



Belfast City Council

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| Report to: | Parks and Leisure Committee |
| Subject: | Parks Improvement Agenda |
| Date: | 14 August 2008 |
| Reporting Officer: | Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure |
| Contact Officer: | Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure |

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to:

- (i) seek approval to proceed to implement the recommendations contained in the report of SOLACE Enterprises and to outline some practical next steps for taking these forward, in a prioritised sequence; and
- (ii) to inform Members of the progress that is already being made in developing the Service;

Relevant Background Information

Since the formation of the Parks and Leisure Department in April 2007, work has been ongoing with the Departmental Management Team, Business Improvement Service, Human Resources and the Core Improvement Team to develop an improvement agenda that would lead to the creation of a Department that can more effectively contribute to the Council's vision for Belfast becoming a better place to live in, work in and visit.

The main areas of work within the improvement agenda are:

- business planning;
- performance management;
- financial management;
- developing management capacity; and
- communications.

One of the key elements of this overall plan of work included a more in-depth focus on the Parks and Cemeteries Service and defining the level of change which would be required in order to develop the Service into a modern

customer oriented one, delivering in line with the ambitious expectations of the City.

To assist with this process the services of an experienced parks practitioner were secured through SOLACE Enterprises to:

- develop and articulate a modern customer-orientated, outcome focused service that will promote and assist in the delivery of the Council's aims and objectives; and
- undertake a baseline assessment of the existing service, excluding the zoo which will be the subject of a separate piece of work.

All of this work was done within the context of:

- the Parks and Leisure vision for future service provision within the Departmental plan;
- the important role Parks can play in delivering the corporate objectives of the Council as articulated within the Corporate plan 2008 - 2011;
- the major projects that are already programmed (Connswater Community Greenway, the Giant's Park, Loughside etc) in which Parks will take a leading role;
- the Council's improvement agenda;
- the growing financial pressures and the need to deliver both an efficient and effective service;
- preparing for RPA; and
- recognising the shadow of change that has been hanging over the service since November 2005.

SOLACE Enterprise's report outlines the current and ongoing position within the Service, diagnosing what the strengths and weaknesses of the Service are and makes recommendations on how it may be improved.

Members will also recall that the Parks and Leisure Committee, at its meeting on 13 September 2007, granted authority to create additional posts within the Parks and Leisure structure within existing payroll budgets. One of the posts considered essential for the future management of the Parks and Cemeteries Service is that of Parks Services Manager, the most senior management post within the Service. This post will be necessary to sustain the change programme and to provide leadership to the Service going forward.

The SOLACE Enterprises associate has also provided interim management for the Service since his engagement. This has allowed the recommendations made to be based on the reality of the daily management experience. This has also enabled elements of the work required to be progressed (see recommendations 6 and 7).

Key Issues

The key issue is how to take the recommendations forward to effect change as quickly as possible. The recommendations may be categorised into five broad groupings:

Recommendations 1 and 2 are aimed at establishing how the authority should approach the design and future management of our parks and to immediately put this into practice by redesigning two main parks. This would have an immense positive effect on raising staff morale especially given their disappointment when, following the adoption of the Open Spaces strategy in 2004, little changed in relation to proactive parks improvement. Subject to agreeing the parks work could start immediately

Recommendations 3 - 5 involves the restructuring of the Service. It is proposed that a number of costed options could be drawn up by January 2009, one of which would involve no growth. Early consultations with staff indicate that there is a growing recognition of the need for such and that planning at the margins will not produce the change that is needed (a verbal report on the consultation exercise will be given at the meeting). It is proposed that an inclusive approach will be taken to the review to achieve staff involvement and buy in. It will also attempt to shift resources from back of house to frontline where possible. Progress reports and Members input will be made through the Members Focus Group and once the preferred option is agreed a detailed project plan will be prepared with a view to an early implementation.

Recommendation 6 is aimed at delivering a geographical database depicting all of our sites and the levels of maintenance being applied. This will enable parks managers to manage and will enable the City to compare how it is performing with others. This is already being progressed through an in-house team supported by the Business Improvement Team and ISB under the overall direction of the Interim Manager. The composition of the in-house team involving managers and operational staff reflects the inclusive approach we wish to take. In addition to addressing the asset register, the use of machinery has also begun to be measured with interesting results. It is anticipated that this work will be completed by November 2008.

Recommendation 7 is aimed at addressing the skills capacity issues identified and to develop and prepare the staff for what will hopefully be a smooth transition. As has been pointed out by SOLACE Enterprises, structural change alone will not deliver change. Again, the department is progressing this recommendation. Parks staff are currently involved in the management development programme being delivered by Ad Lumen as well as responding positively to the fresh direction being given by the Interim Manager who is emphasising the need for teamwork and the need to adopt a more strategic approach. In relation to the latter, work has commenced on a policy/strategy for play area provision, play area safety, and playing field provision in addition to a review of the parks strategy Your City Your Space.

It is also recognised that to successfully implement the recommendations made by SOLACE Enterprises, significant progress will be required in the re-engineering of the supporting business processes and business infrastructure within the Service in line with the agreed agenda for the wider departmental improvement. Dedicated support, including corporate support, will be required for these elements of work to ensure progress. Detailed project plans will be developed for each element of this work.

It is proposed that recommendations are taken forward by the Director in association with SOLACE Enterprises acting in an interim management capacity. This would be supported by the Policy and Business Development Manager and Business Manager. Business Improvement and other corporate support will also be used as required.

Resource Implications

Financial

The financial implications involved in the next phase will be:

- Interim management arrangements (3 months) – approximately £18,000 and reasonable expenses which is based on a negotiated reduction in SOLACE Enterprise's rates of just under 15%.
- Project management and development of options and staff/TU consultation – officer time
- Recruitment of a permanent post of Parks Services Manager (indicative grade PO11 - £50,012).

Human Resources

Delivery of most of the activities detailed in the Project Plan at Appendix I will require dedicated officer time and the buy-in and support of the support of staff across the Parks and Cemeteries Service.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- (i) approve the recommendations contained in SOLACE Enterprise's report as outlined above;
- (ii) grant authority to appoint a permanent post of Parks Services Manager in line with previous discussions of 13 September 2007; and
- (iii) grant authority to implement interim management arrangements for at least 3 months until a Parks Services Manager is appointed through retaining the services of SOLACE Enterprises at the negotiated reduced rate

Key to abbreviations

None.

Documents attached

Appendix 1: SOLACE Enterprises report: Belfast City Council Parks Service.