

City council has 2,400 on its payroll... but still spent over £40m on outside services and overtime



More than £40m of ratepayers' money has been spent on outside services and overtime by Belfast City Council

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MORE than £40m of ratepayers' money has been spent on outside services and overtime by Belfast City Council.

Figures obtained following Freedom of Information requests from this newspaper show how City Hall officials have splurged £25,346,509 on agency workers, advertising and legal fees in just four years.

The council which is Northern Ireland's largest local authority with 2,400 workers and an annual budget of around £140m, has also forked out over £18m worth of overtime payments to its employees throughout the same period.

The sums have sparked an

background

Belfast City Council is the largest local authority in Northern Ireland with 2,400 staff working across seven departments and an annual budget of around £140m. There are 51 elected members and Sinn Fein is the largest party with 16 councillors. The

angry reaction from the right-wing Taxpayers' Alliance and elected members who have raised concerns about value for money.

By far the most — £20.8m which totals 4.5% of the council's £84m staffing budget — has been paid out on agency workers and recruitment agencies to plug temporary shortages, seasonal de-

DUP has 15 representatives.

Chief Executive Peter McNaney, received a salary in excess of £122,000, car allowances of £1,518 and £610 in expenses. Last week it emerged the council had spent £81,000 on banners to "dress up" the city streets.

mands and short-term assignments across all departments.

And a total of £1.5m was spent on external legal services, despite the council having its own town advocate.

A significant proportion of the costs are payments made to solicitors for fees in connection with defence of claims (mainly public

liability) in which the case was either settled or the plaintiff successful.

The council, which also has its own public relations team, has shelled out a further £3.2m on advertisements to promote everything from the annual Lord Mayor's Parade to 'Get Home Safe' and waste commercials.

In May the Belfast Telegraph revealed that £18.7m had been spent on overtime.

That sum would have been enough to employ 1,247 street cleaners, 1,168 park rangers or 643 building control surveyors.

A spokeswoman for the Taxpayers' Alliance said: "It's staggering that the council has spent so much on overtime and agency staff in recent years.

"There will always need to be some spending on this but with

better recruitment and improved managing of staff, it should be possible to reduce this bill.

"The City Council has to find millions in savings in the coming years and advertising is one of the first things they should look at cutting spending on.

"Taxpayers expect good quality services in exchange for their rates, not propaganda and poster campaigns.

"Reducing spending on advertising is an easy saving that won't affect frontline services.

"It's really worrying that there seems to be duplication with the council spending money both on an in-house legal team and huge sums on external advice. They must ensure that they are getting value for money in this area."

Sinn Fein City Hall leader Jim McVeigh noted that the council

had made "considerable" savings in recent years but said there was still room for improvement.

"Sinn Fein are looking at how money is spent in relation to the development department in particular as it has the most discretionary spending," he said.

Mr McVeigh said money should be "re-directed" to disadvantaged areas such as north and west Belfast and hinted that a "package" may be made available later in the year.

"We are confident that come the autumn we'll see the council stepping forward and being seen by ratepayers to be playing a part in trying to turn things around."

In a statement a spokeswoman said the council "continually reviews" costs and was "committed to providing value for money and being more efficient".

More than £20m spent to plug staff shortages

THE bill for using agency staff has steadily increased year-on-year.

A total of £20,786,410 has been spent paying recruitment agencies and agency staff salaries to supplement shortages since 2007 — that's the equivalent of £5m a year and eats up 4.5% of the council's annual salary budget.

In May, the Belfast Telegraph highlighted how civic bosses had spent a further £18,748,167 on overtime payments — which worked out at an average of £1,953 a year for each of the 2,400 employees.

There are currently around 120 vacant posts in the council's structure.

According to the latest

agency staff

figures, 170 agency workers are being used to plug temporary shortages, seasonal demands and short-term assignments.

In its response Belfast City Council said using agency staff was "good practice".

Jill Minne, head of human resources wrote: "It would be impossible to recruit and directly employ staff given the immediate/short-term need.

"It is good practice to use agency workers as it avoids the costs of recruitment and other additional staff on-costs."

ADVERTISING costs have set Belfast ratepayers back more than £3m over the past four years.

The council has spent £3,208,186 on television, billboard, bus advertisements, newspaper and leaflet promotion of everything from the Tall Ships festival to dog fouling campaigns.

The council, which has an in-house public relations team, has been making efforts to reduce advertising spending in recent years and costs have dropped from £822,447 in 2009/10 to £614,360 last year.

However, questions are still being raised about value for money.

By far, the highest amount —

Promotional campaign bill soared to over £3m

advertising

£352,013 — was spent publicising markets such as St George's, which opened for the first time on a Sunday last year.

However, a significant proportion, £812,575, also went on advertising three waste campaigns — 'Waste, It's Not Rubbish', 'Waste, Time for Action' and 'Start Saving, Stop Wasting'.

A further £679,733 was spent on anti-litter adverts.

And £11,632 was spent on an anti-social behaviour campaign aimed at deterring young people, particularly in the Holy Lands area of south Belfast, from becoming involved in street disorder.

Legal costs hit £1.5m despite in-house team

THE council may have its own 'in-house' legal team but they still paid more than £1.5m for solicitor and barrister services.

John Walsh, legal services manager at City Hall, said a "significant proportion of the costs" were connected with the defence of public liability claims.

However, this newspaper has established that £119,535 of ratepayer's money was used to fund legal representation at equal pay and industrial tribunals.

Last year, a record £56,694 was dished out to defend the council at tribunals, with Health and Environmental Services generating a bill of

legal fees

£43,625 — the highest of the seven main departments.

Mr Walsh said: "Belfast City Council has an in-house legal service.

"A significant proportion of the costs relate to payments made to external solicitors for fees in connection with the defence of claims (mainly public liability) in which the case was either settled or the plaintiff successful.

"Almost all claims made against the council or other forms of litigation are handled internally with external counsel engaged to undertake advocacy."

Marketing