



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	Arrangements for Monthly Political Party Briefings
Date:	21 st October, 2011
Reporting Officer:	Stephen McCrory, Democratic Services Manager (ext 6314)
Contact Officer:	

1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	The importance of the Political Parties on the Council has increased over recent years and the Parties expect matters of importance or those which are complex to be presented either to the Party Leaders Forum or to the Party Groups for early comment before a report is submitted to the appropriate Committee.
1.2	At the moment, there is no structure in place to co-ordinate the dates of Party briefings or how they can contribute to the decision-making process. It should be remembered that a request to brief the Parties will necessitate 6 separate briefings which impacts upon the Members and senior officers alike in terms of the time commitment required.
1.3	It is clear that the need to brief the Parties will continue and that this is driven both by the Council Departments and by the Parties themselves. It is always difficult to find dates when both the Party Members and the necessary senior officers are free and officers realise that it is essential that briefings are organised so as to best suit the elected Members.
1.4	The Parties have now identified dates and times each month (with the exclusion of July and December) when their Members would be free for a 90 minute session. These dates will be included in the Committee meeting schedule and the monthly Remembrances so that Members and officers can both plan properly for the sessions. Democratic Services will provide appropriate refreshments for these meetings.

2	Key Issues
2.1	<p>A three month trial was held in 2006 when the dates of monthly Party briefings were organised in advance. The exercise was generally seen as positive by both Members and officers and a survey of Members demonstrated that 77% were in favour of the pilot scheme being made permanent. There is, therefore, evidence that a system of more regulated briefings would be welcomed.</p>
2.2	<p>It is vital for the success of any new arrangements that there is a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of both Members and officers and a healthy mutual respect between the two. The new arrangements must have demonstrative benefits to both the Members and officers if they are to succeed. It can only be to the benefit of the Council if the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and the Political Parties are working so far as is possible in harmony towards the achievement of the key priorities in the Corporate Plan. It is recognised that individual Parties will have their own views on individual matters of policy which will differ from those of other Parties and those of Chief Officers. However, it should benefit everyone if there is a co-ordinated system in place which allows important and/or complex issues to be fed through the Parties before reaching Committee. It should also help towards a more informed and constructive debate on these important matters at Committee.</p>
2.3	<p>One of the most important issues to get right if this is to work is a mechanism to co-ordinate how issues get on the agenda for the Party briefings. It is vital that the briefings are not viewed as only a way in which officers can brief Members on what officers consider to be important. There must be ownership of the briefings by the Parties themselves.</p>
2.4	<p>Of course, it is extremely important that Chief Officers are able to brief all of the Parties on important matters such as the estimates process, the Corporate Plan, performance management etc and a defined schedule of meeting dates will allow officers to know in advance when the Parties will need to be briefed. For example, there would be a clear advantage to both Members and officers if officers knew well in advance the dates and times when they would be briefing the Parties on the estimates and capital programme rather than the current system where they are struggling to find dates within a very tight timescale.</p>
2.5	<p>In order for this to work properly, Chief Officers have a vital role to play. At the moment, individual Chief Officers and other senior officers often include a statement within Committee reports that they will brief the Parties on issues without any central control and this is partly responsible for the log jam in the meeting schedule. CMT has agreed to play the role of deciding on a monthly basis the one or two (maximum) matters of most importance to be included on the agenda for Party briefings.</p>

2.6	Equally, it is vital that time is allowed in each briefing for matters which have been raised by the Parties themselves. It must be recognised that the Parties control the briefings and that the agenda is not simply at the entire discretion of Chief Officers. For example, one Party might ask for a briefing on Arterial Routes. This does not mean that briefings on this subject have to be held for the other five Parties, which will save a considerable amount of time. The Parties are asked to agree not to raise ad hoc requests for briefings at Committee meetings. Rather, they are asked to agree that only the Party Leader (and/or Deputy Leader for the larger Parties) would be entitled to request that a subject is added to a monthly briefing session.
2.7	It must be recognised that no matter how much we try to regulate the business of the briefings, there will always be occasions when it will be necessary to arrange special briefings at short notice or where it will be necessary to arrange briefings on an area basis rather than on a Party basis. This can be accomplished with the Parties' agreement if it is seen as the exception rather than the rule, and every effort should be made to minimise the number of occasions when such emergency briefings are necessary.
2.8	During the year there will in all likelihood be occasions when CMT have not identified any issues that require the Parties to be briefed and in the same month a Party does not identify and individual issues about which it requires a briefing. In such circumstances either the briefing will be cancelled or, if it is deemed by the Party to be useful, the scheduled date could be used for Party development work under the Member Development Programme.
2.9	This will not work if there is not a resource provided to make sure that it is co-ordinated properly. This has already been accommodated within the new Democratic Services staffing structure. A Democratic Services Officer would be assigned to certain Parties and would work closely with them on the programme of briefings. Those officers would meet with the Party Officers to agree the agenda (made up of those issues agreed by CMT as important for all Parties and those issues which the individual Party wishes to be briefed about) and to ensure that this can be accommodated within the available time. The officers would prepare the agenda, liaise with the appropriate senior officers, issue the associated papers, attend the briefing, take a note of decisions, prepare a minute and follow up any decisions taken – similar to the work they undertake for the individual Committees. It is extremely important that the role of the Democratic Services Officers is defined clearly. They would not be attending political meetings of the Parties, such as those held prior to Council meetings to discuss the Parties' positions on matters before the Council, and they cannot be seen as a Party resource. Rather, their role must be tightly defined within the Party briefing arrangements.

3	Resource Implications
3.1	The responsibility for staffing the Party Briefing sessions will rest with the Democratic Services Section and these duties have been included in existing job descriptions. There would not be any additional financial or Human Resources costs.

4	Good Relations and Equality
	None

5	Recommendations
	It is recommended that the Committee:
5.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree to the establishment of monthly Party briefings on the basis set out in the report with effect from January, 2012;
5.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the date and time of the monthly briefings as set out in Appendix 1; and
5.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree that from January 2012 all requests for individual Party Briefings must be through the Party Leader or Deputy Leader.

6	Key to Abbreviations
	CMT – Corporate Management Team