



## BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>City Hall grounds tours – pilot implementation</b>
<b>Date:</b>	18 <sup>th</sup> April 2008
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	George Wright – Head of Facilities Management
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	As above

### Relevant background information

Members will be aware that the Council has sought to ensure that citizens of the city, visitors and tourists are made aware that the closure of the City Hall is a temporary situation and that the grounds very much remain open as usual. The Big Wheel, the Christmas Market and the Proms are just some of the high-profile events which contribute very positively to this message.

Members will also be aware that the public tours of the City Hall have, for some time, been one of the principal tourist attractions in the city, and that tour participant numbers had increased to almost 60,000 per annum by the closure date. It is clearly important to try to minimise the adverse effects of the closure on the ongoing popularity of tours when the City Hall re-opens, and also to look for additional ways in which to emphasize that the grounds remain open as usual.

One potentially effective way of achieving both objectives is to organize tours of the City Hall grounds, and following COMT endorsement of this proposal some initial research has been undertaken and some modest expenditure already incurred in order to develop the proposal outlined below.

It should be noted that the proposed tours would seek to tell the story of the city generally and would not be limited solely to items located in the grounds, but the tour content seeks to link all of these references back to the City Hall as the focal point of Belfast's political, social and cultural development over the last century. The script was devised by a professional researcher and copywriter, Seth Linder, on foot of a quotation exercise.

The initial proposal is that 2 tours each week-day be offered, lasting approximately 45 minutes each, based on the script referred to above. The tours would, if approved, be available on a pilot basis from May until September 2008, and their continued provision could then be reviewed.

In terms of resources, Members will be aware that the Facilities Management Section currently employs 2 permanent tour staff, usually supplemented by an agency employee at times of peak demand. However in the light of the City Hall closure we have recently agreed to release the 2 permanent staff on secondment for 2 days per week at the request of the NI Assembly, in order to conduct private tours of that building. This, combined with the fact that these staff already have a detailed programme of work to complete during the closure period and also because of some related health and welfare issues, would mean that the proposed grounds tours could not be delivered directly by BCC staff.

It would therefore be necessary to recruit and train additional agency staff for the duration of the pilot scheme, with existing BCC tour staff assisting in staff training, administration and providing cover for sickness & holidays etc. As a consequence of this there would be additional expenditure associated with the pilot scheme of approximately **£8,525**.

Clearly, if the proposed tours are to proceed, it will be necessary to recruit and train the relevant staff as soon as possible in order to begin to offer the tours to the public during May 2008.

### **Key Issues**

The principal issue is whether or not Members are of the opinion that the proposed tours would have the effect of ensuring some degree of continuity in terms of tourism and of keeping the City Hall in the public eye until it re-opens, and would therefore be a positive development.

If so, then clearly some additional costs will be associated with the tours, so another key issue is whether or not Members would wish to see these costs recouped (wholly or in part) by the introduction of a charge, or whether the associated costs should be absorbed by the Council for the duration of the pilot scheme and reviewed thereafter.

By way of illustration, on the basis of 2 tours per day (morning and afternoon – Mon-Fri) for a period of 20 weeks with a maximum number per tour of 25 people and an overall average take-up rate of 70%, a charge of **£2.10** per person would recoup all associated costs. The take-up of the tours would, of course, be kept under review and if necessary additional afternoon or Saturday tours could quite easily be added in order to cope with any unmet demand.

Issues may, however, arise in respect of levying flat charges on particular categories of tour participant, notably senior citizens, the unemployed and schools. Consequently, the Committee may wish to consider a base charge of **£3.00** per person, which would permit the offering of concessionary pricing resulting in up to 40% reductions for senior citizens, school-groups and the unemployed.

The Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau has confirmed that it can provide booking and administration facilities in respect of the tours, together with cash-handling if the Committee is minded to introduce a charge, and that it can accommodate either fixed or concessionary pricing.

### **Resources Implications**

#### Financial

Additional expenditure of **£8,575** would be required, although this could be wholly or partially offset by the introduction of a charge for the tours.

#### Human Resources

Agency staff would be required to supplement the existing tour staff resources.

#### Asset & other implications

There are no direct asset implications in respect of this report.

<b>Recommendations &amp; Decisions</b>
--

<p>It is recommended that the Committee approve the provision of City Hall grounds tours on the basis of the content and format set out above.</p>
--

<p>The Committee is requested to decide whether or not a charge ought to be levied for the pilot scheme and, if so, whether this ought to be a flat charge for all participants or on the basis of concessionary charging for appropriate groups.</p>
---

<b>Key to Abbreviations</b>
-----------------------------

None
------

<b>Documents attached</b>
---------------------------

Proposed tour script?

