



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Sister City Link – Hefei, China
Date:	12 May 2010
Reporting Officer:	John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470
Contact Officer:	Shirley McCay, Head of Economic Initiatives, ext 3459

Relevant Background Information

Members will be aware that, over the last decade, the cities of Belfast and Hefei have been developing linkages. These culminated in the signature of a Sister Cities relationship between the two cities in 2005. A number of visits and exchanges between the cities have taken place and new relationships continue to develop.

Key Issues

An action plan for the development of linkages between the cities was approved by the Committee in September 2008. This included a range of actions under the following headings:

- Business Development and Investment
- Education and training
- Enhancing links with the Chinese community in Belfast
- Cultural awareness
- Information and awareness-raising

At a previous meeting of Development Committee (13 August 2008), a presentation was made by Amnesty International regarding the linkages with Hefei. Following that presentation, the Committee agreed to Amnesty's proposal that, in its future links with Hefei, the city should:

- Promote the integration of human rights dialogue and education into the Council's relationship with Hefei
- Put human rights on the agenda during all future meetings with the Hefei civic leadership
- Raise human rights issues with all official visitors from Hefei to Belfast and
- Ensure that Council representatives raise human rights concerns during all official visits to Hefei.

Since the endorsement of this proposal, there have been no civic exchanges between the cities. However, a range of other linkages and activities with China and the Chinese

community in Belfast has been undertaken including:

Business Development and Investment

- Completion of a business development initiative to help local small businesses consider “Doing Business in China”. 10 companies took part; 7 of whom are currently pursuing joint ventures or other linkages
- Research with Invest NI to establish opportunities for a trade mission to Hefei – as part of Invest NI trade development programme

Education and training

- Support for school exchange visits: 5 Belfast schools took part in a British Council sponsored visit to Hefei in September 2009 as part of their “Connecting Classrooms” initiative. There are plans for a return visit to Northern Ireland, probably within the next academic year
- Assistance with universities and colleges welcoming international students – civic receptions and welcome events.

Enhancing links with the Chinese community in Belfast

- Plans to deliver enterprise workshops and mentoring in conjunction with Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Belfast, to encourage additional business start-up among Chinese community
- Continuing engagement with Chinese community through Good Relations work.

Cultural awareness

- Support for key events e.g. Chinese New Year held at St George’s Market.

Information and awareness-raising

- Links established with Local Government International Bureau (LGIB) to exchange information with other cities involved in Chinese city links
- Promotion of linkages and implementation of lessons learned through engagement in Open Cities project looking at impact of economic migration.

As with Belfast’s other sister city linkage with Nashville, it is clear that the link is strengthened when agencies other than the City Council build their own contacts within the partner city and develop mutual relationships. Contact with the Chinese city is intermittent and requires a significant investment of time and resources to maintain the momentum of the relationship.

The issue of the Amnesty proposal has not yet had to be addressed directly but will require careful consideration of how it is managed if and when there are to be further civic contacts between the cities. We have been made aware that Hefei may be considering a future visit to Belfast in June 2010. While we do not, as yet, have confirmed dates for the visit, it is proposed that we provide some civic hospitality and assist in developing a programme for the visitors.

With regard to the business to business contacts between the cities, we have engaged with Invest NI to explore the opportunities for a trade mission to Hefei at a future date. Invest NI has confirmed that they plan to take a trade mission to China in the coming year. Their proposed visit locations will not include Hefei but are likely to include Wuhan which is approximately two hours from Hefei by train. Invest NI are happy to support businesses who may want to pursue commercial interests in Hefei as part of an organised trade mission. However the businesses would have to make their own arrangements for Hefei.

Resource Implications

While final details of visitor numbers and itineraries are not available, it is suggested that a budget of up to £5,000 should cover all overheads associated with the visit.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee approves the allocation of up to £5,000 towards civic hospitality as part of a civic visit by Hefei.

Decision Tracking

No specific actions to report back.

Key to Abbreviations

LGIB – Local Government International Bureau