



**Report to:** Development Committee

**Subject:** **Council's views on the newly established NI Parliamentary Group on the USA**

**Date:** 4 September 2012

**Reporting Officer:** John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470

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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Belfast City Council received a request from the NI Assembly to give views on the newly established Parliamentary Group on the USA, their role and priorities. It is not a formal consultation as only a few organisations have been asked to input.
1.2	The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission has agreed that due to Northern Ireland's strong relationship with North America, there is merit in forming a Northern Ireland Assembly Parliamentary Group on the USA. This is a similar approach to that taken at Westminster where there is a British-American Parliamentary Group.
1.3	<p>The Northern Ireland Assembly Parliamentary Group on the USA will focus on producing a report to consider the role and value of the Group to justify its long term future including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– the level of interest amongst their Members and appointing an Executive Committee;</li> <li>– the aims and priorities of the Group;</li> <li>– potential activities to be undertaken by the Group; and</li> <li>– an assessment of the resources required for the Group's work and any external funding which may be available to the Group.</li> </ul>
1.4	<p>At this initial stage, the focus of the Group seems to be on engaging with USA delegations visiting the Assembly, developing links with USA legislators on common issues, and exploring economic and cultural opportunities to benefit Northern Ireland.</p> <p>The Group will not replicate or conflict with the role of the Executive or of any of the Assembly's Statutory Committees.</p>
1.5	<p>Below is a list of the current membership of the Group – although the Group is potentially open to every MLA in the Assembly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Mr William Hay Speaker (Chairman)</li> <li>– Mr Leslie Cree MLA</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mr Stewart Dickson MLA</li> <li>- Mr Paul Girvan MLA</li> <li>- Mr Danny Kennedy MLA</li> <li>- Mr Chris Lyttle MLA</li> <li>- Mr David McClarty MLA</li> <li>- Mr Basil McCrea MLA</li> <li>- Dr Alasdair McDonnell MLA</li> <li>- Mr Cathal Boylan MLA</li> <li>- Ms Judith Cochrane MLA</li> <li>- Mr Edwin Poots MLA</li> </ul>
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<b>2</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>
2.1	Belfast City Council has been selected to be a respondent due to our historic relationships with USA dating back over 15 years. Much of the activity stemmed from the late 90's in the period immediately succeeding the peace process.
2.2	BCC presently is reviewing its international relationships in general including USA. This project comprises review of international relations activity of the Council and all the key stakeholders, agreeing on the key priority areas and Belfast narrative and building a collaborative approach to international relations and marketing across the city.
2.3	Some of the key Belfast/US relationships over the last 15 years have included:
2.4	<p><u>Friends of Belfast</u></p> <p>A social capital network of over 300 pre-eminent business people, professors and politicians across USA covering the cities of Washington, New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Denver, Austin, Portland in Maine and Portland in Oregon and Nashville was established in late 1990s.</p>
2.5	In the beginning direct economic benefits were realised with companies such as Allstate and Liberty Mutual investing in Belfast as a direct consequence of interventions by Friends of Belfast recommending Belfast to investment decision makers. From 2002 onwards the Friends of Belfast initiative became more focused on connecting business people, academics and politicians with updates on opportunities for investment in Belfast. Several external and internal trade missions took place supported by Friends of Belfast in New York, Boston and Washington. Due to a refocusing of Council priorities, in 2006 Council ceased actively managing the Friends of Belfast network although some activity continues in the USA without BCC direct intervention. The role of a refreshed Friends of Belfast going forward is being investigated under the International Marketing and Relations project.
2.6	<p><u>World Trade Centre</u></p> <p>Belfast has had the licence to operate a World Trade Centre (WTC) since 2002. This in effect connects Belfast to over 300 other World Trade Centres around the globe. WTCs have multiple purposes ranging from a minimal use of the WTC brand name to a fully integrated service facility for trade and business development, locally and internationally. Outward missions to Washington, New York and Qatar occurred with the support of the WTC network.</p>
2.7	BCC delivered a range of services to local businesses under the WTC banner for four years which culminated in Belfast receiving recognition from the WTC network as a

	<p>potential applicant for formal accredited status. Due to a loss of resources for this project the WTC activity has currently ceased although international investment opportunities continue as part of Council's mainstream economic development approach.</p>
2.8	<p><u>Nashville</u> An agreement between Belfast and Nashville, Tennessee, to become sister cities under the formal Sister City network was signed in 1995 and, after a dormant period in the late 1990s was resurrected. From 2006 onwards the Council has had a full work programme attached to it spanning tourism, creative industries and wider cultural potential. Nashville have a formal committee of the Sister City network dedicated to Belfast with support from the Mayor's office and efforts have been made in recent years to ensure that the wider economic development opportunities relating to healthcare are included as part of our exchange programme. A number of Belfast singer songwriters and the wider music industry have benefited from participation on BCC led missions to Nashville and have obtained business deals and contracts directly as a result. A full review of the potential of this relationship is underway.</p>
2.9	<p><u>New York, Boston and Washington</u> Over the years since the late 1990s there has been particular engagement with New York, Boston and Washington with economic development trade missions operating between Belfast and these cities, sometimes on a bi-annual basis. In the mid 2000's the missions were themed and concentrated on creative industries.</p>
2.10	<p>Relationships were built up with a wide range of economic development agencies and with the universities allowing for learning, transfer of ideas and sharing of knowledge. Current activity is centred on identifying the optimum form of relationship and specific objectives for each location.</p>
2.11	<p><u>Silicon Valley/Hollywood</u> In November 2011 Belfast was visited by a group of creative and hi tech leaders from the Silicon Valley and Hollywood in USA known as the Irish Technology Leadership Group seeking investment opportunities. They had previously included Belfast in visit programmes in earlier years as part of a joint programme with Dublin but this year they designed a bespoke programme for their mission to coincide with the MTV EMA music awards and focused their attention on Belfast only.</p>
2.12	<p>They announced a new internship programme for up to 4 companies to benefit from a placement with Silicon Valley companies in the coming year during their stay in Belfast and committed to signing a longer term MOU for cooperation between Belfast and the Irish Technology Leadership Group. Unfortunately the internship programme has not advanced as originally envisaged and a review of this activity is also underway.</p>
2.13	<p><u>Specific recommendations</u> The Council is currently developing an International Relations Framework and an International City Marketing plan. The focus is on internationalisation, connections, partnerships and investment and we think the establishment of this Assembly Group is timely for both sides.</p>
2.14	<p>As part of this process we have engaged with a number of key stakeholders in the City (who are also active on a regional level) to gather their views and find out about their international work. From our previous and current experiences, we think that the critical parts to the success of this group are:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Find out what is currently happening in the locality/region</li> <li>- Develop a set of priorities</li> <li>- Create an agreed local narrative</li> <li>- Develop criteria for success</li> </ul>
2.15	At first instance it is proposed that the Assembly Group conducts a NI audit on the existing relations with the USA. It seems from the Council's own audit that many Councils, Colleges, and Universities have formal and informal links with the USA.
2.16	<p>We believe it is important to set down criteria on where and why the group will engage with the USA on specific areas. We suggest that priority areas should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investment and funding</li> <li>- Trade and new business opportunities</li> <li>- Partnerships</li> <li>- Cultural and social exchange</li> <li>- Political and diplomatic connections</li> </ul>
2.17	Consistent and coherent messages are very important in establishing new partnerships in the USA. There are many organisations in NI being involved in the USA, organising inward and outward visits many times in a year, often to the same locations but with different messages. This group could lead on establishing one NI narrative around economic, political and cultural issues.
2.18	Working together will be of major importance in this era of public sector cuts. We would be very keen that we establish relationship with the Assembly group early on, both through the political level and the officer level via the group secretariat. It would be very beneficial if the Council would have an ongoing input into the work of the group.
2.19	We believe that there are a number of organisations who could play an important role and asset to the group, besides the Council, Queen's University, University of Ulster, Belfast Metropolitan College, the Belfast Education and Library Board for example. Also, the group could exploit the existing lasting relationships such as International Fund for Ireland and Irish Institute of Pittsburgh.
2.20	Finally we would suggest a joint calendar of planned inward and outward visits to the USA from the NI Assembly to Invest NI, Local Councils, Chambers and Universities.
2.21	After speaking with the Secretariat of the Group it was obvious that the MLAs who are part of the USA Parliamentary Group are keen to work together with Belfast City Council in shaping and delivering their work. We would suggest an early meeting between the BCC and the Assembly group/secretariat with the BCC delegation being Chair and Deputy Chair of Development Committee and Director of Development.

<b>3</b>	<b>Equality and Good Relations Considerations</b>
3.1	There are no Equality and Good Relations considerations attached to this report.

<b>4</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
4.1	Members are asked to approve the draft BCC response to the request and raise any additional issues, relating to the consultation document, that they would like to be included. Furthermore Members are asked to approve that the Chair and Deputy Chair of Development, or their nominees, and Director of Development meet with the Assembly Group as appropriate.

<b>5</b>	<b>Decision Tracking</b>
The main points from the meeting between Council and the Assembly Group will be presented back to Committee in December 2012.	
Timeframe: December 2012	
Reporting Officer: Shirley McCay	

<b>6</b>	<b>Documents Attached</b>
Appendix 1 - Background to the Assembly Parliamentary Group	
Appendix 2 - The rules of the Assembly Parliamentary Group	