

Development Committee

Tuesday, 17th February, 2009

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor M. Browne (Chairman); and
Councillors Campbell, Convery, Ekin, Lavery,
C. Maskey, McCarthy and Rodgers.

In attendance: Mr. K. Sutherland, Planning and Transport
Policy Manager;
Mr. J. Walsh, Principal Solicitor; and
Mr. J. Heaney, Committee Administrator.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors Attwood, Humphrey, B. Kelly and Kyle.

Belfast City Centre Management

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 10th December, it had agreed to receive a presentation from the Belfast City Centre Management company in respect of its range of new initiatives and the development of its existing activities.

It was reported that Mr. B. McGivern, Chairman, Belfast City Centre Management company, and Mr. Andrew Irvine, City Centre Manager, were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman.

Mr. Irvine advised the Committee that Belfast City Centre Management sought to deliver additional services for the City centre on behalf of its core funders in order to contribute, in a measurable way, to the development of a cleaner, safer, more attractive and more accessible City. He pointed out that the company had three main objectives, namely:

- (i) delivering direct City centre services;
- (ii) facilitating and assisting in the delivery of its funders' City centre Initiatives; and
- (iii) direct liaison with City centre businesses.

Mr. Irvine indicated that the work of the company was extremely important to the success of Belfast City centre and was crucial in securing the support of the private sector for key Council initiatives. He drew the Committee's attention to a number of schemes which had been developed by the company, including the Belfast Against Night Disorder (BAND) scheme, the Retail Crimewatch and Radiolink Schemes,

the proposed Taxis Scheme, which he indicated was designed to clear revellers quickly from the City centre between midnight and 3.00 a.m. and would complement the Council's Get Home Safe Scheme campaign, and the Urban Management Initiative, which sought to provide information to traders in respect of the Streets Ahead Programme.

In relation to Belfast City Council events, the Centre City Manager reported that work was ongoing with the officers from the Development Department and that the Chamber of Trade and Commerce was seeking to deliver a co-ordinated "Belfast 2009 Events and Street Animation Programme". Mr. Irvine suggested that one of the biggest problems within the City centre was traffic management and he displayed for the information of the Members several photographs depicting problems associated with vehicles entering the restricted-access zone. He indicated that there had been 29,000 illegal vehicle movements per month through the zone. He then highlighted the problems of taxi parking within the City and, in particular, at the taxi rank adjacent to the City Hall.

Mr. Irvine reported on his organisation's work in relation to the Economy Activity of the City and the development of the character of the City. He then addressed a number of issues which had been raised at previous meetings, including disabled access to the City centre, the Streets Ahead Programme, the proposed Taxi Scheme and the erection of Christmas lighting within the Castle Street area.

Mr. McGivern advised the Committee that his organisation had had several meetings with Translink in relation to the traffic management of the buses throughout the City centre. In relation to the Streets Ahead project, there were problems with the co-ordination of work planning between the Department of the Environment, the Department for Social Development and the Department for Regional Development.

Several Members highlighted the problems associated with the Streets Ahead project pointing out the lack of co-ordination between the various Statutory Bodies and utility companies, which they had suggested was not good practice. In addition to its detraction from the attractiveness of the City, it had caused disruption to pedestrians and, particularly, to wheelchair users. In this regard the Members suggested that it might be a useful mechanism to establish a Working Group between the various Statutory Bodies and Utilities Companies along similar lines to the new Belfast Group which operated in the City and had sought to bring all the relevant agencies together to work for the betterment of Belfast. The Members sought clarification as to whether this Group was still in existence.

In regard to café culture throughout the City, the Chairman indicated that, following meetings with the Department for the Environment, there might, in the near future, be a relaxation in the barriers which had been placed in the way of development of such a culture throughout the City.

Mr. Irvine and Mr. McGivern then answered several questions in regard to the parking of all buses in the City centre, the Taxi Scheme, traffic management and the income achieved by the company. Mr. McGivern indicated that there were problems in dealing with a number of utility companies and he suggested that it might be worth

investigating what liabilities, if any, had transferred from the public authorities, such as the Council, to the private companies which had taken over the utility supply role within the City. He pointed out also that he was very supportive of the idea of a cross-departmental group which could co-ordinate work in the City centre.

The members of the deputation thanked the Committee for receiving them and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce

The Committee was advised that representatives of the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce were in attendance and accordingly Messrs. J. Moore, D. Penick and N. Gordon were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman.

Mr. Moore advised the Members that the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce represented over 500 affiliated organisations and, in addition, it sought to support the interests of those businesses throughout the City who could not afford to be a member. He stated that the current financial crisis was having a severe effect on the businesses within the City centre and there was a real fear that many could stop trading and shop premises would remain vacant. He was therefore of the view that there was a need to ringfence and protect the City centre.

Mr. Penick stated that, it was not only the City centre which was affected by the economic downturn, but other trading locations throughout the City and surrounding cities and towns. He suggested that the problem would be exacerbated by the development of a large out-of-town retail unit at Sprucefield. He pointed out that his organisation would welcome the John Lewis company locating in either Belfast or Lisburn City centre, but they were opposed to the inappropriate out-of-town location.

Mr. Gordon suggested that a weak framework, in terms of the planning and development process, was having a detrimental effect on City centres and on smaller towns and villages throughout the province. The loss of local shops providing goods and services had an inappropriately detrimental affect on older people and people who could not afford to travel to large out-of-town shopping centres. He stated that there was a need to work together to encourage the development of the town/city centres throughout the province.

The deputation then answered a number of questions in relation to the development of out-of-town shopping centres and the likely effect this would have on the City centre and arterial routes throughout the City.

In relation to a question from a Member, the Principal Solicitor indicated that there was, at this point in time, no reason for the Council to seek a judicial review since no decision had been arrived at in regard to the planning application, and it appeared likely that the application would be subject to a local inquiry.

In conclusion, Mr. Moore advised the Committee that the majority of the John Lewis Group's operations were located in city centres throughout the rest of the United Kingdom and that he was of the view that the opportunities offered by the developer at Sprucefield had been made very attractive to the John Lewis Group. He suggested that

the Minister for the Environment should release Planning Policy Statement 5 with immediate effect. He pointed out that, since the development at Sprucefield would erode the rates base for the City, it would be appropriate for the Council to object to the development. Mr. Gordon stated that there was a need for investment on brownfield sites and not additional shopping centre constructed on out-of-town greenfield sites.

The members of the deputation thanked the Committee for receiving them and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee proceeded to consider the undernoted report in respect of the Council's position regarding the development at Sprucefield:

“Relevant Background Information

The Development Committee on the 10th December 2008 agreed to receive a presentation from the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce in respect of their concerns in relation to the current Sprucefield Centre Ltd application for further retail development at Sprucefield. The basis for the request and the details of the proposed development were set out in the report of 10th December 2008 which is included as Appendix 1 for information.

The adverse implications for the surrounding retail centres, arising from the proposed development, combined with the changed economic conditions highlights the necessity for a precautionary approach to both retail development and the application of policy. The advice contained in the previous report suggested that the Council, in recognition of the limited application modifications and changed economic climate, maintained the previously adopted positions both in respect of the objection to the application and the recommendation that the proposed development be subject to a Local inquiry.

The Committee resolved that in advance of the presentation and taking account of the changed economic situation it would not be appropriate, at that stage, for the Council to reiterate the previously adopted position in respect of the proposed application.

Key Issues

The modifications to the current planning application represent very minor changes from the previously submitted proposals that were the subject of objections from a number of organisations and the Council. The clearly identifiable adverse implications for the retail core of Belfast and the surrounding city and town centres therefore remain extant.

It should also be noted that the approval of the proposed application would have significant adverse implications for retail policy generally within the metropolitan area.

With regard to the retail policy Committee may wish to note that Planning Service in October 2008 requested the early release of that part of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) BMAP Report relating to strategic retail issues. The Commission recently confirmed that it took the view that this was a discrete issue and, as the public sessions of the inquiry were complete, it could comply with the Department's request. Whilst the Commission recently confirmed that it had issued the report to the Department on 21st January 2009 both organisations have stated that the findings and recommendations contained within the report will not be made available to the public at this stage.

The Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Independent Belfast Retailers, along with a number of other objectors within the wider region, have indicated that they will be pursuing objections to the current Sprucefield Centre Ltd application. The Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce propose to make a presentation to the Committee in respect of the concerns arising from the proposed development and the potential impacts on the wider region over the short and longer term investment horizons.

The Chamber may also wish to take the opportunity to explore the potential for the development of similar working arrangements to those previously adopted whereby objectors shared a coordinated approach to the participation in any future public inquiry to reduce the potential cost of such an action.

Notwithstanding the above the Department it is suggested that the previous recommendation to the Committee remains the most appropriate course of action and the Council position, of objection to the proposed development and request for a Local Inquiry to be convened, be maintained.

Resource Implications

There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

Recommendations

Members are requested to:

- maintain the previously adopted positions and approve the submission of an objection to the proposed development at Sprucefield including a recommendation that the proposed development be subject to a Local inquiry."

After discussion, it was

Moved by Councillor McCarthy,
Seconded by Councillor Lavery,

That the Committee agrees to maintain its previously adopted position and approves the submission of an objection to the proposed development at Sprucefield, including a recommendation that the proposed development be subject to a public inquiry.

On a vote by show of hands six Members voted for the proposal and one against and it was accordingly declared carried.

Chairman