



<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	Operation Banner – report on consultation
<b>Date:</b>	Friday 19 October 2012
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	Hazel Francey, Good Relations Manager

### **Relevant Background Information**

The Committee will recall that at its last meeting it agreed that consultation on proposals in relation to Operation Banner should be undertaken with a broad and inclusive list of groups in Belfast and that this consultation exercise should be time-bound, with a further report to be submitted to its next meeting on 19 October.

Accordingly, those groups named on the two lists submitted to the Committee on 21 September were contacted (lists attached). Representatives from the army, UDR and police welfare groups were invited to a meeting on Tuesday 2 October and representatives from the various victims groups in the city, as indicated on the list provided by the Victims & Survivors Service (V&SS), were invited to a meeting on Thursday 4 October. (Copy of invitation letter attached, which outlines the various options that had been considered).

Each meeting was facilitated by the Council's Equality & Diversity Officer, the Good Relations Manager and staff from the Good Relations Unit. Groups who were unable to attend the meeting were informed that their opinions were still welcomed and some submitted comments via e-mail.

### **Key Issues**

#### **Police and armed forces**

The first meeting on Tuesday 2 October was attended by representatives of the police and Royal British Legion. The police welfare representatives who attended supported in general the proposal to erect a substantial memorial to all those who served in Operation Banner, along with a granite bench, but were not in favour of tree planting.

The official representative from the Royal British Legion reported that he was speaking on behalf of the RBL, the national Custodian of Remembrance and an organisation that makes significant use of the existing Garden of Remembrance at the City Hall. He pointed out that there was already a National UK Memorial at the Arboretum in Staffordshire. He was aware of the political sensitivities surrounding any proposed memorial and stated that the Royal British Legion was keen to avoid anything that

might contribute to negative tensions or negative publicity on the issue. Their main concern was the impact that any planned memorial may have on the Garden of Remembrance, which was a focal point for their two main annual commemoration ceremonies in July and November.

The Royal Irish Regiment representative was unable to attend but in a written submission proposed an "alternative to the ideas of trees, windows, plaques, statues, etc., of which there is already a plethora in and around City Hall and which, I suggest, may be of limited interest to the citizens of Belfast and casual visitors".

The RIR representative stated that they are currently planning a Military Gallery in Belfast which would tell the story of the Irish soldier in service to the Crown. The involvement of the Army in Northern Ireland would form a significant part of that story but would be set in the wider context of the service of Irish men and women, from all sections of our divided community, to the Crown over the past 3-4 centuries. He felt that such a Gallery might achieve far more than would be possible with a conventional memorial. It could provide information in an educational, interactive environment, challenge myths and would contribute positively to the local economy.

### **Victims' groups**

The meeting on 4 October was attended by representatives from the Ashton Centre, Forum for Action on Substance Abuse (FASA) and Haven Victims Support; all these groups appear on the official V&SS list. One individual representing the Greater Shankill Community Council and one other representing a local Branch of the Royal British Legion (the Oldpark/ Cavehill Branch) also attended.

Despite the fact that these victims groups represented very different views and expressed a wide range of opinions, this was a very measured and respectful discussion.

Both the Shankill Community and the (unofficial) local RBL Branch representatives were keen to support the option of a memorial but they were aware of the process involved and stated that, in their opinion, their views would not affect the ultimate decision which would be made by the Council, probably on political party lines.

The Ashton Centre representatives noted that there were already a number of pieces of art in the City Hall dedicated to the armed services. In their opinion, symbolism was important and the building should provide a space that reflected all the communities in Belfast. They were concerned as to how this consultation fitted within the current EQIA on artefacts and balance within the City Hall and Council staff stated that any proposal would have to take into account the broader equality context. One Ashton Centre representative stated that a memorial for Operation Banner would be seen as insulting by many nationalists and could be regarded as divisive and retrograde at a time when Belfast had experienced substantial progress and should continue to be moving forward.

All present acknowledged that this was a very complex situation and there was no simplistic solution.

Two victims' groups - Relatives for Justice and Survivors of Trauma - were unable to

attend but submitted written comments. Relatives for Justice felt that an inclusive memorial to all those killed or injured would be a timely acknowledgement for all those affected by the conflict. The Survivors of Trauma group noted that there were already several stained glass windows in the City Hall acknowledging the role of the armed forces and were not in favour of any more memorials being erected to the legacy of Operation Banner.

### **Conclusion**

There was no consensus on this issue. Even among the armed forces and police welfare agencies there was no universal agreement about a memorial. The army and RBL representatives in particular were clearly aware of the political composition of the Council and were keen to avoid any course of action that might be seen as damaging community relations in the city.

### **Resource Implications**

None at this stage but could be various amounts up to £55,000, depending on the Committee decision.

### **Equality and Good Relations Implications**

The Committee will be aware that a major Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on memorabilia in the City Hall is underway, with a period of public consultation just completed on 1 October. Any decision taken in relation to Operation Banner should be taken with due regard to this broader context and would have to be fully consulted upon in line with our current statutory equality obligations.

### **Recommendations/Decision required**

The Committee is requested to note the report back on the consultation exercise and decide on an appropriate course of action.

### **Abbreviations used**

EQIA	Equality Impact Assessment
FASA	Forum for Action on Substance Abuse
RBL	Royal British Legion
RIR	Royal Irish Regiment
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment
V&SS	Victims & Survivors Service