

Draft Tourism strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020 – Consultation Response

Thank you for providing Belfast City Council the opportunity to comment on the Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy 2020. Belfast City Council's overarching response is the Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework 2010 – 2014, attached as Appendix 1. Over the last 18 months Belfast City Council has worked in partnership with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to develop this 5 year tourism strategy for the city to inform government priorities and strategy. The Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework 2010 – 2014 provides a clear direction for tourism in the city and has been approved in its draft format by both organisations. It has recently been the focus of a consultation exercise with the aim of finalising and launching before the summer.

Our response also includes a brief summary of tourism in Belfast (including Belfast City Council's role) and our comments on the specific questions posed as part of the consultation exercise.

1.0 Summary of Tourism in Belfast

Each year, Belfast welcomes over 7 million day trip and overnight visitors generating approximately £500 million of revenue into the local economy. Over the last decade, the city has grown significantly in respect of its tourism offer and infrastructure. We offer a choice of accommodation including 27 hotels, a range of high quality visitor experiences and attractions and the city is serviced by two international airports as well as the Port of Belfast.

Belfast City Council has and continues to recognize the importance of tourism. We own and operate many of the city's (and region's) key tourism assets including Belfast Zoo, St George's Market, Belfast Waterfront Hall, Ulster Hall, City Hall, Belfast Castle, Malone House and Belfast Parks (e.g. Lady Dixon, Botanic Gardens and Ormeau). We have an established £multi million events programme for the city, we provide a range of financial support programmes for the culture and arts sector and when appropriate we provide capital support for key projects e.g. Titanic Signature Project, Lyric Theatre, Connswater Greenway and the MAC.

Belfast City Council has taken the lead in developing a range of tourism products featuring music, literature, culture & arts, food and retail. We have also led the way in maximising new technologies and recent product developments include a new Belfast Music iphone app and we are currently working on a Belfast Literary iphone app.

Belfast City Council continues to support the development and promotion of a vibrant evening economy which gives leisure and business visitors more opportunity to spend money in local businesses. Belfast City Council works in partnership with key stakeholders through the Retail and Evening Economy Steering Group chaired by Belfast City Centre Management. Over recent years, Belfast City Council has invested significantly in developing the city's evening and Sunday economy. We have negotiated late night opening with our major retailers to 7pm weeknights and 9pm on Thursdays; Victoria Square open to 9pm Wednesday – Friday. Belfast offers early bird menus, shopping voucher schemes and all year round city centre events and animation programme.

In recognising the importance of partnership, Belfast City Council was instrumental in establishing Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB) as a public / private sector partnership to drive marketing/promotion of the city as a business and leisure tourism destination. BVCB also operates the Belfast Welcome Centre – Northern Ireland's flagship gateway tourist information centre which receives over 350,000 visitors per annum - as well as the two tourist information points at the airports. BVCB has over 400 private sector members.

In 2008, Belfast City Council undertook an extensive consultation exercise to develop the new Belfast Brand. The Belfast Brand Proposition is of a city in which 'A unique history and a future full of promise have come together to create a city bursting with energy and optimism'. The core values of the brand are:

- A dynamic city with a big personality between the mountains and the sea
- A city proud of its heritage... is alive with possibilities and open to change ... vibrant, energetic and exciting
- The people of Belfast provide a welcome which is not just warm, but genuine and generous, inviting anyone and everyone to join in
- Belfast provides a vivid and memorable experience with new things to discover every time you visit

The motivating appeals of the brand are: heritage & culture, authenticity, welcoming people, distinctive character, relaxed style, discovery, natural countryside, water and urban environments.

2.0 Questions

2.1 Your reaction to the key target to grow visitor revenue to £1 billion by 2020. Do you agree that the five critical success factors set out on section 3 of the strategy will deliver this target i.e.

- **Earning more from visitors**
- **Investing in development – both capital projects and business skills**
- **Targeted marketing**
- **Policy support from government and its agencies**
- **Industry leadership**

Belfast City Council has experienced tremendous growth in tourism over the last decade and we are confident that the city will continue to attract high volumes of visitors to the city and grow visitor revenue. At present the city attracts over 7 million day trip and overnight visitors generating £500 million revenue. It is important that the national targets can be broken down to reflect the contribution of key areas / themes to support future investment decisions. At present, Belfast City Council and NITB has agreed the targets in Table 1 for growth over the next 5 years as outlined in the Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework 2010 – 2014 however there must be alignment between Northern Ireland and Belfast targets and we would welcome guidance from the Department on this before our Framework is published.

Table 1 Targets for Belfast 2010 – 2014

Growth Targets	2008	Low		Medium		High	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
Total Overnight Visitors	1.6M	20	1.92M	30	2.08M	40	2.24M
Holiday Visitors	0.5M	40	0.71M	50	0.77M	60	0.82M
Nights	5.1 M	10	5,600,000	15	5,850,000	20	6,100,000
Spend	£201M	10	£231M	15	£245m	20	£261m

We would agree with the five critical success factors and we are already delivering a range of actions to support these. However we would make the following comments:

- There should be more focus on developing direct air and sea access to Belfast/Northern Ireland. This is vital if Belfast is to compete as an attractive city break and conference destination.
- There should be more focus on developing access between Dublin and Belfast and internal transport networks. Increasing rail and bus links and improving evening services. Translink and the private sector should be identified as partners.

- The Belfast and Northern Ireland Welcome Centre, which has been in operation since 1999, plays a key role in maximising visitor spend from its central location in Donegall Square and at the airport Tourist Information Centres. Already these facilities play a key role in cross selling, retailing local crafts and souvenirs, ticketing of events and festivals and promoting special deals. The Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework 2010 – 2014 identifies the need to move the centre to ground floor location and further align services to maximise visitor spend opportunities. DETI should recognise that this is a flagship centre for Belfast and Northern Ireland and offers huge potential to drive visitor spend.
- Belfast City Council has invested significantly in creating new experiences for visitors. These have included Late Night Art, Belfast Music Tour, Belfast Music Exhibition, Belfast Literary Tour, Belfast Bred to name but a few. These are innovative products that promote cross selling whilst also providing an authentic, personal experience for visitors. Our approach has been to kickstart these initiatives with public sector support however it is clear that there are commercial opportunities for the private sector. DETI should consider further investment in tailored support programmes for small business start ups to encourage entrepreneurs and private sector investment.

2.2. Whether you support the 3 priorities for Action (People, Product and Places, Promotion) within the Strategy and associated actions within the Action Plan.

Belfast City Council supports these priorities which are also reflected in the Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework 2010 – 2014.

2.2.1 People

More focus should be given to the role of Local Authorities under the theme of people. Belfast City Council is in its third year of delivering the HARTE Programme which aims at getting long term unemployed into the hospitality sector. To date we have had 154 trainees who have completed the course and 57 are now in employment.

It is essential that we deliver a personal welcome for all visitors to Belfast City Council owned sites. Belfast Castle, Malone House and the Zoo have all been awarded various awards for customer excellence and we are committed to ensuring these high standards and setting standards for the industry across Belfast.

2.2.2.Product and Places

Belfast City Council has played a key role in developing the Titanic (Maritime) Belfast Signature Project and agrees that 2012 offers a significant opportunity for Belfast. We are already discussing our events programme for 2012 and working with a broad range of culture and arts organisations. We believe that the Titanic (Maritime) Signature 'Destination' is Belfast and that Belfast City Council and our partners, Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau should be identified as playing a key role in delivering the 2012 opportunity.

Priority D2 refers to Belfast City Council and BVCB taking the lead in developing a Convention Centre and exhibition facility in Belfast to exploit the potential of Business Tourism. The emphasis should be on 'integrated' convention and exhibition facilities and if a viable option is agreed for the city, this will require capital support from government.

The Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework identifies a further 4 capital projects for investment if Belfast is to compete as a leading tourism destination. These include the development of Crumlin Road Gaol, Belfast Hills & Belfast Zoo, a National Art Gallery and the Lagan Canal. These should be identified in the Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy 2020 as they

are beyond the remit of Belfast City Council and will require a joined up approach between local and central government.

There are a number of key parks and leisure sites which would welcome investment for development in the council's portfolio which would significantly add to the cultural and tourism product of Belfast. Café culture in parks is another opportunity the Council would be keen to develop, encouraging people to spend time in parks, improving health and well-being by spending time in attractive, safe, green spaces.

2.2.3. Promotion

Belfast City Council invests nearly £2million per annum into Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau to promote Belfast as a tourism destination. The private / public sector model has proved successful for the city, however there is little reference to BVCB within the Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy or action plan. Furthermore, Belfast City Council has led the development of a new brand for the city. The Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy 2020 must recognise the investment local authorities make in promotion and marketing; acknowledge the existing delivery structures, such as BVCB, and identify their role in supporting or leading on the 'Promotion' actions.

Further consideration needs to be given to the role of the Belfast Brand and how it complements/corresponds with the Northern Ireland Brand.

Tourism Area Plans should have a promotion and research element.

It is important that investment is made in to knowing who our visitors are currently and who they might be in the future. We have had concerns whereby Tourism Ireland have identified key market segments for Ireland which do not match the markets that Belfast is focusing on e.g. younger 18 – 24 year old market is not a priority for Tourism Ireland. Specific research linked to specific themes e.g. city breaks is required to challenge current marketing strategies.

2.3 Whether you support the cross cutting theme of Partnership and the associated actions in the Action Plan

We support the theme of partnership. No reference is made to the partnership approach that has already been established between NITB and Belfast City Council. This is evident from the Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework 2010 – 2014 and from the ten year partnership we have developed through Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau.

The Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework 2010 – 2014 is our commitment to developing quality places for residents and visitors. Within the framework we identify 9 Local Tourism Destinations across the city which will be developed to enhance the visitor experience and services. We will be establishing a Belfast champions group to drive the Framework forward and welcome the opportunity to feed directly into the Minister, maximising the buy in from central government.

There is no reference to Public/Private sector partnerships within the document. Belfast City Council's experience of such partnerships within the context of tourism has been positive. Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau has already been mentioned above, however it is worth noting that the Titanic Signature Project has been delivered via a public / private sector partnership which has allowed the greatest investment in any single visitor attraction within Northern Ireland. New 'innovative' partnerships will be required to meet the ambitious targets identified.

We believe that it is critically important that we deliver quality parks, open spaces and leisure environments that people value and take pride in. We are keen to develop new partnerships which will further enhance the city's assets in terms of programming and provision. For example,

sporting facilities are a key attractor for the city in terms of regional and international sporting events. New partnerships with the education sector would help deliver a broad range of facilities which would enhance the sports 'offer' in the city.

Equally, initiatives such as the Connswater Greenway and other potential greenway projects in the city have an enormous impact on city and neighbourhood attractiveness. We would encourage the strategy to recognise the importance of such partnership initiatives with the community and voluntary sectors in the city.

2.4 Whether you support the proposal to develop an approach for working collaboratively at a local level to deliver for tourism in your area

Yes, as already demonstrated via the Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework.

2.5 Whether you feel there are any significant areas not covered by the Strategy or Action Plan and how you wish to see them reflected

There is limited reference to Northern Ireland's waterways. The Belfast Integrated Strategic Tourism Framework has identified the Lagan Canal as a key priority for future development and we see this as being an important step to achieving the broader strategic aim of opening up the Ulster Waterway's network.

Whilst the top line target is to generate £1 billion tourism revenue by 2020, there should be a broader range of measurements to demonstrate/review success.

It may be useful to have a 5 year target to measure performance and review. A job creation target would also be a useful target to have established and may be a useful target to help justify funding support.