

Social Policy Working Group

Tuesday, 28th September, 2021

MEETING OF THE SOCIAL POLICY WORKING GROUP

HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

- Members present: Councillor O'Hara (Chairperson);
Aldermen Copeland and Dorrian; and
Councillors Harvey and McLaughlin.
- In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor and Director of Legal and Civic
Services;
Mr. J. Tully, Director of City and Organisational Strategy;
Ms. N. Bohill, Head of Commercial and Procurement
Services;
Ms. C. Sheridan, Head of HR;
Ms. L. Toland, Senior Manager, Economy;
Ms. C. Keenan, Enterprise and Business Growth Manager;
Ms. A. Allen, Neighbourhood Services Manager;
Mr. C. Campbell, Divisional Solicitor;
Mr. L. Murray, Strategic Category Manager;
Ms. C. Hutchinson, Policy and Performance Analyst;
Mr. G. Dickson; Strategic Policy Lead Officer;
Mr. J. Uprichard, Community Planning Officer;
Mr. R. Connelly, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer;
Mr. M. Mulholland, Policy Officer;
Mr. T. Kearns, Economic Development Officer;
Ms. N. Donaghy, Employability & Skills Officer;
Ms. C. Miskelly, Employability & Skills Officer;
Ms. M. Robinson, Employability & Skills Officer;
Ms. N. Quigley, Employability & Skills Officer; and
Ms. K. McCrum, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported on behalf of Councillor Heading.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 30th June were taken as read and signed as correct.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Action Tracker

The Strategic Policy Lead Officer advised that the majority of actions would be discussed during the course of the meeting and undertook to circulate the Action Tracker to the Working Group via email.

The Members requested updates on the following items:

- Rescheduling of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) presentation;
- A paper on minimising the Council's use of employment agencies, as per the Notice of Motion;
- Staff analysis – high level data regarding the percentage of staff residing in Belfast;
- An update regarding the request for changes to be made to the Procurement 1992 Order.

The Working Group was assured that updates would be provided on these actions as soon as possible.

Noted.

City Charter Update

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy provided an introduction to the City Charter, now named the Belfast Business Promise, outlining the key areas of focus over the coming weeks and months.

The Policy and Performance Analyst then delivered a presentation which included a recap of the steps that had been agreed by the Social Policy Working Group and Strategic Policy and Resources Committee to date.

She advised that feedback from businesses had suggested that the scheme needed to be seen as more than a Council initiative, with a strong appeal to businesses through language and imagery and one that was unique to Belfast.

The Working Group was reminded that the aims of the Belfast Business Promise were to:

- Set up a community of businesses and organisations committed to embedding more inclusivity in their business practices to create a better city for everyone;
- Create a free, voluntary membership and accreditation scheme that all businesses could sign up to, in order to create more high quality jobs, lower levels of poverty, build stronger healthier communities, reduce inequality in the workplace and build a more sustainable local economy; and
- Give businesses recognition for the positive social impacts being delivered through their core business activities.

The Policy and Performance Analyst provided an overview of the 8 Belfast Business Promise (BBP) Pledges which had been updated following the feedback received:

1. Provide fair wages and contracts – Ensuring employees are paid the Real Living Wage and have security around the hours they work;
2. Offer opportunities into work – Creating pathways into work by providing job and development opportunities, and removing barriers to employment;
3. Support the local and social economy – Using purchasing power to support the local economy, increase competitiveness and to add social value;
4. Recruit inclusively – Ensuring job accessibility for all Belfast residents and hiring across diverse communities;
5. Improve training, engagement and well-being – Creating a workplace where employees feel valued and can thrive;
6. Pay promptly – paying supplier invoices on time, working towards a 30 day target;
7. Work in partnership with our communities – Work in collaboration with local communities through meaningful engagement to bring about positive impact;
8. Protect our environment – Working together to tackle the global challenge of climate change and protect our environment for future generations.

She explained that the requirements in each area might differ depending on the size of the business. An animated video was then played which communicated the aims of the BBP, the pledges and the benefits to businesses in an accessible format for businesses of all sizes.

The Working Group was advised that a branded pledge document providing a summary of the ambition and desired impact, membership and accreditation details, membership support, business benefits and pledge details was nearing completion. The Policy and Performance Analyst undertook to circulate this to the Members once complete, along with details of the Accreditation Process which would include specifics about how membership would be reviewed to ensure businesses were progressing and maintaining standards.

With regards to the monitoring and evaluation framework, she confirmed that work was ongoing with an external consultant to align the approach with best practice, building evaluation into the design and delivery whilst looking at the inputs, outputs, outcomes and the desired impact using the Logic Model.

She added that proportionality was also an important consideration, and so an executive summary of the monitoring and evaluation framework was being developed which would detail the key indicators/commitments within each pledge. Further detail was provided on the need to capture information about who was and was not engaging with the BBP, the numbers of businesses using and benefitting from the scheme and what changes in behaviour and working practices were being seen as a result.

The Policy and Performance Analyst outlined the next steps within the consultation plan which included further testing with a range of businesses, in particular SME's and Anchor Institutions, promotion of the BBP and its vision with businesses and

citizens, and various engagement sessions with stakeholders. She also highlighted a number of key considerations in implementing the charter, in particular the need for dedicated resources and staffing, and the importance of the on-line presence for information sharing, networking and developing the brand.

The Working Group was advised that the next steps of the BBP included final changes to the branding, targeted consultation and engagement, finalisation of the launch approach and identification of the necessary resources.

The work to date was welcomed by a number of the Members and questions asked about how the BBP would be targeted towards more traditional sectors and small and medium-sized enterprises, and how it could be promoted to companies that were new to the City.

The Policy and Performance Analyst agreed that engagement with these groups was important and suggested that marketing videos which included testimonials from those sectors would be important in promoting the benefits for all. She added that feedback had also recognised the opportunity for Invest NI to promote the BBP as a way for new companies to access a community of businesses with the same ethos and to share best practice.

A Member suggested that it was important for the Council to be an early adopter of the Belfast Business Promise, and to be transparent about which commitments were being achieved. He also commented on the importance of balancing the need to attract businesses to the scheme, with a robust accreditation and review process to ensure that the desired outcomes and outputs were being met.

The Working Group was advised that, based on their feedback, an anchor institution engagement session was planned with the Lord Mayor which would include details of how the Council was progressing towards meeting the pledge areas.

In response to a query as to what action would be taken if it became clear that certain pledges were not being acted upon, the Policy and Performance Analyst explained the proposal to choose 3 core pledges, with businesses then asked to select a further 3 from the list. She added that the 3 core pledges would be reviewed as part of the consultation process but that the suggestion was to include 'Provide fair wages and contracts', 'Support the local and social economy' and 'Improve training, engagement and well-being', however, it was recognised that protecting the environment was also an important pledge to consider.

The Working Group welcomed the comprehensive presentation and noted the progress to date.

Social Value Procurement Policy

The Head of Commercial and Procurement Services informed the Members that the Social Value Procurement Policy was currently out for public consultation via Your Say Belfast and would close on 14th December. She also confirmed that 3 information sessions were planned during October.

She advised that an email containing a link to the consultation document and details of the information sessions was due to be issued to around 50 stakeholders and would also be circulated to the Working Group for wider distribution. Details of further

engagement activities were provided, including attendance at the launch of the Belfast Business Promise, social media and interlink promotion and dissemination via the E-Tender procurement platform.

In response to a query as to whether the Policy would be in place for the beginning of the new financial year, the Head of Commercial and Procurement Services suggested that it was likely to be within a number of months of this date.

With regards to the aspiration to review and amend areas of Local Government Procurement Legislation, she confirmed that a number of meetings had taken place with the Department for Communities which was open to discussing the options, with a further meeting scheduled in order to progress with this work.

Noted.

Procurement and Commissioning Group

The Director of City and Organisational Strategy provided an update on the work of the Group which first met on 13th May, 2021. He advised that CLES had subsequently provided training on carrying out spend analysis exercises in order to determine how organisations procure and spend, and to work through how this could be targeted to support 'local and social' across the City.

The Members were advised that the spend analysis exercise had been completed by the Council, and that results from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, Queens University and Ulster University were expected imminently, after which further analysis would be undertaken by CLES in October, 2021. He added that, once complete, an update on the findings and the proposed next steps would be provided to the Social Policy Working Group.

In response a to query about additional anchor institutions undertaking the exercise, such as the Belfast Trust and NI Housing Executive, the Director advised that he hoped that all partners involved in the Community Planning Partnership would become involved in the future.

The Working Group noted the update provided.

Living Wage Accreditation

The Head of HR confirmed that the real Living Wage hourly rate was revised annually in November, and was currently set at £9.50 per hour. She added that, in line with the Council's local agreement, any employees and casual workers (excluding apprentices and industrial placements) remunerated below this level were paid a living wage supplement to compensate for the difference, and that in 2020/2021 this effected 1 employee.

She then provided an update on the work undertaken to date to progress towards Belfast becoming a Living Wage City and the Council becoming an accredited Living Wage Employer, which included:

- The establishment of a cross departmental working group;

- An up to date assessment of payment of the Living Wage hourly rate within the Council and associated companies which confirmed that, whilst not an accredited employer, the Council did pay the Real Living Wage hourly rate, as did BWUH Ltd and GLL;
- Ongoing benchmarking with accredited organisations and cities, as well as engagement with the Living Wage Foundation to learn from best practice that has been implemented elsewhere;
- An ongoing analysis of the impact of payment of the Living Wage hourly rate and annual increases on the Council's agreed job evaluation process and pay structure.

With regards to the benchmarking exercise, she advised that obtaining the information had proven difficult and so work was ongoing with the Living Wage Foundation to help with this process. She also confirmed that the following actions were still to be undertaken:

- Financial scenario planning to include the potential impact on the Council's pay and grading review, affordability and the estimates process;
- Identification of and engagement with relevant contractors;
- Consideration of the potential impact of the Trade Unions pay claim for a reduction to a 36-hour working week.

In response to a query as to what contingency planning was in place should the benchmarking information not be forthcoming, the Head of HR confirmed that staff would work through the process if this was the case, however, it was hoped that the Living Wage Foundation could assist in moving this element forward. She added that further updates would be brought to the Working Group on a monthly basis

The Working Group noted the update provided.

Universal Basic Income Research

The Senior Manager, Economy, informed the Working Group that a proposal had been received inviting the Council to engage in a research programme into the potential for the introduction of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) model in Northern Ireland. She explained that Derry City and Strabane District Council had recently agreed to be involved in a pilot at a cost of £15,000, and the same contribution was being sought from Belfast City Council.

She added that the indicative timeframe for completion of this work was September, 2022, however, it is likely that the early modelling work would be able to identify estimated costings for a potential UBI trial by Spring 2022.

The Working Group was reminded that a Notice of Motion regarding the investigation of UBI for Northern Ireland had previously been debated and passed by the Council, and that a local network had been established. It was further confirmed that if a trial was to take place, it would require endorsement by the Department for Communities.

Whilst a number of the Members raised concerns about the demonstrated outcomes of UBI, it was agreed that the recommendation to contribute to the research should be brought to the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for further debate.

Any Other Business

In relation to a request made at the previous meeting, the Head of HR confirmed that 52.2% of Belfast City Council's workforce resided within the Council boundary.

The Working Group requested that a report on this figure was presented at a future meeting, providing a breakdown of the figure by Department and, if practical, to include information on post codes, commuting times and diversity. The Head of HR undertook to review what information could be provided, and to present a report to the October or November meeting.

In response to the suggestion that actions should be considered to increase the number of staff who live in Belfast, through apprenticeships for example, the City Solicitor cautioned that it was important to have due regard to Fair Employment Legislation and case law in this area, and to maintain the merit principal throughout the recruitment process.

Date of Next Meeting

The Working Group agreed that meetings would be scheduled in late October and November, 2021, with dates to be confirmed via email.

Chairperson