

Extract from minutes of:

STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

20th September, 2024

“Equality and Good Relations

Dual Language Signage at Olympia Leisure Centre

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of report or summary of main issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise Committee of the outcome of the consultation on the draft Equality Impact Assessment carried out in relation to the erection of bilingual Irish/English signage at Olympia Leisure Centre.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is asked to:

- Note the contents of this report;
- Note the contents of the Consultation Report at Appendix 1;
- Note and approve the contents and findings of the Equality Impact Assessment Draft Final Decision Report at Appendix 2;
- Determine whether it wishes to proceed with the erection of bilingual signage at Olympia Leisure Centre.

3.0 Main report

3.1 Background

Belfast City Council carried out a consultation into the proposed erection of bilingual or multilingual external naming and internal directional signage at its four city wide leisure centres (Andersonstown, Olympia, Lisnasharragh and Templemore) in 2019 / 2020.

On 24th January, 2020 [Agenda for Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on Friday, 24th January, 2020, 9.30 am - Belfast City Council \(www.internalminutes\)](#) the Council’s Strategic Planning and Resources Committee agreed to erect bilingual external naming and internal directional signage in Andersonstown Leisure Centre.

3.2 At a subsequent meeting on 24 September 2021, [Agenda for Strategic Policy and Resources Committee on Friday, 24th September, 2021, 9.30 am - Belfast City Council \(www.internalminutes\)](#) the Committee considered agenda item 2(f)

‘consultation on signage – Andersonstown, Lisnasharragh, Olympia and Templemore Leisure Centres – Options Paper.’ Committee agreed to the erection of bilingual signage at Olympia Leisure Centre but did not take any decision on the erection of bilingual signage at Lisnasharragh or Templemore leisure centres, instead agreeing for a report on linguistic accessibility at those centres to be presented to Committee in the future.

The decision with respect to Olympia was subsequently called in and a barrister’s opinion was obtained on 8 December 2021, which found merit in respect of Ground 41(1) (b) of the Local Government Act (2014) – that ‘the decision would disproportionately affect adversely any section of the inhabitants of the district’.

Committee will be aware that this opinion was given in the absence of an Equality Impact Assessment.

- 3.3 Following receipt of the barristers opinion, the ‘called in’ decision of the Committee of 24 September 2021 to erect bilingual signage at Olympia was placed on the agenda of the next available Council meeting on 10 Jan 2022, in accordance with standing orders, where the taking of any such decision would have required the support of a qualified majority vote of 80% of the Members present and voting. At the Council meeting, Members took a decision to refer the matter back to the Committee and the original decision to erect the signage did not proceed to a vote.**

Committee agreed at its meeting on 21 January 2022 to proceed with an Equality Impact Assessment on the erection of bilingual external naming and internal directional signage at Olympia Leisure Centre.

3.4 Key Issues

A consultation on the Draft Equality Impact Assessment was launched on 12 June 2023 and ran for 14 weeks until 17 September 2023. The public were encouraged to respond online through the Council’s consultation platform and there was an opportunity to submit written information to the consultation. There were also a number of online and in-person public meetings.

- 3.5 The consultation report gives an analysis of the statistical responses for each question and an analysis of some of the key themes in the commentary under each question. The consultation responses showed a strength of feeling both for and against the erection of bilingual signage.**

- 3.6 Much of the commentary opposing the erection of bilingual signage is based on the concept that it will cause alienation and damage community relations. Commentary in favour of the erection of the bilingual signage states that this is in line with the concept of rights and inclusivity, and is in keeping with international guidance on minority language issues.**

- 3.7 Committee will be aware of developments in the Council's approach to language since the EQIA on the proposal to erect bilingual signage at Olympia was conducted. In May 2024 Council approved a Language Strategy Action Plan that sets out how the Council will deliver its commitments under the five strands of the Language Strategy (those five strands being Irish, Ulster-Scots, new communities, sign language and disability communications).

Committee will further be aware that the Council is currently conducting a consultation on a draft Irish Language Policy, which itself is the subject of an EQIA. The draft policy, among other things, commits the Council to adopting a dual language approach to signage in all its facilities and will, as part of a rolling programme, prioritise the erection of such signage through a categorisation approach.

- 3.8 Committee will be aware that the original Committee decision of September 2021 to erect bilingual signage at Olympia Leisure Centre did not proceed. The matter was referred by Council back to the Committee who decided to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment into the matter. Committee are now being asked to make a new decision on signage at Olympia, based on all of the information available, including the findings of the EQIA.

Financial and Resource Implications

- 3.9 None. The cost of the signage will be met out of existing budgets.

Equality, good relations or rural needs implications

- 3.10 Committee will be aware of the Council's two statutory duties under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the 'Act'). Section 75(1) states that the Council must have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between nine different groups: persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, marital status or sexual orientation; between men and women generally; between persons with a disability and persons without; and between persons with dependants and persons without. Section 75(2) states that the Council must have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.
- 3.11 Schedule 9 Paragraph 4(2)(a) of the Act requires the Council to have a scheme that states the Council's arrangements for assessing compliance with its duties (with regard to both equality and good relations) under Section 75 of the Act.

The Council's Equality Scheme currently provides that the Council uses Equality Impact Assessments for this purpose.

Recent legal advice obtained by the Council in an opinion dated June 27, 2024 advised that the key legislative requirement for the Good Relations Duty requires the Council to have a scheme which states the Council's arrangements for assessing its compliance with the Good Relations Duty and for consulting on matters to

which the Good Relations Duty is likely to be relevant (including details of the persons to be consulted).

Section 75 does not require the use of Equality Impact Assessments in relation to the Good Relations Duty, nor does the Equality Commission, although it does make a recommendation to that effect.

It is open to the Council to adopt different arrangements, not involving the use of an EQIA, for assessing compliance with the Good Relations Duty. However that would require an amendment to the Council's current Equality Scheme.

3.12 Committee will note that Section 75 of the Act requires the Council to carry out a review of its Equality Scheme every five years and make any relevant updates to a revised Equality Scheme. Therefore the Scheme is due for revision next year.

3.13 Section 4 of the Draft Final Decision Report provides an analysis of potential impacts on both equality of opportunity and good relations.

Committee will note that the primary function of an EQIA is to determine the extent of differential impact of a policy upon nine groups listed in Section 75(1) of the Act and in turn whether that impact is adverse, that is, whether it has a negative impact on one or more of the nine equality categories. If it is decided that the policy has an adverse impact, the public authority must consider measures which might mitigate the adverse impact, and alternative policies which might better achieve the promotion of equality of opportunity.

The Draft Final Decision Report states with regard to equality of opportunity that prior to consultation, it was suggested that the proposal for bilingual signage may give rise to a potential adverse impact for those from a Protestant / Unionist / Loyalist ('PUL') background and that signage may discourage access or use of Olympia by those groups. The consultation confirmed that this perception did exist within PUL communities i.e. the proposal did have potential to alienate users from these communities, making it less likely that they would use the centre. However, the report further states 'At the same time it was also suggested during the consultation that the absence of bilingual signage may have an adverse impact on those from the Irish language community.'

The report notes that a very small number of respondents with a disability did indicate that multilingual signage may have the potential to cause confusion given the nature of their disability (e.g. dyslexia, learning difficulties).

With regard to Good Relations, the report states that 'The evidence that is available to date, and including the previous round of public consultation in 2019/20 along with the current consultation, does indicate that the proposal for bilingual naming and signage has the potential to have an adverse impact on good relations on grounds

of religious belief, political opinion, and also perhaps national identity.’ The report concludes that ‘evidence available prior to consultation suggested that the proposal may have the potential for adverse impact and the consultation has confirmed that, within certain communities, this impact is perceived to be real and to be significant.’

These findings are discussed in more detail in Section 4 of the Draft Final Decision Report attached to this report at Appendix 2.”

After discussion, it was

Moved by Councillor Beattie,
Seconded by Councillor R-M Donnelly,

That the Committee agrees to proceed with the erection of dual language signage, that is English and Irish, at the Olympia Leisure Centre.

On a vote, fifteen Members voted for the proposal and five against and it was declared carried.

Accordingly, the Committee:

- noted the contents of the report;
- noted the contents of the Consultation Report at Appendix 1;
- noted and approved the contents and findings of the Equality Impact Assessment Draft Final Decision Report at Appendix 2;
- Agreed to proceed with the erection of dual language signage, that is English and Irish, at the Olympia Leisure Centre.”