



Belfast City Council

Report to	Strategic Policy and Resources Committee
Subject:	Timing of meetings Involving Elected members
Date:	8th February, 2013
Reporting Officer:	Stephen McCrory, Democratic Services Manager (ext 6314)

1	Relevant Background Information
1.1	The Member Development Steering Group, at its meeting in November, 2011, considered a report concerned with helping Members to undertake their roles effectively while achieving a work/life balance. The Member Development Charter, which the Council was accredited with in November, 2011, also specifies that Councils should regularly assess the support which they provide to Members to ensure that they have sufficient mechanisms and arrangements in place to accommodate a proper work/life balance.
1.2	It is clear that the demands on Members' time are ever increasing. There were 365 meetings held in the year from 1st October, 2011. Such demands are likely to increase further as the Investment Programme is rolled out, the Review of Public Administration progresses and Councils begin to prepare for undertaking new functions, such as community planning and regeneration. In addition, Members have time commitments in attending a wide range of partnership meetings and meetings of outside bodies to which they are appointed.
1.3	Members are required not only to devote a considerable amount of time to Council related business but also to undertaking their constituency role, which can often involve working during what would be considered to be unsociable hours.

2	Key Issues
2.1	<u>Rules on the Timing of Meetings of Committees and Working Groups</u>
2.1.1	The time when full Council meetings are held is established at Standing Order 2 as 6.00pm, except where otherwise fixed by statute or by special summons.
2.1.2	Each Committee or Working Group and the Policing and Community Safety Partnership sets the time of its own regular meetings and normally considers this at the first meeting of the Committee in each Council term. The time of special meetings, unless agreed by the Committee when deciding to hold the special meeting, is fixed by the Chairman. This has been established practice for many years.
2.1.3	<u>It is, therefore, a matter for each Committee or Working Group to decide when it wishes its meetings to be held.</u> For example, the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee has confirmed that 10.00am on a Friday is the preferred date and time for its meetings and the Parks and Leisure Committee has agreed that it would continue to meet at 4.30pm on the second Thursday of the month. The Development Committee, in 2011, agreed that it would meet twice monthly rather than on one occasion and that the start time would move from 4.30pm to 5.15pm. The Town Planning Committee and the Licensing Committee have met at 4.30pm for many years and have not indicated any wish to change that time. In establishing the time of their meetings, each Committee or Working Group needs to give consideration to the dates of other meetings so that an overall monthly schedule can be prepared which provides for the efficient transaction of Council business. This allows an annual schedule of meetings to be prepared and circulated and provides the data for the production of the monthly Remembrancer of meetings.
2.2	<u>Members' Questionnaire</u>
2.2.1	In order to gauge Members' opinions on the most suitable times for them to attend meetings and other related activities such as Working Groups and Member development activities, a short questionnaire (Appendix 1), which all Members were asked to complete, was issued on 23rd March, 2012 by the Democratic Services Section.
2.2.2	A total of twenty nine responses were received. Members were asked to identify preferred days and times for Committee meetings with the day being divided into five periods of; 10.00am to 12.00noon, 12.00noon to 2.00pm, 2.00pm to 4.00pm, 4.00pm to 6.00pm and after 6.00pm.
2.2.3	Of the responses received from Members, 23 (79%) indicated that they were willing to attend Committee meetings or other organised activities on any weekday. The least popular day for the scheduling of meetings etc was Friday.
2.2.4	As regards preferred timings for Committee meetings, 28 (96%) of those who responded indicated that they would prefer meetings to commence after 4.00pm. There was little variation in the preference for timings of Working Groups, Corporate Workshops and development activities other than a small number of Members commenting that over lunch had worked well for those meetings previously.

2.3	<u>Timing of Meetings</u>
2.3.1	In order to further inform the discussion, we have looked at the times of meetings involving elected Members (Committee and Working Groups and meetings of the DPP and PCSP) over the year from 1st October, 2011 (Appendix 3). In total some 365 meetings were held
2.3.2	What the results clearly demonstrate is that 77% of all meetings held were either after 4.00pm or over the lunchtime period (which a number of Working Groups have indicated suits them best). Some 11% of meetings were held in the morning, but this figure is made up primarily of meetings of the Strategic Policy and Resources and the Voluntary Transition Committees, which have decided to continue to meet at that time.
2.4	<u>Available Research</u>
2.4.1	Any consideration of the establishment of an overall policy on the time of meetings involving elected Members would constitute a major policy shift and would have to be subjected to equality screening. There is some research available which would indicate that the time of meetings could have a significantly disproportionate impact upon women and in particular working mothers.
2.4.2	A conference was held in Hillsborough Castle in 2006 entitled “Encouraging Women into Political and Public Life”. One of the conclusions reached at the conference was that <i>“Council hours of nine to five, Monday to Friday, in line with the Assembly are more female and family friendly, because we need to ensure that mothers have a chance to be at home”</i>
2.4.3	A document published by the Women’s National Commission on “Women in Public Life Events in 2009-10” commented that <i>“Women also raised concern about attending evening meetings and, as a consequence, the availability and cost of childcare”</i> .

3	Resource Implications
3.1	There might be a cost involved, both in terms of overtime payments and time off in lieu, should more meetings be held outside the normal working day.

4	Equality and Good Relations Implications
4.1	An Equality Impact Screening would need to be undertaken to assess the impact upon Members and Officers should any major policy shift be considered in relation to the timing of meetings.

5	Recommendations
5.1	The Committee is requested to note the information and to take such action thereon as may be determined.

6	Documents Attached
Appendix 1 – Members' Questionnaire	
Appendix 2 – Responses to Questionnaire	
Appendix 3 – Time of meetings for period form 1st October, 2011 to 28th September, 2012	