

Extract from minutes of –

DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

9th MARCH, 2010

“Belfast Welcome Centre

(Mrs. P. Davison, Estates Surveyor, attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

‘Relevant Background Information

The Belfast Visitor and Connection Bureau occupies premises currently leased to Belfast City Council in Donegall Place. BVCB has been approached by Failte Ireland to consider moving their operation into the Belfast Welcome Centre premises in Donegall Place. Failte Ireland requested a meeting with BVCB on 14 January to discuss the possibility of a shared working space.

Failte Ireland has operated a walk in enquiry office in Belfast for over 42 years. They closed their premises in Castle Street just after Christmas 2009 as their lease was due to terminate and the building was unfit for purpose and presented significant health and safety issues for staff continuing to work there.

The service Failte Ireland currently operates is purely information provision and accommodation booking for the Republic of Ireland. After 42 years with a base in Belfast they have a loyal local customer base of regular customers who call in to pick up information and book short breaks, with an annual footfall of just over 20,000 visitors. This service is provided Monday – Friday during core office hours by three members of staff, sharing two full time posts.

BVCB have identified a space that could accommodate Failte Ireland. This space was used as an extra card sales point, however a new main counter was installed last year and extra tills and credit card machines behind the new counter mean the space is now redundant.

Key Issues

BVCB point out that the concept of shared space in Tourist Information Centres and visitor attractions is not new. Failte Ireland has shared office space in the Derry/Londonderry T.I.C. since it opened and more recently NITB have moved into Dublin Tourism Offices.

BVCB have identified the benefits to this shared space approach:

Financial Benefit:

BVCB has proposed a licence fee of £25,000 per annum plus vat. The only additional payments by Failte Ireland would be for separate phone and broadband lines.

In the current economic climate, additional income to BVCB is welcomed when funding is decreasing and generating commercial income is more challenging.

Customer Focused:

The shared space further promotes the “one stop” approach – Belfast Welcome Centre regularly gets enquiries from customers requesting information on the Republic of Ireland and BWC refer them to the Castle Street premises.

New customer base:

In facilitating Failte Ireland customers in the BWC, the BWC can avail of a new market. The current price differential between the euro and the pound means Belfast will benefit with the local customer base attracted by deals in Northern Ireland as opposed to the Republic of Ireland.

The request for shared space was discussed at the BVCB Board. While there was general support for the proposal, there was concern from Board members that a Failte Ireland section within the BWC could dissuade visitors from visiting areas in and around Belfast, drawing their attention to the South of Ireland instead.

BCC’s lease on the Donegall Place premises terminates on 31 July 2010. The landlord has offered a ten year lease on the existing terms and no decision by BCC has been taken on the renewal of the lease due to the ongoing consideration of alternative options.

BCC’s current lease does permit the possibility of granting of a licence to Failte Ireland to enable them to occupy the premises alongside BVCB. The licence would end either upon expiration of the term of BCC’s lease on 31 July 2010, or sooner. If BCC were to renew their existing lease, Failte Ireland’s occupation may be continued subject to terms of BCC’s lease.

The BVCB Board recommended that, subject to BCC approval, a nine month licence agreement be granted to Failte Ireland. During this period BVCB could monitor the situation to ensure there were no adverse impacts from the shared space to Belfast and the wider region.

Resource Implications

Financial:

BVCB receives a pro-rata contribution of £25,000 p.a. from Failte Ireland towards their operating costs.

Physical:

Failte Ireland would plan to undertake minor works to the service desk in order that it could accommodate two people and to the slat wall area to make it more suitable for brochure racking. They would also install an overhead canopy for internal signage. Work would be required on external signage so both parties could benefit. None of the above costs will be borne by BCC.

Recommendation

It is recommended that Committee agree a licence is granted by BCC to Failte Ireland to occupy the premises of Belfast Welcome Centre alongside BVCB until the lease ends on 31 July 2010.

Decision Tracking

Further to agreement, Legal Services will be instructed to complete the appropriate documentation.

Timeline: March 2010 Reporting Officer: Shirley McCay

Key to Abbreviations

**BVCB – Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau
BCC - Belfast City Council
BWC – Belfast Welcome Centre
TIC – Tourist Information Centre
NITB- Northern Ireland Tourist Board'**

In answer to Members' questions, the Estates Surveyor indicated that the money received from Failte Ireland would not come to the Council but rather would be retained by the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau to off-set its running costs. She pointed out that this would ultimately benefit the Council. The Head of Economic Initiatives stated that, on occasions, other organisations had rented space from the Bureau for short periods of time in connection with forthcoming events and that, since the Bureau had a target of achieving £1 million in income in the current financial year, the money from Failte Ireland would assist in this regard. She also pointed out that the rental figure had been decided following negotiations between Failte Ireland and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau.

Following discussion, the Committee agreed that a Licence be granted by the Council to Failte Ireland to occupy a portion of the premises within the Belfast Welcome Centre alongside the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau until the lease on the building ended on 31st July."