenging for funded groups to plan delivery of projects without clarity on the final allocation that they will receive. Whilst organisations welcome additional financial support they have highlighted the need for an early indication of their budget to ensure that resources are directed towards the times of greatest need.

3.6 Financial and Resource Implications

There is currently £223,400 allocated identified from underspends for a Hardship Programme in 2024/25. However, any commitment to provide Council funding to

Social Supermarket Projects will reduce the available budget for the Hardship Programme.

3.7 Equality or Good Relations Implications / Rural Needs Assessment

An Equality Screening and Rural Needs Assessment was undertaken for the delivery of the 2024/25 Social Supermarket programme.”

Proposal

After discussion, it was

Moved by Councillor R. McLaughlin.
Seconded by Councillor Garrett,

That the Committee agrees to adopt option 2 as set out in the report.

Amendment

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,
Seconded by Councillor Whyte,

That the Committee agrees to adopt option 1.

The Committee agreed to vote by show of hands on which of the two options they supported.

Eight Members voted for option 2 and two Members for option 1.

Accordingly, the Committee adopted option 2, that is:

To provide £113,057 from the Hardship Programme to the Social Supermarket budget 2024/25, which would allow 21 groups to receive 100% of their recommended allocation and would provide a budget of £110,343 for the 2024/25 Hardship Programme.

Safer Neighbourhood Officers - City Centre

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise members on the following matters;

Recruitment of 2 additional Safer Neighbourhood Officers to work as part of the existing team within the Community Safety Unit (CSU) until 31st March 2025

2.0 Recommendation

Members are also asked to:

Approve the recruitment of 2 additional Safer Neighbourhood Officers (SNOs) until 31st March 2025

3.0 Main Report

3.1 Background

Following ongoing Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB), crime and vulnerability issues within the city centre, including several high-profile incidents, the most recent posted on social media on Friday 21st June, which received almost 1 million views, an emergency meeting was held on Tuesday 25th June.

3.2 The Lord Mayor and Chief Executive of Belfast City Council, alongside directors within City and Neighbourhood Departments met with representatives of the business community from Belfast City Centre to discuss ongoing issues and concerns linked to ASB, crime and vulnerability issues.

3.3 The discussion focused on several actions required to assist in addressing the complex issues presenting themselves within the city centre, alongside ongoing work by teams operating in the city centre from Belfast City Council, Police, community & voluntary organisations and the business community.

3.4 One action discussed was the recruitment of additional Safer Neighbourhood Officers to increase the footprint and profile within the city centre.

3.5 The Safer Neighbourhood Officers (SNOs) have been in operation since April 2013. The SNOs are a frontline engagement & enforcement service whose primary role is to help address issues of community safety concern and associated Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) by:

- providing a BCC presence through deployment of high visibility foot patrols
- offering guidance, support, and advice on community safety issues
- challenging low-level anti-social behaviour

- enforcing laws relating to on-street drinking and environmental crime
 - helping to reduce crime and fear of crime
- 3.6 The SNOs have experience in engaging with vulnerable people in the City Centre and have training in de-escalation techniques, conflict management and first aid. Officers regularly work alongside outreach teams and the PSNI to refer high risk individuals to specialist services whilst reducing problematic behaviours in order to provide reassurance to members of the public and businesses. SNOs are also trained to administer Naloxone to revive individuals suffering from an opioid overdose and remove inappropriately discarded sharps from across the city daily. They are also an integral part of the Complex Lives programme.
- 3.7 The SNO's over the past number of weeks have seen an escalation in a range of issues within the city centre where they have had to intervene with on-street drinking, vulnerable people in risk taking behaviour, administer naloxone to several people, tackle Anti-Social Behaviour and the removal of inappropriate sharps.
- 3.8 Belfast City Council have received supportive statements from:

PSNI

'The SNOS provide an invaluable service to Belfast City Centre and are regarded as one of the PSNI's key partners in ensuring the City Centre is safe and prosperous.

The enhanced footprint provided by SNOS in the run up to Christmas 2023 was welcomed by Police and certainly made the City Centre feel and indeed look safer – a sentiment which has been shared by many retail partners.

The SNOS are committed to safeguarding and signposting the most vulnerable in our society and often work in collaboration with City Centre Police around this – their enhanced presence in the run up to Christmas certainly did ensure that many of our community with addiction issues were given additional support during what can be a difficult time of the year.

Ultimately, the City Centre is unique and at times, complex location to Police – the support provided by the SNOS is invaluable and City Centre Police look forward to building on this evolving relationship.'

3.9 EXTERN

'Our outreach team work closely with the SNO staff. We work together when a service user is under the influence and is at risk of participating in anti-social behaviour to deescalate and make safe the situation. Staff work together supporting each other's services daily for positive support of our service users. Such is the relationship when we put the call out in December the SNOs swiftly attended and were first on the scene at an incident where one of our staff had been assaulted.'

3.10 Complex Lives Manager

The Christmas period is a difficult time for the individuals known to Complex Lives, it can be a time of hardship and loneliness with many seeking comfort from one another in the City Centre. This inevitably brings challenges to those services managing risk and safety in the area and therefore the enhanced presence of the Safer Neighbourhood Officers has been a vital and valuable resource. The SNOs are a compassionate and knowledgeable team who have not only taken the time to get to know our individuals but as a consequence have been instrumental, as part of the wider Complex Lives Multi-disciplinary Team, to improve the health and wellbeing and accommodation solutions for the most chronically homeless in Belfast. Working together as one larger team the communication between the Outreach Services in Belfast has improved greatly.

3.11 Financial and Resource Implications

Additional Safer Neighbourhood Officers (SNOs) until 31st March 2025 at a cost of £34,088 per post, x 2 posts = £68,175. Posts to be funded from departmental underspend and/or realignment of specified reserves.

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

None."

The Committee approved the recruitment of 2 additional Safer Neighbourhood Officers (SNOs) until 31st March 2025.

Use of the City Hall Grounds

The Committee noted that the City Solicitor would be exercising her delegated authority to allow the use of the City Hall Grounds for a small event to coincide with the illumination of the City Hall on 9th July.

Standing Order 14 - Committee Minutes to be submitted

In accordance with Standing Order 14, the Committee agreed, as the meeting had been held later than seven clear days before the meeting of the Council, that the minutes of the meeting be submitted to the Council on 1st July for ratification.

Chairperson