



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Relocation of the Belfast Welcome Centre
Date:	13 January 2010
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Relevant Background Information

Members agreed at the September 2009 Committee meeting that BCC officers continue to work with Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB) in the search for new premises for the Belfast Welcome Centre (BWC).

The BWC has been located on the first floor at 47 Donegall Place since April 2001. In 2009/2010 the annual expenditure for the operation of the Belfast Welcome Centre is £1.7 million; funding for the operation comes from net generated income/trading surplus (35%); BCC (50%); and NITB (15%).

The BWC's primary role is to provide visitor information and orientation as well as acting as a gateway to the Greater Belfast area and rest of Northern Ireland. The Centre deals with over 384,000 enquiries per annum and is staffed by 1 manager, 4 supervisors, 5 full time travel advisors and a range of support and temporary staff. The BWC operates Tourist Information Centres at the George Best Belfast City and Belfast International Airports. The BWC has also successfully run the Crumlin Road Goal tours for the last 2 years as well as the call centre for key events including the Tall Ships in 2009. It will also pilot a tourist information point at the City Hall during the peak visitor period in 2010. It is estimated that a visit to a Tourist Information Centre generates some £65 of spending in the region; using this measure, the BWC Business Plan indicates that the Centre will generate an additional £20 million spend to the region in 2009/2010.

The rationale for reviewing the location of the Belfast Welcome Centre is that the current lease expires in July 2010, the economic climate offers an opportunity to negotiate on prime sites that may not have been as affordable in the past and the preference was always to source a ground floor central location. It is also worth noting that the Belfast Welcome Centre provides one of the most physical opportunities to present the new Belfast Brand to visitors and citizens and a relocation of the Centre

would provide an opportunity to capture the brand in the design, layout and services.

Within a strategic context, the vision for tourist information/service provision in Belfast is to continue and strengthen the role of the Belfast Welcome Centre at a central City location, however better connect the BWC to a network of Tourist Information Centres/points across the City, spreading the impact/benefits of tourism and providing visitors with more experiences. To date there are already information points in South Belfast (Queen's), West Belfast (Cultúrlann) and the Shankill (Spectrum Centre). Further plans are to develop provision in East Belfast at the Titanic Signature Project as well as the possibility of linking to the Connswater Community Greenway project. Within North Belfast, there will be opportunities linked to the development of the Crumlin Road Gaol.

BVCB and BCC appointed Tourism Transport Consult (TTC) in association with Allan Balnaves to assess the rationale for relocating the Belfast Welcome Centre. The final report is attached as Appendix 1. In summary the report considers three options in detail; Northern Bank 8–10 Donegall Square North, Belfast Central Library and remaining at the current location. The report recommends that the most suitable option is the Northern Bank 8–10 Donegall Square North, however, more detailed information is required on the fit out costs and rental agreement before a final decision can be made.

Key Issues

In summary the main findings of the attached report are as follows:

Case Study Analysis

When compared with nine cities across the UK and Europe, the BWC outperforms almost every comparator Tourist Information Centre (TIC) in its commercial approach and performance. Dublin receives greater numbers and retail spend whilst Birmingham has outstanding ticket sales. The BWC is the only TIC on an upper floor leading to issues in achieving visibility and shop window frontage. Most other TICs are located near train stations, although this does not appear to be a major concern in Belfast.

Customer Survey

During May–June 2009, a survey of 101 customers was carried out to seek their views as they left the BWC. Whilst in general there were high levels of satisfaction with the services provided and 60% had no problem finding the BWC, 11–18% suggested that visibility and location were flaws.

City Development Review

The report examines the new developments that have taken place in the City, such as Victoria Square and the proposed Royal Exchange. The conclusions reached is that the Donegall Square/Donagall Place area will remain a key spot reaching visitors and achieving high footfall in the foreseeable future. The review also looked at probable nodes on the Rapid Transit System. Whilst subject to consultation, it is likely that the loop from Titanic Quarter to the City Centre will pass in front of the City Hall and provide a stop at or near the Donegall Square location.

Site Appraisals

The criteria identified for the appraisal of any possible locations were;

- Space availability – BWC requires 11,500sqft
- Visibility and Distinctiveness
- Accessibility

- Contribution to Belfast and Northern Ireland Brands
- Potential to increase revenue and footfall
- Contribution to Gateway Role and economic benefits
- Rental costs
- Fitting out costs

Initially five locations were identified based on the ability to attract high footfall; the current premises; 11-15 Donegall Place; 51- 53 Donegall Place; 62 Donegall Place and to these were added Belfast Central Library and Belfast Metropolitan College. During the course of the appraisal, the sites 11-15, 51-53 and 62 Donegall Place became unavailable. Belfast Metropolitan College will be put on sale on open market prior to its move to Titanic Quarter in August 2011 and therefore also not available.

Conclusion

The appraisal examined the three final sites – existing location, Northern Bank 8-10 Donegall Square North and Belfast Central Library.

The Belfast Central Library

Whilst an attractive building in an area with future tourism potential, it would not attract the same levels of footfall as the other two sites and this therefore has an impact on the revenue generated and gateway role. Fewer visitors mean fewer sales and fewer opportunities to provide information on other areas. It is estimated that a move to Belfast Central Library could reduce the economic impact of the BWC to under £7 million (currently £20 million) because of the drastic fall in numbers and sales.

Current Premises

The report concludes that the current premises has issues around visibility and due to size/space constraints, it has more or less reached its potential from this location.

Northern Bank

The recommendation is that the Northern Bank site on Donegall Square North provides the optimum available location for the Belfast Welcome Centre. It ensures;

- A high profile central location exhibiting characteristics of the brand
- An accessible ground floor location
- High footfall of visitors and locals
- Close proximity to City Hall
- Rapid Transit System passing nearby and well connected to other transport hubs
- Good visibility for signage
- Good window display capability
- Box office maximisation of use
- Space for sub letting e.g. café
- Space for promotions
- Space to accommodate both BWC and BVCB administration and marketing.

The costs associated with the Northern Bank building are higher than remaining in the current location.

In order to make an informed decision on the relocation of the Belfast Welcome Centre to the Northern Bank 8-10 Donegall Square North, more detailed plans and costings must be produced. This will include fit out plans for a new information centre as well as negotiation with the landlord on the rent/lease agreement.

BVCB and BCC officers have discussed this and agreed that this could be progressed fairly quickly through BCC's Projects and Property team.

Resource Implications

If the BWC is relocated to Northern Bank 8 – 10 Donegall Square North, there will be a one off capital investment required to fit out the new premises. Subject to timescales, NITB may provide some funding towards this under its Tourism Development Scheme Fund, however it is currently closed until April 2011. There may also be an increase in rent, subject to income projections based on increased footfall.

In the short term, BVCB has agreed to cover any associated costs in producing detailed plans for the Northern Bank building.

Recommendations

It is recommended that further investigations are undertaken on the preferred option of the former Northern Bank premises, Donegall Square North as proposed by the independent report.

- The Northern Bank option is further explored through the production of detailed and costed layout plans and
- Direct negotiation with the landlord is undertaken on the rent

Decision Tracking

A report on the full costs associated with the Northern Bank option to be prepared by May 2010.

Timeframe: May 2010 Reporting Officer: Shirley McCay

Key Abbreviations

BWC – Belfast Welcome Centre
BVCB – Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau
NITB – Northern Ireland Tourist Board
TTC – Tourism Transport Consult
TIC – Tourist Information Centre

Documents Attached

Appendix 1 – Rationale for Relocating the Belfast Welcome Centre