



Belfast City Council

Report to:	The Audit Panel.
Subject:	PROJECT TO REVIEW APPROVAL AND CONTROL PROCESSES AND TRAVEL POLICY
Date:	11 March 2008.
Reporting Officer:	Trevor Salmon, Director of Corporate Services
Contact Officer:	Heather Loudon, Head of Financial Services

Relevant Background Information

The Council received a Freedom of Information (FOI) enquiry on 18 January 2008 from Kevin Magee of the BBC. He requested the following:-

1. Details of the extent and cost of travel outside Northern Ireland taken by members of staff and City Councillors over the past three years.
2. Details of the reason for the trips, who embarked on the travel, the date, destination, duration and overall costs involved.
3. A breakdown of the planned costs and people, staff and Councillors, likely to participate in the forthcoming trip to Nashville.

The statutory Regulations require the Council to make available, on request, the information on allowances and travel payments made to Members. Several years ago the Policy and Resources Committee took the decision to meet this requirement by publishing this information annually as a matter of course under the Publication Scheme for FOI. This information requested by Mr Magee was therefore readily accessible and already in the public domain.

The current database of payments to staff only holds the information for the last two years requested (2005/06 and 2006/07) and does not hold details of duration. Under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) an applicant has the option of either paying any fee or charge which a public authority assesses as the cost of carrying out additional work to meet a request or to amend the request to match the information which can be provided without charge. When contacted Mr Magee opted to amend his request to staff information for the two years and not to seek the information relating to duration.

The Nashville information was substantially already in the public domain through Committee report.

All of the information requested and amended was sent to Mr Magee within the 20 day time limited defined in the FOIA.

Dealing with this enquiry revealed that the current data held for staff was difficult to handle and, more importantly, cumbersome to validate quickly. There was no connection between the raw data and the business case for the expenditure as the data was not being captured to assist management interrogation. The information on Members was more accessible and intelligible because of its routine production for the FOI Publication Scheme.

To deal with these shortcomings a cross-departmental review team, including Audit Governance and Risk Services, has commenced work under the chairmanship of the Head of Financial Services and reporting to me. The first meeting of the group will be on 4 March.

The review will have the following objectives and outputs:-

Objectives

1. To review current approval and control processes and the travel policy
2. To identify improvements to both processes and policy which matches the new financial systems, takes account of the human resources strategy and workforce development plan's needs and which provides for continuous improvement
3. To ensure that the new processes enable improved access to information which enables improved on-going scrutiny of value for money and greater accountability, both internally and externally

Outputs

1. A travel policy which it is agreed is fit for the purpose for the organisation
2. Reviewed and where necessary improved control mechanisms and processes
3. A framework for compliance monitoring, value for money audit and continuous review
4. An action plan for implementation including communication and training

It is anticipated that the project will be completed by the end of June 2008 with the exception on any technological changes which cannot be accomplished within this timeframe. The initial focus will be on ensuring that any improvements which can be made to improve control and accountability through accessibility are put in place as quickly as possible. Ideally these should be put in place for the new financial year.

Key issues

The Strategic Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting on 22 February referred the matter to this Panel "to scrutinise the costs and reasons for all journeys being undertaken by Council employees and to ensure that existing controls and systems continued to be reviewed and tightened." It was indicated that the Panel should report to the Committee in the near future.

The Committee also agreed that the Council would move towards publishing all details

of staff trips under the Publication Scheme, as is currently the case for Members, in order to become more transparent and open to the public. The mechanism for doing this will be identified by the group which has been established and consultation with the trade unions will commence.

Resource Implications

Financial

None

Human Resources

None

Asset and Other Implications

None

Recommendations

The Audit Panel are requested to approve the Terms of Reference for the Review and Approval and Control Processes and Travel Policy.

Key to Abbreviations

FOI – Freedom of Information

FOIA – Freedom of Information Act 2000

Documents Attached

None

