



**Reconsidered Item  
City Centre Business Information Point**

**Meeting of Development Committee, Tuesday, 20th August, 2013 4.30 pm (Item 10.)**

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

**“1 Relevant Background Information**

***1.1 Members will be aware that under the Review of Public Administration, the responsibility for enterprise will transfer to local councils. With this in mind the Economic Development Unit has begun to scope out potential enterprise initiatives to pilot prior to the transfer. Demand from businesses has highlighted a need for greater access to Council’s services and easier access to the programmes and advice that are offered in the city.***

***1.2 One such pilot initiative is to provide a dedicated information resource in the city centre to deal with business start and development enquiries and to link businesses with council services including Building Control and Environmental Health as well as the suite of programmes provided by the Economic Development Unit. The space would also serve as an area to facilitate workshops, outreach development, showcasing venue and meeting space.***

***1.3 As part of our engagement with partner organisations on this issue, a number of organisations have confirmed that they would be supportive of this approach. In addition, one organisation has confirmed that it was also considering this approach and has identified the opportunity to collaborate on a pilot project in this field. This could provide an opportunity for Council to support a model to test a city-centre business information point.***

**2 Key Issues**

***2.1 Feedback from businesses and start ups in the city has identified that it can be difficult to obtain all the information needed to start up, grow and develop a business in the city. While there are numerous sources of information, there is not one central information point. As clients can have enquiries as wide-ranging as business planning, environmental issues, planning issues, recycling queries, building control matters and information on forming companies, it can be challenging for entrepreneurs to access all the information they require.***

***2.2 The recently commissioned Integrated Economic Strategy has identified a range of key issues facing Belfast post-RPA. Currently businesses in Belfast look to both BCC and Invest NI for advice, guidance and support. Post-RPA the great majority by number of businesses will look to the council alone. Forthcoming research suggests that many businesses are unaware of the breadth of services offered by the council or are unclear as to who they need to contact regarding the wide range of challenges that they face on a day-***

*to-day basis in their business. The Council's 2013 business survey (report currently at draft stage) also notes that while businesses continue to be interested in programmes like business planning and sales development there is also significant demand for advice on Building Control issues, Health and Safety and Licensing.*

*2.3 A centrally placed information point could provide an opportunity for proactive outreach to the business community, facilitate engagement with potential start-up entrepreneurs and give council a visible presence with local communities.*

*2.4 As part of our discussions with enterprise support partners, ORTUS have identified plans to consider the opening of a pop-up business information resource in a city centre location (premises have been identified – unit is currently vacant). ORTUS was established in 1988 to actively promote sustainable social, economic and environmental regeneration by providing property and business development support. They are members of the Enterprise NI Network and deliver a range of business start and development programmes.*

*2.5 The proposed dedicated business information point would be staffed on a full-time basis and provide pre-start, start up and growth zones allowing clients to obtain information and signposting. The first floor of the premises will also be available as a space to facilitate enterprise outreach sessions including ideas generation, meetings and showcase space for businesses in a prime city centre location.*

*2.6 The resource could act as a signposting agent to the Council as well as other relevant bodies including: Invest NIRICS, NISP, HMRC, Advice NI, Banking sector, Labour Relations Agency, The Prince's Trust, UCIT/UNLTD, DEL, Universities and Colleges and HSENI*

*2.7 The business information point could provide an opportunity for those providing business advice services and support to work on a partnership basis providing a comprehensive and effective service for potential entrepreneurs and businesses in the city that is centred around the needs of the business – as opposed to the business having to seek out the support from a range of sources and across a number of locations.*

*2.8 Within the council, there is considerable support from Building Control to look at this proposal on a pilot basis with a view to improving the way in which the council interfaces with existing and would-be businesses and to developing flexible and targeted support services to address business growth issues.*

*2.9 In order to minimise the risk to the council and to allow us to explore this approach, it is proposed that a partnership is developed with ORTUS to pilot this approach, sharing the financial commitment for the first year of the service. Progress will be reviewed on a regular basis and efforts will be made to bring on additional internal and external partners with a view to providing a comprehensive one stop shop for business information and support, in a city centre location.*

### **3 Resource Implications**

#### **3.1 Financial**

*The total cost for operating the unit for one year will be around £80,000. ORTUS have committed resources of £41,000 and have asked whether the Council could make a commitment of £39,000 towards staffing, fit-out and overhead costs. These resources can be made available within the council's enterprise support budget.*

### **4 Recommendations**

**4.1 Approve the resourcing of a pilot business information point for one year, up to a value of £39,000 and to note the commitment to maximise the input from and referrals through to other business support agencies in the city and other council departments, in order to enhance the impact of this project.”**

A number of Members suggested that, rather than agreeing to accede to the request submitted to provide funding towards the establishment of the information point, the Council might have undertaken its own research to ascertain the market demand for the service within the City. In addition, it was suggested that, in order to achieve best value for the Council, an expressions of interest exercise could have been undertaken. A further Member expressed concern that the amount requested within the report had not been supported with a detailed breakdown of the associated costs.

### **Proposal**

Moved by Councillor Reynolds,  
Seconded by Councillor Hussey,

That the Committee agrees to defer, until its meeting on 17th September, consideration of the report to enable further detailed costs in respect of the request by ORTUS to be submitted for consideration.

On a vote by show of hands eight Members voted for the proposal and ten against and it was declared lost.

### **Further Proposal**

Moved by Councillor Mac Giolla Mhin,  
Seconded by Councillor Maskey,

That the Committee agrees to adopt the recommendation, subject to the circulation to all Members, prior to the meeting of the Council on 2nd September, of a breakdown of the detailed costs in respect of the request by ORTUS.

On a vote by show of hands ten Members voted for the proposal and nine against and it was declared carried.