



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources
Subject:	Council Meetings in City Hall and Reopening Arrangements
Date:	23 January 2009
Reporting Officer:	Gerry Millar, Director of Improvement, Ext: 6217
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Relevant Background Information

Council agreed that the refurbishment work to City Hall would take place in two phases initially to accommodate a proposed 2009 election. Phase 1 was to include the availability of the main civic rooms ie the Council Chamber, Reception Room, Banqueting Hall, Great Hall, Rotunda and associated access and amenity in the form of stairway lift and restrooms. That target has now been achieved although access to the building will only be available from the front.

Phase 1 was completed on 19 November 2008 meaning the Council Chamber was available for the Council meeting from December 2008, although the Committee rooms and Party rooms will not be available until phase 2 in the Summer.

As phase 2 of the construction programme will be ongoing until Summer 2009 a number of temporary arrangements will need to be put in place for Members to hold Council meetings in City Hall from February onwards. Restrictions that will necessarily apply were presented to Members at the October meeting.

At that meeting the Committee agreed to forego a December return due to the Continental Market and to instead organise a site visit with a view to making a decision in January.

Key Information

The site visit duly took place on 11 December and those Members who attended, it is fair to say, were favourably impressed both in terms of the quality of the work and the progress that has been made. A separate visit was also arranged for the High Sheriff in December who was also happy with the project.

The restrictions on using the Council Chamber remain as presented in October and are outlined below:

The Civic Rooms – as stated the main rooms and access to them will be available from 19 November 2008. There will be heating and lighting, toilets available in the East entrance and lift and stair access.

What will **not** be available are any phone or data links and there will be no arts or artefacts displayed in the rooms.

Catering – Facilities Management can provide a cold buffet service as they do presently with the Reception Room made available for dining or if required hot food can be made available. Alternatively, if Members wish, catering could be provided in CWB although that would mean Members having to walk around to the front of City Hall to access the building.

Car Parking – Car parking at City Hall will be limited with although the spaces can be made available at the East and Front entrances or by opening the front gates and parking on the driveway. The main alternative is to park in Adelaide Exchange and walk to City Hall although there is free on street parking in Linenhall Street etc from 6.00pm.

Please note the courtyard is the contractors compound and will be the last part of the contract to be completed.

Pre Council Party Meetings – this remains the most difficult issue although space can be made available for Party Groups to hold Pre Council meetings in the main civic rooms by partitioning some space eg in the Banqueting Room or Great Hall. Please note, however, any Party Groups who wish to meet in City Hall rooms will have fairly basic furniture such as round dining tables and stacking chairs.

The alternative to this ad hoc arrangement is to meet first in Adelaide Exchange and then transfer to City Hall for the Council meeting.

Timing – As any decision taken at this Committee must be ratified at the February Council the Members may consider it more appropriate to use City Hall following a natural break in the year such as Easter, however as stated the Chamber is available with the above restrictions whenever Members decide to move. The alternative is to wait until September when the building will be fully operational.

Reopening Plans – The contract date for completion of the works is August 2009 following which there will be a further period of decanting people back to the building.

We will of course endeavour to improve on this date but at the moment this is the most definite we can be.

The main public facilities will be usable from September onwards and a number of enquiries have been made both to Members and Officers as to the availability of City Hall for banqueting functions. No dates have as yet been agreed.

It is suggested that the first event should be a Council sponsored opening event and that City Hall should not be made available before that takes place. Once this date has been set bookings can then take place as normal.

Furthermore Members are asked to note that the Directors of Development, Improvement and Head of Communications are working with a range of Officers and outside organisations to develop a positive 2009 message for the City. Besides City Hall there are a number of major buildings opening eg Ulster Hall, Ulster Museum, Queens Library etc as well as some major events eg Tall Ships, Sister Cities etc which can boost confidence in the Belfast brand if properly packaged.

The opening event and/or series of events for City Hall would be part of this programme which it is intended to launch at the Ulster Hall opening on 6 March 2009 following agreement by Committee in February.

Members are asked to agree to these plans in principle subject to further details being brought to Committee in February.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

1. Consider the date from which Council meetings should be held in the City Hall;
2. Consider their preference in terms of catering, ie City Hall or CWB or Adelaide Exchange;
3. Consider the preferred location for pre meetings;
4. Note proposed opening plans and agree the first event in City Hall is part of the opening arrangements;
5. Agree that a further report be brought to Committee on the suggested programme of events.

Documents Attached

None

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