

**MEETING OF THE JOINT GROUP OF THE PARTY LEADERS
FORUM AND HISTORIC CENTENARIES WORKING GROUP**

Minutes of the Meeting of Friday, 2nd December, 2011

Members present: Councillor Hendron (Chairman);
Aldermen Browne, Ekin, Newton, Smyth and Rodgers; and
Councillors Attwood, Hanna, Maskey, McVeigh and
Reynolds.

In attendance: Mr. P. McNaney, Chief Executive;
Mr. C. Quigley, Town Solicitor and
Assistant Chief Executive;
Mrs. H. Francey, Good Relations Manager;
Mr. S. McCrory, Democratic Services Manager; and
Ms. C. Wilson, Project Officer.

Apology

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Councillor Kyle.

Withdrawal of Unionist Members

Councillor Reynolds stated that it had been agreed by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee that a range of diversity issues, including the use of the Irish language and memorabilia in and around the City Hall, should be referred to the Working Group meeting with Group Leaders to enable a full discussion on the issues to take place. He stated that the decision which had been taken by the Council at its meeting on 1st December in relation to the erection of an Irish language Christmas sign at the East entrance area of the City Hall, in the view of the Unionist Parties, undermined this discussion and therefore Members of the DUP, UUP and PUP intended to withdraw from the meeting.

The Members of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Progressive Unionist Party then withdrew from the meeting.

Following the withdrawal of the Unionist Members, a number of Members expressed their disappointment and stated their view that the Unionist Members should have remained in the meeting and discussed their concerns with the Members from other Parties. Members also stated that decisions had been made at the Council meeting on 1st December in relation to the flowerbed in the Ormeau Park and the use of the park by the Joint Unionist Committee in May.

The Chief Executive pointed out that a decision was needed as to how the Group wished to proceed. He encouraged all the Parties on the Council to meet to try and resolve any outstanding issues so that the work of the Joint Group could proceed in a manner inclusive of all parties.

Following discussion, the Group decided, as there were no decisions which were required to be taken at the meeting today, to proceed with the remainder of the meeting and, in particular, the briefing from Dr. John Kremer on the Equality Impact Assessment concerning the memorabilia in the City Hall and its grounds. The Group requested that the Chief Executive arrange to call a meeting of the Party Leaders on the Council to discuss the way forward for the development of a Council Diversity Strategy.

Development of a Council Diversity Strategy

The Group considered the undernoted report which had been prepared by the Chief Executive:

“1.0 Relevant Background Information

1.1 Members will be aware that Strategic Policy and Resources Committee at its meeting on 18 November 2011 agreed:

‘that the Party Group leaders meet with the Centenaries Working Group over a defined period of time, as set out (in the report), to explore the possibility of developing a Council strategy on diversity and agree that the Chief Executive’s office liaise with Members to agree a timetable of meetings to be tabled at the first joint meeting of the Historic Centenaries Group.’

1.2 The Committee noted a range of issues relating to cultural diversity on which the Council will have to make decisions in the near future:

- memorabilia and displays in and around the City Hall
- Flying of the Union Flag EQIA
- the Decade of Centenaries programme, events, cultural displays in Council public facilities
- use of the Irish language
- Use of the Ulster-Scots language
- Use of minority languages
- How the Council deals with homecoming parades
- Queen’s Diamond Jubilee celebrations and expressions of distinctiveness within local areas and neighbourhoods (i.e. including public art, signage and symbolism).

1.3 The Good Relations Partnership has made considerable progress in connecting the city development and good relations agenda. This is demonstrated through the development of the Good Relations Plan and the most recent Peace and Reconciliation Plan.

In mid-2008, the Council facilitated a visit to Chicago, Illinois which resulted in a series of recommendations in relation to developing a welcoming and open city. A summary of the associated research and recommendations, particularly on the development of shared spaces, is attached as an appendix.

2.0 Key Issues

Good relations and community cohesion are vital ingredients for the city's future development and there is a real opportunity to transform the potential for disputes over our multiple identities into cultural wealth. Ultimately, Belfast's abundant 'cultural wealth' could prove double the asset, in terms of attractions for visitors and residents alike.

However, without an overarching agreement there is a risk that issues related to the expression of identity may descend into serious division, distracting Members from their ambitious growth agenda contained within the stimulus package.

Neutrality to Diversity

As the Council continues in its journey from neutrality towards a "good and harmonious" environment, there is an emerging imperative to upgrade the organisational capacity to manage diversity.

At present, neutrality provides a useful protection against potentially offensive or extreme manifestations of political symbolism and any new diversity policy would have to incorporate similar safeguards. This would be underpinned by a commitment to inclusive dialogue and community engagement to resolve any issues which are potentially divisive.

All of the issues listed above (1.2) require resolution as they touch not only on the Council's equality obligations under Section 75 (i) and (ii), but also go to the core of the Council corporate agenda.

The purpose of this process is therefore to develop a council strategy on diversity which would allow Council to approach all of these issues in a consistent, fair and open manner.

Proposal

The proposal is to develop a broad, commonly-agreed cultural framework/strategy rather than a set of ad hoc responses to diversity. A diversity strategy or 'framework of principles' would enable the Council to promote equality and a commitment to the full inclusion and participation of all communities in the city.

Purpose of Joint Group

It is proposed that the aim of the joint group is:

To develop and agree an overarching framework of principles as the basis for developing a Council 'Managing Diversity' strategy (*working title*).

The group (known as the '*Joint Group*') will report, at the appropriate times to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Framing the agenda – options

The options proposed for the development of a framework of principles and strategy on diversity are:

Option 1

The Joint Group would seek to expand the principles already agreed by the Historic Centenaries Working Group and approved by SP&R Committee, with a view to developing an overarching framework of principles which allows decisions to be made in a consistent, fair and open manner. Following agreement on the principles, consideration would be given to how this impacts upon the various diversity issues as well as organisational implications.

Option 2

The Joint Group agrees a prioritised sequence of discussions on the list of diversity issues (as above at 1.2) to enable decisions on each issue which combined would form a strategy. These meetings would seek relevant expert contributions and build upon the principles already agreed by the Historic Centenaries Working Group and approved by Strategic Policy and Resources Committee. The next meeting of the group (13 December) would agree the schedule of items for discussion.

At the conclusion of the chosen process a full report would be presented to the Committee for decision on the overall policy and the individual elements by March 2012.

Option 3

The Members may wish to discuss an alternative option on how they wish to take forward the conversation.

External facilitation

No diversity policy will be possible without political agreement. This will require an open and frank discussion on the implications of the framework of principles and the strategy. For this reason, Members might consider whether it might be beneficial to invite external, independent expert facilitation for the series of meetings.

Building consensus through dialogue

At meetings of the Historic Centenaries Working Group, there is a common agreement that items will only be forwarded to the formal Committee system when there is cross-party consensus or an agreement to formally consider a range of options. The Joint Group might consider adopting a similar approach. It is proposed that this will be an arena for private dialogue and a place where participants have licence to think aloud. Members will need to be confident that opinions expressed in the meetings will be treated under Chatham House rules.

Frequency of meetings

The Strategic Policy and Resources Committee has recommended that a focused period of time is dedicated to this task. Given the urgency and priority of the matter, Members may wish to consider fortnightly 2 hour meetings which will allow for the flow of discussion to remain relatively sustained as well as facilitate any papers requested by the group to be prepared by officers or external experts. The dates, up until end of February, will be tabled at the meeting.

It was agreed by Strategic Policy and Resources that Members of the Joint Group would be able to nominate a party colleague if they were unable to attend.

Other issues

The Joint Group will be aware that the Historic Centenaries Working Group has recently received representation from the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland and the Ulster Centenary Committee seeking usage of Council facilities during 2012. Decisions on both applications were deferred pending receipt of further information and the development of a Council diversity policy. The Joint Group will have to consider the applications in the context of the strategy development and provide timely advice to the relevant Committees.

3.0 Resource Implications

Human: Staff from the Chief Executive's Department will be involved in the development of any future strategy.

Financial: Costs for external facilitation will be covered within existing revenue budgets within the Chief Executive's Department.

Assets: None.

4.0 Equality Implications

Any strategy would have to ensure compliance with existing legal requirements and Equality Commission guidelines but should aim to promote better community relations within both the Council and the city.

5.0 Decisions required

To select option 1, 2 or an alternative option developed by the Members, for framing the agenda

To agree use or otherwise of external facilitation

To agree the principle of Chatham House rules for the meetings

To agree frequency of meetings

6.0 Officers to contact

**Hazel Francey, Good Relations Manager (Ext. 6020)
Caroline Wilson, Project Officer (Ext. 3399)"**

The Group decided, given that the Unionist Members had earlier withdrawn from the meeting, not to take any decisions in relation to the development of a Council Diversity Strategy and requested that the Chief Executive arrange for the next meeting of the Group to focus on the establishment of a key set of principles in relation to the Diversity Strategy and that, in order to assist the Group in its discussions, the meeting be facilitated by Mr. Duncan Morrow from the Community Relations Council.

Equality Impact Assessment on Displays within the City Hall and its Grounds

The Chief Executive reminded the Group that the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, at its meeting on 15th April, had granted approval to the carrying out of a formal Equality Impact Assessment on the City Hall memorabilia by an independent external consultant. Dr. John Kremer had been appointed to undertake the assessment. Dr. Kremer had produced a draft report, a copy of which had previously been circulated, and had been invited to make a short presentation to the Joint Group to outline his findings and emerging recommendations.

The Group decided that it would be beneficial to hear the presentation from Dr. Kremer as there were not any decisions required to be taken at the meeting and the presentation was for information purposes only.

The Chairman welcomed Dr. Kremer to the meeting and asked him to make his presentation on the Equality Impact Assessment.

Dr. Kremer indicated that the aim of the assessment was to manage the City Hall and its grounds in order to help promote a harmonious environment for those who visited or worked in the building, whilst reflecting both the diverse identities of its users and the several functions served by the City Hall and acknowledging its prominent role in the civic life and history of the City. Dr. Kremer indicated that the primary data which he had used in his assessment had included the Council's policy, procedures and decisions; the Shared City survey of Belfast City Hall users; the Conservation Assessment Report; and legal opinions which had been obtained in 2002 and 2011. Dr. Kremer indicated that the survey of Belfast City Hall users had indicated a general high level of satisfaction amongst visitors but had identified significant differences between the two communities. He pointed out that there were strong indications that a "chill factor" operated within parts of the Catholic community towards the City Hall.

Dr. Kremer went on to indicate that the Conservation Report which had been commissioned in September, 2011 had raised concerns in relation to the state of various textile objects, including flags in the rotunda and East stairway. It had also pointed out that fabric on the two ceremonial chairs in the Council Chamber required immediate attention; that the display cabinets were not all fit for purpose; and that, generally, work was required to be undertaken in order to preserve the historic artefacts currently located within the building.

He pointed out that the legal opinions which had been obtained in 2002 and 2011 had indicated that the Council was free to change its policies and practices in relation to the display of artefacts and memorabilia by democratic decision at any time, provided that whatever decision was taken was lawful. The opinions had also pointed out that there was not any legislative provision or rule of law which directly controlled the maintenance and display by the Council of memorabilia or artefacts.

Dr. Kremer went on to outline the preliminary recommendations contained within his report. He stated that the underlying principle which he had applied was to move towards more balanced and inclusive displays within the City Hall that were welcoming, attractive, interesting, representative of the history and heritage of the City and representative of the diversity of the City. Dr. Kremer went on to outline the fourteen main recommendations contained within his report which were:

- (i) that the existing artefacts, other than the statues, should be removed from the main reception areas (i.e. the Marble Hall and Rotunda) and repositioned in alternative contexts so as not to detract attention from the impressive grandeur of the building itself;
- (ii) the Council should be encouraged to seek expert advice on how its existing collection could be presented more efficiently for those visiting the City Hall and its grounds. This should extend to specific advice on the preservation of individual items;

- (iii) those parts of the building that were routinely visited by the public, including thoroughfares, corridors and designated display areas, should continue to portray the story of Belfast through the appropriate display of artefacts and memorabilia;
- (iv) the Council should continue to work with those skilled in interpretive design to develop appropriate narratives in those parts of the building that were frequented by visitors and tours, including thoroughfares, corridors and designated display areas;
- (v) the Council should continue to liaise with local communities to facilitate the provision and management of temporary exhibitions in the City Hall and its grounds, and to ensure that those exhibitions were deemed to be appropriate;
- (vi) any signage and accompanying information throughout the City Hall and its grounds should aspire reasonably to accommodate those who may not be able access written English;
- (vii) in designated work areas (e.g. staff offices, kitchens), further to the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998, an obligation should fall on the Council to provide an environment where “no worker feels threatened or intimidated on grounds of religious belief and/or political opinion”. The display of materials more closely associated with one community than another should be avoided in those designated work areas;
- (viii) in designated Political Party rooms, responsibility should continue to rest with each Political Party to provide and manage what they regard as a good and harmonious environment within that space;
- (ix) where a Council employee may have concerns about working in an environment containing certain displays that he or she regards as likely to disrupt a good and harmonious working environment, the Council should aspire to accommodate those concerns through an examination of his or her duties on a case-by-case basis;
- (x) in public function rooms, including the Registrars’ offices, the Council should continue to ensure that those environments were maintained in a welcoming manner that was not likely to cause offence to those attending functions from any section of the community;
- (xi) displays in the Lord Mayor’s parlour should continue to be managed by the incumbent Lord Mayor in a reasonable manner which accommodated his or her freedom of expression of political opinion but was also mindful of the identities of those visiting that room;
- (xii) the Council should continue to liaise with those organisations hosting functions and events to ensure that any temporary displays were not likely to disrupt a good and harmonious environment and were in keeping with the function in question;
- (xiii) where a Council employee may have concerns about working at a function associated with certain temporary displays that he or she regards as likely to disrupt the good and harmonious working environment, the Council should aspire to accommodate those concerns through an examination of his or her duties on a case-by-case basis;
- (xiv) the Council Chamber should be preserved in its present form.

The Chief Executive pointed out that the legal opinion in relation to the Equality Impact Assessment required to be incorporated within the document on a formal basis.

The Members of the Group asked a number of questions of Dr. Kremer and the officers in attendance in relation to the Equality Impact Assessment and its status and in relation to the process to be undertaken over the next period of time.

The Chief Executive pointed out that the draft Equality Impact Assessment, compiled by Dr. Kremer, would constitute a Council policy and therefore would need to be approved by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee and the full Council before going to a full public consultation.

Following further discussion, the Chairman thanked Dr. Kremer for his presentation. She reminded the Group that no decisions on the Equality Impact Assessment had been taken at this stage and that the matter would be decided by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in due course.

Chairman