

# The Belfast Manifesto



## NIIRTA

The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) strongly supports 'The Belfast Manifesto'. This should be required reading for election candidates to both Belfast City Council and the Northern Ireland Assembly if they are serious in a policy plan for the future development of our capital city.

NIIRTA's 1300 members have a collective turnover of £3 Billion and employ over 30,000 staff. We have members in every village, town and city in Northern Ireland.

Belfast makes a huge contribution to the Northern Ireland Economy, with 28% of all Northern Ireland's jobs based in the city. Belfast is rated within the top five fastest growing regional economies in the UK. The city has the largest and most diverse retail centre in Northern Ireland with a combined retail spend of more than £2.5 billion per year.

We commend our colleagues in Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce in publishing this document which complements our own manifesto, 'Programme for Prosperity'.

[www.niirta.com](http://www.niirta.com)



## Introduction

**Belfast is a modern, vibrant, self confident city. It is well recognized as a centre for business, industry, higher education, arts, a legal centre as well as being the economic engine for Northern Ireland.**

The **Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commence** is the leading provider of business support and networking on behalf of the entire city centre business community. We are the region's largest membership organisation for Belfast businesses owned by our members, managed by a council elected by our members and are completely independent of government. Some of our successful initiatives have included the 'City Centre Beat' scheme & 'Feel the Beat of the City' project which have tangibly delivered for our members and also helped to enhance Belfast City Centre.

The **Chamber's mission** is to ensure that our member's interests are considered in all decisions affecting the business and commercial life of the city and to promote Belfast as a leading UK retail, trade and leisure destination. Our priorities are to:

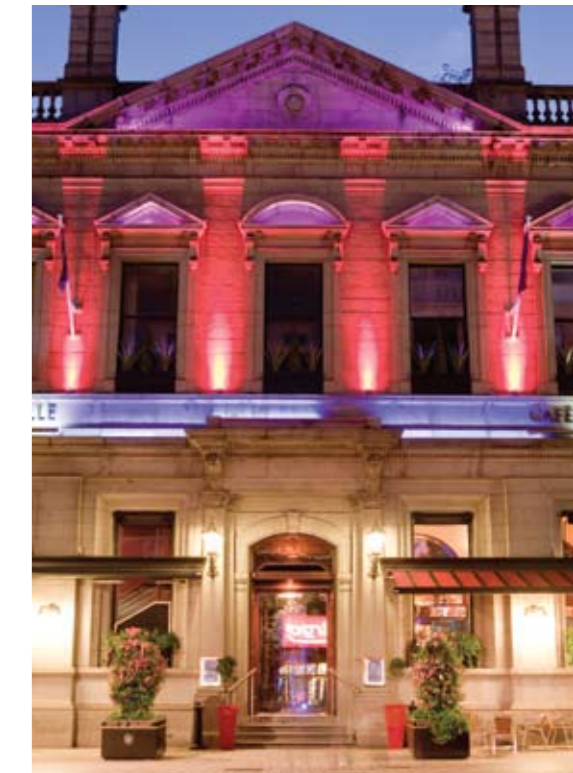
- Provide a rational and articulate voice for our members
- Represent members needs and views at local, regional and national levels
- Provide opportunities for contact and trade between members
- Work in partnership with other organisations to improve the prosperity of the city
- Consolidate Belfast's position as a leading UK retail, trade and leisure destination

## Belfast - A Shared Approach

The Belfast population elects just under a quarter of the Northern Ireland Assembly members. However, **Belfast businesses pay some 67% of the Belfast rates bill, and yet have no opportunity to vote in Council or Assembly elections.**

Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce has therefore produced **The Belfast Manifesto** to set out our views for the forthcoming Programme of Government.

This manifesto sets out the united views of the Belfast City Centre business community on how we can take Belfast forward. We strongly believe we all have a role to play and need to work closely with our elected representatives in order to build on the successes already achieved. We recognise we are in challenging times; however, this document presents key proactive opportunities which will not only help to improve Belfast city centre economy but will ultimately help to contribute towards delivering a sustainable and successful economy for everyone in Northern Ireland.



## Belfast - the key economic driver of Northern Ireland

As the capital city, it is important to recognise that the development of Belfast has a significant impact on the rest of the region as demonstrated by the following key facts:

- Over 28% of all jobs in Northern Ireland are located in the city.
- The city is the main centre of business in Northern Ireland with a primary catchment population of 1.8 million. This includes all of Northern Ireland as well as extending into parts of the Republic of Ireland.
- 7.1 million high-spending visitors to the city each year, demonstrating the Lonely Planet's description of Belfast being a 'city on the rise'.

### Key statistics

- Belfast is rated within the top five fastest growing regional economies in the UK.
- There has been £5bn of investment in Belfast and 35,000 new jobs created in Belfast in the last decade
- It is ranked fifth in the UK for retail trading conditions and fourth for retailer confidence (Gerald Eve: 'Prime Retail Report').
- In 2009, 52.9% of the working age population was in employment.
- In 2009, 5.9% of the working age population were unemployed.
- In 2007, there were 7,600 VAT registered businesses.
- It has a combined retail spend of more than £2.5 billion per year.
- Zone A rents were £195 in 2009, a change of -26.4% from 2008.
- There is 1 million square feet of vacant office space in Belfast.
- The average annual wage in Belfast is £27,000, compared to £19,000 elsewhere in NI

Sources:

DTZ report, Belfast City Centre Healthcheck 2007  
ATCM Milestone Report January 2011

## Government - working together

Working with the Northern Ireland Assembly there are opportunities to explore and deliver better ways for joined-up government with overarching strategies and an efficient public administration.

- Mindful that its promotion of Belfast is not in conflict with the overall economic prosperity and vitality of Northern Ireland the Chamber calls for:
  - a. **An overarching Belfast Strategy to be located within the Office of the First Minister & Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).**
  - b. An overarching strategic framework for town centre regeneration with improved cross-departmental co-operation or alternative governance arrangements.
  - c. An All Party Working Group on town centres should be formed at the NI Assembly
  - d. Implementation of the Review of Public Administration (RPA), providing local solutions to local issues, which is critical to the future of town centres.
- The failure to implement the Review of Public Administration in 2011 is a missed opportunity and the costs associated with delay are a cause for concern.
- The Chamber looks forward to working with:
  - a. The Northern Ireland Assembly and government departments in the development of regional policies and strategies that contribute to the success of Belfast city centre as a regional driver for the Northern Ireland economy.
  - b. An empowered Belfast City Council in the development of a Belfast Strategy, with clearly defined policies for the city centre, and in the daily operation and delivery of services in the city.

The Chamber welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Northern Ireland Assembly, its government departments and Belfast City Council to adopt the same innovative and 'can do' attitude as the private sector when faced with financial constraints.

## Planning for a sustainable future

The Chamber calls for improvements to be made to the planning policy in order to deliver the following benefits:

- **The land use planning hierarchy, from the Regional Development Strategy down to individual planning decisions, to be rationalised into one government department to ensure a coherent strategy with joined-up delivery.**
- The urgent adoption of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) and Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5), which have been left for considerable time in draft form are critical to the protection of town and city centres.
- In line with draft PPS5, a simple and transparent test should be applied to proposed out-of-town shopping centres, based primarily on the economic impact on existing retailers.
- The introduction of a 'Motive Test' in planning legislation should be applied to all applications for Judicial Review, to avoid unnecessary legal delays motivated by commercial interest.
- The requirement for active businesses frontages in city/town centre streets in order to add ambience and make areas attractive to visit/shop and work.

## Fairer Business Rates & Taxes

While businesses pay the greater share of taxes and rates, they have no voice in the electoral democratic system. The present lack of residential voters in Belfast city centre leaves those paying 67% of the Belfast rates bill without electoral influence

- **BCTC calls for legislation to require Local Government to consult with businesses, non-domestic rate payers who in Belfast pay some two thirds of the rates bill, before striking a rate.**
- **We call for non-domestic rates to be based, at least in part, on business turnover and not solely location and use.**
- BCTC would welcome a reduction in Corporation Tax to the level of 12.5% but only on the caveat that any associated reduction of the Northern Ireland Block Grant is phased in. The challenge and opportunity to the private sector to replace the unbalanced and unsustainable reliance on the public sector is to be welcomed.
- BCTC supports the Business Coalitions Jobs Plan document
- Vacant Non-Domestic Rates, which were launched in an entirely different economy, are now discouraging development and leading to inappropriate lettings in the zone A area city centre.
- Additional rates should be placed on car parks at out-of-town shopping centres to create a level playing field with town and city centres. These extra rates should be reinvested into Town Centre regeneration.

## A cleaner City for all

One of the most basic and essential functions of Local Government is to deliver a clean city. The Belfast 'Streets Ahead' project has improved the quality and appearance of our city centre and it is now important that we maintain these high standards and not lose the benefit of these works due to poor cleanliness.

- **Cleansing is a priority in terms of Council services. Belfast City Council should:**
  - **Make a strategic change in priorities to double the present allocation of resources given to cleansing operations.**
  - **Carry the first round of city centre cleansing operations before 7am, when delivery vehicles then park in significant numbers.**
- We call for a city centre free from litter, fly posting and graffiti and look forward to making a contribution to improving city centre cleanliness in future through Business Improvement Districts.

## Accessibility for all

- **BCTC call on DRD to prioritise investment which will assist in enhancing Metro bus services through the provision of additional Quality Bus Corridors on arterial routes and bus priority measures within the city centre.'**
- Significant numbers of city centre users still need to access the city by car. Car parking tariffs should be structured to encourage short-term parking, a high turnover in car parking spaces, and where possible the movement of all-day parkers to Public Transport.
- Strategic Park and Ride sites on the outskirts of the city similar to Cairnshill would help to deter car users from coming into the city.
- On-street parking should be removed from key commuter routes such as the Lisburn Road and Ormeau Avenue, with additional lanes restored where possible.





## Building a better City Centre for all

### Live in our city and town centres:

- Belfast Chamber would advocate that Regional Development, Planning and future Local Council Policy be directed to encourage people to live in our city centre.

### A managed & active city centre

BCTC supports Town Centre Management in the form of a public private partnership, to deliver a co-ordinated pro-active initiative designed to ensure that our city centre is desirable and attractive place.

The economic vibrancy of Belfast city centre is dependent on successful town centre management that measurably contributes to:

- an environment that is clean and safe, by investing in maintenance and security
- added vitality through professional marketing and events programmes
- stimulating growth by inward investment and development and through work with existing businesses develop branding that stresses distinctiveness and changes perceptions
- celebrating local heritage through tourism and destination management
- increasing choice and diversity by promoting and integrating new amenities, residential development and the night-time economy
- ensuring that the town or city centre is welcoming to all and an experience worth having
- Regional and Local Planning Policy should focus on the protection of our active street frontages. PPS5 needs to be reviewed to include reference to active frontages and to the management of change. The new local development plans should also include place specific analysis that leads to place specific proactive change.

### Standards of excellence in urban design for the city

BCTC calls for the establishment of:

- Office of 'City Architect'
- A Belfast urban design centre
- Forum of city developers to ensure quality design.





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