

Belfast Tourist Bus – Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the findings of a recent review into issues associated with the operation of hop on hop off bus tours in the city and to consider any relevant actions that the Council and partners might undertake in order to address these issues.

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- Note the update on issues relating to tourist bus operators in the city
- Support the development of a code of conduct for operators and work with partners and the operators to explore how this can be managed

3.0 Main report

3.1 Tourism in Belfast was worth £460m in 2014. It is imperative as we seek to grow that figure in the coming years that we are very mindful of the visitor experience at all levels. Large numbers of visitors are currently using the hop on and hop off bus services and it is important that this experience complements the overall message of the city as a quality visitor destination.

3.2 Members may be aware that the Council has previously discussed a range of issues associated with the conduct of companies providing hop on hop off bus tours for tourists to the city. There had been some concern that the behaviour of staff could have a negative impact on the city as a welcoming tourism destination. The issue appeared to be particularly challenging during busy periods and on cruise ship days.

3.3 During the summer of 2015, some of these tensions arose. However, according to Visit Belfast, these were not on the scale on previous events. Despite this, there have been a range of complaints raised through organisations such as Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM) and Visit Belfast themselves and the issue was discussed at the Board meetings of both organisations recently.

3.4 Currently, there are two operators licensed to operate tours in Belfast. They are:

- Belfast City Sightseeing Tours
- Belfast City Tours (Titanic Bus Tours).

3.5 In order to identify whether there was an opportunity for the Council and partners to take any specific action on the matter, some research was undertaken to understand the operating framework within which the

organisations work; the current sales policy for those wishing to buy tickets for the tours and the view of tourists on the services provided.

- 3.6 With regard to the operating environment, bus tour operators are governed by the Transport Act (1967) and licences are issued by DVA within the context of this Act and must be renewed on an annual basis. This sets out the conditions under which licences are granted, as well as potential conditions for refusal. These can include the previous conduct of applicants and the financial standing of businesses applying for the licence. The Act does not provide sufficient cover to take action against instances that have prompted concern in the past.
- 3.7 A new Bus Act has been proposed by the Northern Ireland Executive and this could provide an opportunity to take action. However it is likely to be some time before this Act comes law. In the interim, it appears that there is a legislative gap which makes it almost impossible to take action against operators who are behaving aggressively towards tourists.
- 3.8 In the absence of the legislative framework, this issue is continually monitored through the appropriate agencies including Visit Belfast and BCCM. A new Code of Conduct is currently being developed with Visit Belfast leading on this element. It is proposed that companies are encouraged to sign up to this code of conduct (which cannot be enforced). Any breaches of the code could lead to the suspension of ticket sales by Visit Belfast for a defined period of time, subject to agreement by their Board.
- 3.9 With regard to ticket sales, these are currently being sold through a number of channels including:
- Visit Belfast Welcome Centre
 - Street trading pitch at Castle Place
 - City Centre hotels and shops
 - Online through company websites
 - On the buses.
- 3.10 Belfast City Council has issued licences to four street traders to sell tickets. However two of these sites (in Fountain Street and Fountain Lane) are not currently operating. There have recently been requests from two other street traders to sell tickets from street trading pitches in the Castle Place/High Street area of the city. Decisions on these applications will be subject to agreement by the Council's Licensing Committee. From the perspective of managing the operations, it would appear logical that the operators use these locations as a base for their ticket sales, given that they are located near the start point for both tours.
- 3.11 With regard to feedback from tourists, much of the feedback is generally positive with good reviews on social media including the Tripadvisor website. Both companies have recently applied to Tourism NI for the Quality Grading Scheme and have been ranked 4 stars (Belfast City Sightseeing) and 3 stars (Belfast City Tours). The scheme helps companies work towards continuous improvement. While this ranking is positive, there is room for improvement and the companies have the

potential to make some progress in terms of customer service and language skills of the staff.

3.12 The main complaints tend to relate to the behaviour of staff on the street, particularly at the time of large cruise ship arrivals and on days of high visitor footfall. On these occasions, complaints numbers tend to increase significantly. Most complaints on social media tend to refer to the sales techniques of street staff. As previously mentioned, the current legislative regime makes it difficult to take any action against operators. However, given the potentially negative impact on tourists and on the tourist industry in the city, it is essential that the Council and its partners continue to work together to encourage improvements in standards until the necessary legislative cover is in place.

3.13 There is a working group in place which is Chaired by DVA and involves Belfast City Council, Belfast City Centre Management, the Federation of Passenger Transport and Visit Belfast; which meets throughout the year to discuss any ongoing issues and attempts to find resolutions. This includes engagement with the coach operators.

3.14 Financial & Resource Implications

There will be a cost implication to Belfast City Council in terms of Welcome Host training. Depending upon uptake from the operators it is not anticipated that this will cost in excess of £3000. This can be paid for through the existing Development Department budgets.

3.15 Equality or Good Relations Implications

No specific equality or good relations implications.”

The Committee:

1. Noted the update on issues relating to tourist bus operators in the city;
2. Supported the development of a code of conduct for operators and work with partners and the operators to explore how this can be managed; and
3. Agreed that the issues in relation to better enforcement and legislative change be referred to the Licensing Committee and suggested that the DVA could be invited in to a future meeting of that Committee.