

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 5th August, 2011

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Hargey (Chairman);
Aldermen Browne and M. Campbell;
Councillors Attwood, Convery, Haire, Hendron, Jones,
Lavery, Mac Giolla Mhín, Mallon, Maskey, McKee,
McVeigh and Ó Muilleoir.

In attendance: Mr. P. McNaney, Chief Executive
Mr. G. Millar, Director of Property and Projects;
Mr. J. McGrillen, Director of Development; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Alderman R. Newton and Councillors Hanna and A. Newton.

Minutes

The minutes of the meetings of 3rd and 17th June were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 4th July, subject to the rejection of the decision of the meeting of 17th June under the heading "Homecoming Parade". The Council accordingly agreed to:

- (i) support the holding of an event at the King's Hall with appropriate hospitality and that appropriate arrangements be put in place to ensure it takes place in the short-term; and
- (ii) continue to work with the military and other civil authorities to ensure that a Homecoming Parade takes place in Belfast in the future.

Routine Correspondence - Libraries NI: Future Capital Expenditure

The Committee was informed that correspondence had been received from the Chief Executive of Libraries NI, Ms. Irene Knox, advising the Council that significant improvement work had been completed within the past year at the Falls Road, Shankill and Whiterock branches. In addition, the restoration project to the external stonework at Belfast Central Library had also been completed at a cost of £938,000. However, the letter from Ms. Knox pointed out that Libraries NI had been advised by Central Government that previously anticipated funding would, given the ongoing spending review, be reduced significantly. That would impinge somewhat on the ability of Libraries NI to make further capital investment over the next four years.

Therefore, plans to undertake additional work at the Belfast Central Library had been postponed. Ms. Knox had indicated that, whilst the reduction in funding was disappointing, Libraries NI would continue to promote the upgrade of Belfast Central Library as one of its key projects and also emphasise its important role in the future development of the City's North-West Quarter. To that end, Ms. Knox had pointed out that Libraries NI would continue to seek funding in that regard and requested the Council's continued support.

Noted.

Corporate Planning Process - Update

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 17th June, it had agreed that the key issue for Members was to set the leadership direction for the Council by considering and shaping priorities which would be set out in the future Corporate Plan. The Committee had agreed also that the development of the new Plan should align with the development of the Medium Term Financial Plan and the setting of the rate for 2012/13. The Chief Executive explained that during the next few months Members would receive full support to take an evidence-based approach to creating a strategy which would deliver the Corporate Plan and its financial commitments. The strategy would be clear, concise and easily communicated and be deliverable with definite roles and responsibilities so that officers could be held to account.

He reported that the development of the priorities and projects, which would be contained within the new Corporate Plan, had been initiated and a series of Party and Member briefings had been facilitated as requested during July and August. An initial discussion with Party Leaders had taken place at the end of June to begin to identify and explore potential priorities for the Council and to shape Members' input. To facilitate wider engagement, the Committee had agreed that a workshop be arranged to enable all Members to set out and discuss their views on the important issues and priorities for the City and the Council. A workshop was scheduled for 17th August in the Group Space, Ulster Hall and an invitation had been issued to all Members of the Council. The purpose of the workshop was to allow Members to begin to discuss and give direction on the Council's purpose, objectives and priorities for the new Council term.

The Chief Executive explained that the workshop would provide a forum for Members to explore and discuss some of the key leadership challenges facing the Council including, for example, defining:

- (i) What is the Council's vision and ambition for the City?
- (ii) What are the key priorities and areas for action – what results do Members wish to achieve within this Council and corporate planning term?
- (iii) What can we afford to do?
- (iv) How can we innovate to maximise the potential investment/funding into the City?

That would set the context in which Members would discuss the Council's place shaping role within the City.

Given the challenging economic environment and Members' focus on value for money and efficiency, it was important that discussions in respect of future priorities were taken forward within the context of affordability limits and maximising the effectiveness of the Council's assets. Therefore, it was vital that the discussion on the new Corporate Plan was integrated with the setting of the rate for 2012/13 and consideration of the Capital Programme and City investment. In previous corporate planning processes it had proven extremely valuable when Members had given consideration, in advance of a workshop, to the key issues which they believed would face the City and Council over the next four years and their views on key priorities. In order to inform such considerations, briefings had been offered to all political parties and Members. With regard to the Members' workshop on 17th August, early feedback from some Members had suggested that consideration be given to using a peer Member facilitator who might challenge Members on their views from the perspective of an Elected Member from another successful Local Authority.

With the assistance of visual aids, the Chief Executive made a brief presentation outlining the emerging priorities in terms of what should be in the new corporate plan as a foundation for the workshop discussion.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and agreed that Jon Huish, a peer Elected Member from the Local Government Authority, would facilitate the workshop.

Shaping Belfast: 2011/2015 and Beyond

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Relevant Background Information

1.1 Since the mid 1990's, Belfast City Council has striven to become more relevant in terms of the role it plays in regard to shaping and regenerating Belfast.

1.2 Members' ambition and advocacy has been matched by officer action to facilitate and deliver a range of physical projects that has enhanced the city and bolstered the Council's reputation as a 'can do' organisation.

1.3 Following a basic approach of -

**Policy (i.e. State of the City, Masterplan);
Practice (i.e. projects on time, on budget, to specification)
and;
Partnership (i.e. Titanic Quarter, Connswater Community Greenway, Grove Well-Being Centre)**

The Council has enhanced its influence and role in shaping Belfast and gained substantial credibility.

1.4 Furthermore, through the advocacy and brokerage of Members, the Council has been instrumental in securing key investment projects such as Victoria Square, IKEA and Laganside and has a proven track record in delivering key physical projects as highlighted by the following examples:

- Waterfront Hall which anchored Lanyon Place
- St George's Market which brings vitality to an otherwise sterile area at weekends
- the award winning Gasworks with £160m of private investment and 3/4000 jobs
- Belfast Welcome Centre as the city's tourism headquarters
- the award winning Falls Swim Centre and the ground breaking Grove Well-Being Centre
- Numerous council facility upgrades including a number of multi use games areas (MUGAs)
- Four state of the art recycling facilities
- Land disposals for social housing
- Environmental enhancement of arterial routes
- Pump priming for the Titanic Signature Project, MAC, Lyric

1.5 A lot of the above was achieved against a background of scepticism about the Council's ability, a larger public sector with limited political accountability and a city emerging from an era of conflict which put limitations on key factors of regeneration such as trust and confidence.

1.6 To move forward in this Council term and beyond we need Members input to build on what has already been agreed upon in terms of the Capital Programme, the City Investment Fund and Peace III and other grant applications.

A follow up Members workshop on 17 August 2011 will seek to test Members ambitions for the City; exploring what politically they wish to advocate for and what action they want the Council to take in regard to projects that will make the greatest impact and positive difference to people's lives.

1.7 This report and presentation is offered as a pre cursor for that workshop.

2.0 Key Issues

2.1 Before going into greater detail two key challenges must be stated -

1. It is clear we are in a poor economic climate that threatens future investment in the city which calls for greater imagination and innovation to resource and deliver projects.
2. The job of urban government is to care for its citizens – and not necessarily to fund buildings.

Equal attention needs to be given to the role of the Council in the economy and in society which may be the subject of further workshops. Appendix 1 contains a range of issues a sustainable city needs to be good at under the headings of economy, environment, society and governance and emphasises the need for integration.

2.2 Politics

One upside from the current economic downturn is that people are more willing to collaborate. 'Government Action for our Urban Environment' (see Appendix 2) is a report sent to all new MLAs suggesting the need for a co-ordinated departmental approach to the city. The Minister for the Environment has followed up on this with officials and is intending to convene a ministerial meeting on this issue in September at which it will be important for the Council to have input.

Feedback from Members at the time of writing is that there is a clear understanding that resources are limited and choices need to be made if we are to move projects from being purely aspirational to agreed, understood and resourced and hence deliverable. We now need to agree a shared agenda in regard to place-shaping so that the Council fulfils this key component of civic leadership.

2.3 Policy

The Council's key policy document in relation to place-shaping, the 'Belfast Masterplan 2011', is nearing completion and will set out a number of themes within which we might seek to advocate for and/or deliver projects within but principally it will focus on the primacy of the urban area and the need to drive economic growth. Belfast and the economy has suffered through population loss due to the priority given to sub-urban and rural policies. We need to ensure future government policies are urban proofed.

To assist Members thinking Appendices 3 and 4 contain excerpts from two recent publications on shaping cities. The first is the 12 Guiding Principles needed to secure a sustainable city taken from the 'Freiburg Charter for Sustainable Urbanism'. Freiburg was named European City of the Year 2010 by the Academy of Urbanism

Closer to home, the Scottish Government has recently produced 'Delivering Better Places in Scotland' as a guide for public, private and community stakeholders. Appendix 4 contains the key learning points from what is a lengthy comprehensive document.

Members may find it useful to begin to articulate what is Belfast's common sense approach - i.e. the need for leadership; the need to develop a long term view (e.g. Glasgow and Helsinki are looking ahead 50 years); the importance of neighbourhoods; education, connectivity, inclusion etc. Such thinking will be important in underpinning the 'Belfast Masterplan 2011' and creating a driving force to make things happen.

2.4 Partnership

As instructed by Members, officers have been continuing dialogue with both the DSD and the Planning Service to explore the potential scope and viability of key place shaping functions such as comprehensive development powers for major schemes, regeneration and planning pilots.

We have also been in conversation with some of the major developments that will have a real impact on the city such as, for example, the proposed University of Ulster campus; Casement and Windsor Park stadiums; the Belfast Rapid Transit system; Royal Exchange and so on. All of these projects have their upsides and downsides and we would welcome Members views so that a coherent Council platform for advocacy of these or other projects can be developed. This would provide a clear and consistent message to investors and perhaps elicit a faster response from statutory agencies to enable projects to happen.

2.5 Practice

The Council has a number of capital commitments to deliver on over the new term. These include several parks projects including the Pitches Strategy and Connswater Community Greenway. There are also a range of potential projects from

across all Council departments such as the Belfast Welcome Centre, new Exhibition Centre to enable Belfast to compete with other cities, North Foreshore green technologies, the Lagan Canal, a new recycling centre etc; all of which are at different stages of consideration.

Furthermore there are a number of partnership projects including the Gaeltacht Quarter, St. Comgall's school, Loughside, Girdwood Community Hub, the Markets Tunnels which are seeking Council support and intervention.

There may also be a further range of emerging smaller neighbourhood level schemes to consider with reference to the Council's proposed Local Neighbourhood Fund and possible matching of other funding sources such as OFMDFM's Social Investment Fund.

There are of course more projects than there are resources, both financial and organisational, and Members views will be sought on how and which schemes we focus on to enable delivery.

2.6 Prioritisation

Council officers are working through a grid system that identifies projects that are both unknown (i.e. not clearly specified/just ideas) and not agreed (i.e. no approval, resources and so on) through to projects that we have agreed upon and which are fully articulated and hence deliverable. The model is attached at Appendix 5.

2.7 The workshop on 17 August will allow Members to go through this in more detail.

3.0 Resource implications

3.1 Financial

Current resources include a loan commitment to spend £55m on capital to 2015. Any further increases in capital expenditure will require corresponding allocation of funding to cover the cost of borrowing. Such proposals need to be articulated as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan and rate setting process.

The City Investment Fund has a commitment of £16m for the existing projects approved by the Council with a forecast to raise £29m. To date this Fund stands at £18m which includes the £16m already allocated. In the current market,

capital receipts have not been easily attainable but even without capital receipts £27m is achievable by 2015. There are a number of land disposal options currently snagged by planning issues.

In July 2011 the Council agreed to allocate £2.5million into the Local Neighbourhood Fund for 2011/12.

Work is ongoing on Alternative Funding Mechanisms such as Accelerated Development Zones and Tax Incremental Funding with a report due by the end of the Summer. There will be a series of risks to be considered in regard to the various alternative funding mechanisms and some options may require legislative change.

All of the above investment does have a positive spin off in terms of the rate base, employment, and enhancement of the Council's ability to deliver more and better services.

Assets

New buildings and facilities will in time require ongoing maintenance and this needs to be factored into running and other whole life costs and budgeted for appropriately.

Human

The Human Resource element is stretched to deliver projects as things stand and may require readjustment and realignment of the organisation to get best use out of the skills and experience that are in the organisation.

4.0 Equality considerations

4.1 The appropriate equality screening stages have been integrated into the corporate planning process.

5.0 Decisions required

5.1 The Committee is asked:

1. To make initial comments on the Director's presentation in advance of more detailed discussion at the Members Workshop on 17 August 2011.
2. To think about it's ambition for the city; the big projects on which to advocate and what are the priority projects for delivery.

3. To make use of the information in the report and its appendices.

6.0 **Officers to contact for further information**

6.1 **Gerry Millar, Director of Property and Projects, Ext: 6217.”**

After discussion, the Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Appointment of Director of Finance and Resources

The Committee was reminded that, at its meetings on 18th March and 3rd June, it had approved the process for the recruitment exercise to fill the post of Director of Finance and Resources. The Chief Executive reported that the process had now been concluded and the selection panel had recommended that Mr. Ronan Cregan be appointed to the post of Director of Finance and Resources with effect from 4th July.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and congratulated Mr. Cregan on his appointment.

Chairman