Belfast City Council

Report to	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
Subject:	Publication on the Internet of Committee Report
Date:	24th August, 2012
Reporting Officer:	Stephen McCrory, Democratic Services Officer (Ext 6314)

1	**Relevant Background Information**
1.1	The Committee, at its meeting in November, 2008, adopted a policy to publish simultaneously to the Internet and Intranet in advance of meetings taking place Committee summonses and reports (excluding those reports or parts thereof which were restricted under the publications policy). It should be noted that it is only the reports for the Standing Committees which are published publicly. Reports for Working Groups are only made available internally to officers and those Members who have arranged to have access to the Council's intranet site from their home or office computer.
1.2	At a recent meeting of the Committee concern was expressed that this practice was having the effect of placing reports in the hands of the Press simultaneously with the Members of the Council and that Chairmen were being contacted for comment by the Press before they had time to read the reports and consult with the Chief Officer of the appropriate Department. On occasions, there have been articles in the local press based upon Committee reports which gave the appearance that decisions had already been taken before the Committee met to consider the matter and it could be argued that such reporting can have a damaging effect on proper decision-making. This was the case recently with articles which appeared in relation to the Community Safety Wardens Scheme, the financial performance of several of the Council's facilities including the Waterfront Hall and the benefits to the city of the MTV Awards.
1.3	The Committee agreed that a review of the current policy should be undertaken and the following points are relevant to the discussion.

2	Key Issues
2.1	The Modern.Gov system, which we use to manage the Committee business, can be programmed to publish Committee reports at different times to the intranet (used by internal officers and Members to access the reports electronically) and to the internet (where they are accessible by anyone with internet access).
2.2	There are a range of options for the Committee to consider and three of these have been outlined below. 1. No change to the current system whereby the Committee reports are published both internally and externally at the same time. 2. Revert to the policy in place prior to 2008 where the Committee reports become publicly available only after the monthly Council meeting has ratified the Committee decisions. 3. Establish a new policy where the Committee reports (excluding those reports or parts thereof which were restricted under the publications policy) are made available publicly the next working day following the date of the meeting.
2.3	The views of Corporate Communications have been sought on the matter and their preferred option would be the third one. This option would still mean that the reports would be available to the Press and public prior to the full Council meeting taking and, of course, the Press are provided with a copy of the Minute Book prior to the Council meeting taking place. However it would ensure that the Committee had met and taken decisions on matters of business before a Chairman or other Member was asked to make public comment. It would also prevent (to a large degree) misleading Press stories where it appeared that a decision had been taken before the Committee had actually met.

3	Resource Implications
	None.

4	Equality and Good Relations Implications
	None

5	Recommendations
5.1	It is recommended that the current policy for publishing Committee reports is amended to that outlined in option 3 above.

6	Decision Tracking
	Stephen McCrory, Democratic Services Manager
	September, 2012