



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Shopmobility Belfast – Future Funding Options
Date:	16 March 2011
Reporting Officer:	John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Shopmobility Belfast provides motorised scooters and manual wheelchairs, free of charge, to assist people with mobility disabilities to gain access to the city centre and surrounding areas.
1.2	For the past decade, the organisation has received funding through the Economic Development budget for the promotion of accessibility of services within the city. Previously, this funding was matched by the EU, under the old Structural Funds programmes. However, the current Structural Funds programme is narrower in focus than the previous programmes and these types of services are ineligible for match funding. This means that the contribution provided to Shopmobility by Belfast City Council since 2007 has come from rates monies only.
1.3	At the August 2010 meeting of the Development Committee, a report was presented to make Members aware of a request for support of £25,000 towards running costs of £250,000 for the financial year 2010/2011. In that report, it was accepted that, if Members agreed to support Shopmobility in the current year, notification should be given to the organisation that the direct approach for financial support to the council's Economic Development budget in future years would not be considered. Economic Development Unit (EDU) does not have a grant fund to which organisations can make applications for support and no funding allocation for Shopmobility has been identified within the current estimates.
1.4	While the Committee endorsed this proposal, the matter was raised at the September 2010 council meeting. It was agreed that a further report in relation to future funding options be submitted for the Committee's consideration.

2	Key Issues
2.1	Shopmobility is funded by a range of public and community organisations, principally Department for Regional Development (DRD), Department for Social Development (DSD) and Belfast Health Trust. This funding is used to provide services at a range of locations across the city and to cover the overheads and staffing costs at the organisation's headquarters in Queen Street.
2.2	The organisation also undertakes "paid for" work at major events and is funded for this work. For example, it provides wheelchairs at the Rose Week event at Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park, and is paid for this service by the council's Parks and Leisure Department. It also provides services at a number of the major civic events and is also paid for this service.
2.3	There has been an historical funding relationship between the council's EDU and Shopmobility over the last decade. A contribution towards the organisation's core funding has been provided, on the basis that the services that they undertake help increase footfall and therefore expenditure, particularly in the city centre. However there is a concern that a number of organisations could also suggest that they could deliver this outcome and, therefore, seek funding from council towards the associated costs.
2.4	Advice from Legal Services suggests that allocating funding without competition where there is no applicable fund risks setting a precedent and a breach of all applicable rules relating to fairness etc. In the current funding climate, the prospect of additional requests from organisations is heightened.
2.5	<p>Having undertaken a survey of other councils in conjunction with the Good Relations Unit, it appears that Belfast is the only council that is providing direct, core funding to Shopmobility. While other councils do engage with Shopmobility and other disability support organisations, this is generally done by providing small amounts of funding towards specific activities or by applications received through grant schemes. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Support for Disabled Go – this provides online access guides to a range of venues e.g. council offices, parks, historic land marks, tourist attractions, cinemas, hotels, sports grounds, restaurants etc. This is funded by Good Relations Unit in Belfast City Council – Community Grants budget to provide alternative formats for promotional materials – Disability events e.g. sports days.
2.6	There are presently 2 options for future council support proposed for consideration.
2.7	<p><u>Option 1: Adhere to original Committee decision</u></p> <p>The original August 2010 decision of the Development Committee, namely to inform the organisation that the direct approach for financial support for core costs to council in future years would not be considered, to be adhered to. This approach takes account of the guidance from Legal Services with regard to setting a precedent for other organisations potentially seeking funding. This would not preclude Shopmobility from undertaking paid-for services by other parts of the organisation.</p>

2.8	<p><u>Option 2: Explore opportunities to support the organisation through a legal agreement with Belfast City Centre Management</u></p> <p>Should Committee wish to rescind its previous decision and to provide core funding from the Economic Development budget that a Service Level Agreement should be further explored with Shopmobility in conjunction with Belfast City Centre Management.</p>
2.9	<p>The draft business plan from BCCM for the financial year 2011/2012 was approved at a special meeting of the Development Committee on 22 February 2011. It includes a range of measures to enhance access to the city centre for all users as well as wider regeneration and economic development activities. The proposed activity to be undertaken by Shopmobility should help deliver on some of the accessibility measures.</p>
2.10	<p>While BCCM would be happy to work with Shopmobility on these activities, they would not be in a position to provide financial assistance, unless this was offered by Belfast City Council, through a legal agreement with BCCM. At this stage, there is a general commitment to considering measures to enhance accessibility to the city centre within the draft work plan of Public Space Management group but there are no specific activities identified in this regard. Therefore funding from council would be required for the agreed programme of work.</p>

3	Resource Implications
3.1	To be determined, depending on preferred option agreed.

4	Equality and Good Relations Considerations
	There are no Equality and Good Relations Considerations attached to this report.

5	Recommendations
4.1	<p>Members are asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Note the request from Committee to consider future funding options for Shopmobility. – Note the options for future resourcing of the organisation by Belfast City Council. – Identify the preferred option for further discussion with Shopmobility.

6	Decision Tracking
	There is no decision tracking attached to this report.

7	Key to Abbreviations
	<p>BCCM – Belfast City Centre Management DRD – Department for Regional Development DSD – Department for Social Development</p>