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Dear Barry

Thank you for your letter dated 6 July 2011 concerning the operation of bus tours in Belfast.

In recent years, numerous issues have been highlighted about the conduct of those operating sightseeing bus tours in Belfast. As a consequence, a Tour Bus Steering Group was formed, chaired by Belfast City Centre Management. The Steering Group meets regularly and comprises representatives from PSNI, Roads Service, the Belfast Welcome Centre and this Department. City Council officers responsible for street trading and tourism development are also members of the Steering Group.

The Steering Group introduced a 'code of conduct' for those offering the city tours. This was discussed with the respective tour operators at a recent meeting and further such meetings are planned.

I am pleased that the Council has been able to assist with funding for monitoring how the tour companies operate, particularly on days when cruise ships visit Belfast. I understand that the intention is that those undertaking this role will report back to the Steering Group.

My officials will monitor performance and take the appropriate action where necessary. I am aware that certain operators have been formally warned as to their future conduct. It is only possible to take action where evidence of wrongdoing exists and I welcome additional resources to monitor the conduct of the operators.

The Department will continue to participate in the Steering Group and there may well be the opportunity for the Council to become further involved. Geraldine Duggan, from Belfast City Centre Management chairs the Group and I suggest that you contact her direct on 9024 2111 to discuss the Council's involvement.

The issue has been raised with me by councillors and I will be looking at the issue further.

