



Belfast City Council

Item No:

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	Freedom of Information and Press Coverage
<b>Date:</b>	19 August 2011
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Peter McNaney, Chief Executive
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Jill Minne, Head of Human Resources (Ext. 3220) Eamon Deeny, Head of Corporate Communications John Walsh, Legal Services Manager

**1.0 Relevant Background Information**

- 1.1 Members may have seen the recent article which appeared in the Belfast Telegraph on 25 July 2011 (copy of which is attached at *Appendix 1*), which had been based on three separate Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from a reporter in the Belfast Telegraph. The article covered the costs incurred by the Council over a four-year period in the areas of overtime, agency staff, advertising and legal fees.
- 1.2 Belfast City Council responded to each of the FOI enquiries received in accordance with its statutory obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The responses submitted set out the context and gave relevant background information in relation to each issue. e.g. the Council strives to provide greater value for money for the citizen, achieved £12m in real efficiencies to date; the business case for using agency workers; the reasons for overtime; and that the Council's efficiency agenda places a significant focus on reducing all aspects of employee costs including expenditure on overtime and agency staff. Members will be aware that the Council is already actively working, as part of its efficiency programme, to reduce costs in the target areas covered by the article and has set a £2m efficiency target for 2012/2013. *Appendix 2* contains the FOI replies to the Telegraph in relation to agency workers, overtime and advertising.

**2.0 Key Issues**

**2.1 Balance and Tone of Article**

Members will note from the article that in general terms its tone is critical of Council expenditure in the areas described, using terms such as 'splurged' and 'shelled out'. The article also lacks balance in that it does not refer in any detail to the explanations for expenditure provided in the FOI replies.

Whilst it is clearly in the public interest for all Council expenditure to be subject to scrutiny, it is suggested that the public interest is always best served when a balance of information is provided to permit the public to take an informed view of the story.

**2.2 FOI Requests**

In terms of FOI requests in general, Members should be aware that the Council received **668** such requests last year. Obviously the Council is statutorily obliged to respond to these requests. However the amount of time and effort required to prepare a response can be very different. Some requests can be answered quickly, but many require significant resource. Officers are presently preparing a detailed breakdown of the cost of preparing responses and will bring a report to a further meeting of the Committee.

2.3	<p><b>Developing a Council Response</b></p> <p>Although there is no requirement for an FOI request to specify the reason for which the information is sought, or indeed to identify the name of the person seeking the information, the Council's standard protocol is that all requests made by known media sources will be referred to Corporate Communications for comment and input. Corporate Communications will of course try to ensure that a balanced response is given but it is difficult in some cases to ascertain how the information will be used.</p> <p>If Corporate Communications become aware that a story on a certain topic will run, it will endeavour to brief relevant Council Members, normally Committee Chairs, Group Leaders or the Lord Mayor.</p>
2.4	<p>As Members will be aware, Corporate Communications provide a Current Issues Bulletin to all Members, the purpose of which is to give Members summary information on major topics to assist them in responding to requests for information. However it is recognised that there will be many occasions when Members are asked for comment by media, on which they may wish for briefing from officers. Obviously this happens on a case by case basis but the Head of Corporate Communications is keen to strengthen the flow of information of potential stories to Members to allow them to respond in an informed way. To this end Members are requested to consider whether they wish to nominate individuals from their party political groups to form a Communications Sub-Group to assist in disseminating information and in making recommendations on the Council's communication approach.</p>
2.5	<p><b>Developing a Council Message</b></p> <p>Responding to media requests is an important part of media relations (we receive in excess of 1,500 per year) but perhaps even more important is the need for the Council to proactively get messages out on the positive impact it has on the city and its people. The Council issues over 500 proactive press releases a year and over 90 per cent are used by the media, achieving positive coverage for the Council. However, there is a need to develop strong corporate messages to be used by political representatives and included in press releases, responses to media queries and in other communication channels such as City Matters and social networking sites. Therefore, it is important that in the context of developing the Corporate Plan, the Council's four-year plan setting out how it will contribute to the city's quality of life and its economic and social wellbeing, the Council develops a number of key messages on what it is trying to achieve and then systematically disseminates these messages on a regular basis through its media strategy.</p>

### 3.0 Resource Implications

There are no financial or Human Resources implications contained within this report.

### 4.0 Equality Implications

There are no equality implications contained within this report.

### 5.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- i) note the contents of this report;
- ii) consider the creation of a Members' Communications Sub-Group to assist in disseminating information and to make recommendations on the Council's communication approach for consideration by the Committee; and

iii) agree to the creation of key messages in the context of the creation of the Corporate Plan.

## **6.0 Documents Attached**

**Appendix 1:** Belfast Telegraph article dated 25 July 2011;

**Appendix 2:** FOI replies to the Belfast Telegraph in relation to agency workers, overtime and advertising.