



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Shopmobility
Date:	4 December 2012
Reporting Officer:	John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3470
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1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	Shopmobility Belfast is a charitable organisation employing 10 staff which provides access to mobility equipment such as electric scooters and wheelchairs. The service is available to anyone who has accessibility issues including people with disabilities, older people and those with temporary mobility difficulties;
1.2	The organisation is based at a number of locations in the city and it also provides an outreach service at events such as Rose Week and the Balmoral Show. The organisation has also placed a number of scooters at Belfast Zoo and in Ormeau Park.
1.3	Council have provided support to Shopmobility as part of the Council's Economic Development Strategy since 1995 towards the ongoing development and operating costs of Shopmobility including rental of city centre premises, marketing and promotional materials, and the purchase of a mobility unit and minibus. Until 2008, Council was able to secure 50% of costs associated with the support from the European Regional Development Fund;
1.4	In August 2010, a report was presented to Development Committee to advise of a written request for funding from Shopmobility for a contribution of £25,000 towards its running costs for the year. At this stage the Committee agreed to approve the funding, subject to Shopmobility being advised that no direct financial support would be provided in future by the Development Department. This was subsequently approved at the Council meeting with the proviso that a future report be brought forward with future funding options for the organisation;
1.5	In March 2011, a report was presented to the Development Committee containing a number of options for the future funding of Shopmobility. Two options were presented: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To adhere to the original August 2010 decision; and2. To explore opportunities to support the organisation through a legal agreement with Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM) to undertake a piece of work related to City Centre accessibility.

1.6	It was also noted at this meeting that other organisations throughout the City provided similar services, and, should the Council continue to provide direct funding to Shopmobility on an arbitrary basis, it could leave it open to legal challenge.
1.7	Committee subsequently agreed to option 2, however the BCCM Board confirmed that they believed the services to be provided were not proprietary and that, potentially, an organisation other than Shopmobility could provide these services.
1.8	Shopmobility – and one other organisation – responded to this tender and following an assessment process the contract was subsequently awarded to Shopmobility. This contract was administered through BCCM.
1.9	Shopmobility also receive small levels of financial support from other Council departments, principally Parks & Leisure, for work undertaken in City Parks and at major events.
1.10	Recent research conducted by Shopmobility suggests that customers of their service make 6400 visits to the City Centre annually, accompanied by 2 friends/family members and collectively spend approximately £960,000 within the retail and hospitality sectors.
1.11	A number of other Councils across Northern Ireland currently fund Shopmobility in their respective areas. These include Lisburn (£1,000 per annum), Carrickfergus (up to £5,000 per annum) and Cookstown (£1,500 per annum). Both Lisburn and Carrickfergus fund Shopmobility through their respective Small Grants Schemes whereas Cookstown Borough Council provide an annual in-kind contribution to Shopmobility by hosting them rent free in the Burnavon Arts centre.

2	Key Issues
2.1	Shopmobility have approached the Economic Development Unit (EDU) for a contribution towards their running costs for the 2012-13 financial year of £45,000 out of a total of £269,000. Other sources of funding include DRD (£120,000), Belfast Health Trust (£28,000) and the Titanic Signature Building (£6,500). A copy of the budget is enclosed for Members' attention;
2.2	Advice from Legal Services indicates that funding can be provided under the 2002 Miscellaneous Provisions Order. However, the advice also suggests that if there are any other organisations who could undertake the same sort of service as Shopmobility, any direct payment to them may be challengeable.
2.3	In previous years the request has been for between £20,000 and £25,000.
2.4	In light of the legal advice presented, a number of options have been identified and are presented for Members' consideration: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do not accede to the request for funding; 2. Agree to providing funding of £25,000 in line with the level of support provided in recent years; 3. Agree to meet the full requested amount of £45,000; and 4. Development of a contract for city centre accessibility services. Please note that a contract for services would be subject to a public procurement exercise either through a quotation or a tender with no guarantee that Shopmobility would be successful.

3	Resource Implications
3.1	<p>The resource implications vary depending on which option is preferred:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No resource implications; 2. A commitment of £25,000 would be required; 3. A commitment of £45,000 would be required; 4. A commitment of up to £45,000 would be required in addition to staff time to oversee the procurement process and the project's implementation.

4	Equality and Good Relations Considerations
4.1	Legislation and good practice will be adhered to with the proposal making a positive contribution to equality and good relations by enhancing access to the city centre for those with accessibility problems.

5	Recommendations
5.1	Members are asked to consider the options provided and provide guidance on the preferred option.

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

7	Key to Abbreviations
DRD – Department for Regional Development	

8	Documents Attached
Appendix 1 – Shopmobility Budget 2012-2013	