

City Growth and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday, 23rd January, 2019

SPECIAL MEETING OF CITY GROWTH AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Graham (Deputy Chairperson) (in the Chair);
Aldermen Haire, Kingston, McGimpsey and Rodgers;
and Councillors Black, Mullan and O'Donnell.

In attendance: Mr. A. Reid, Strategic Director of Place and Economy;
Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development; and
Mr. H. Downey, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies was reported on behalf of the Chairperson (Councillor Lyons) and Councillors Beattie, Murphy, O'Hara and Walsh.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor O'Donnell declared an interest in relation to the presentation on Visit Belfast/International Convention Centre Belfast in that she had been appointed by the Council to the Board of Visit Belfast and remained in the room whilst the matter was under consideration.

Visit Belfast/International Convention Centre Belfast

Pursuant to the Committee's decision of 5th December, the Members received from Mr. G. Lennon and Ms. C. Toolan, the Chief Executives of Visit Belfast and the International Convention Centre Belfast, respectively, a presentation on business tourism in the City.

Mr. Lennon informed the Members that business tourism was one of the fastest growing sectors within tourism and that it accounted for £39.1 billion in the United Kingdom and €715 million in the Republic of Ireland in terms of economic impact. Whilst figures were not available currently for Northern Ireland, evidence suggested that it too was a growing market. He explained that business tourism was important in that it attracted mid-week, year-round and return leisure visitors and pointed to additional benefits beyond tourism, such as attracting global business, investors, media, academics and students.

He reported that Visit Belfast was the single point of contact for organisations wishing to hold events in the City and referred to the fact that it worked in partnership with the International Convention Centre Belfast, through a Memorandum of Understanding, and closely with Invest NI, Tourism NI and other agencies. He reviewed Visit Belfast's performance for the past five years, in the context of economic impact, bed nights,

**Special City Growth and Regeneration Committee,
Wednesday, 23rd January, 2019**

conferences secured and delegate numbers, and confirmed that it was working to fulfil its target of securing £58 million of economic impact in the current year and would be increasing that target by 30% in 2019/20.

He then outlined four interventions which Visit Belfast would be implementing to drive growth, namely, the establishment of a business development taskforce, the launch of a 'Belfast Makes Sense' digital marketing campaign, the unlocking of the corporate market and the launch of Belfast Showcase events. He confirmed that forthcoming strategic priorities would focus upon investment in market research, the development of a Business Tourism Strategy for 2020-30 and the aforementioned 'Belfast Makes Sense' digital marketing campaign. In relation to opportunities, he highlighted the strong partnership between Visit Belfast and the International Convention Centre Belfast, the competitive subvention scheme and Belfast's strong accommodation and social offer and, in terms of challenges, access, Brexit, global competition and low levels of awareness of Belfast as a conference destination.

Ms. Toolan explained that the award winning International Convention Centre Belfast was the City's only purpose built convention centre and that it was focused upon delivering world class conferences and events. She outlined a number of changes which had been made to the operation of the centre since its opening in 2016, particularly, the establishment of a new leadership team, investment in technology and the creation of the ICC Belfast brand, and highlighted the value of the current partnership arrangement with Visit Belfast. In terms of attracting conferences, she referred to the City's strengths in, for example, the medical, cyber security and technology sectors and pointed out that a target to contribute £100 million of economic impact and deliver 50,000 annual conference delegate days by 2020 had been established. Access, however, remained a challenge, as was Brexit, competition from other convention centres and low levels of awareness amongst conference organisers.

She then drew the Members' attention to the subvention scheme, under which the Council and Tourism NI each provided annual funding of £200,000 to support conference organisers. Since its launch in 2011, seventy-eight conferences had secured funding of £1,527,000 and had, in turn, generated £95.7 million of economic impact and 223,000 bed nights. She reviewed the level of subvention which was offered in other cities and stressed that it was essential that the current scheme continue, to allow Belfast to compete for large scale events.

The Director of Economic Development stressed the importance of business tourism to the City in the context of, for example, the Belfast Agenda and reinforced the need for the Council to continue to support Visit Belfast, the International Convention Centre Belfast and the other tourism bodies in overcoming the challenges which had been alluded to by both Mr. Lennon and Ms. Toolan.

In response to a numbers of issues which had been raised by the Members, Mr. Lennon confirmed that Visit Belfast was working in partnership with the Council's Economic Initiatives and International Development Unit to enhance the relationship with Belfast's Sister Cities. In relation to the cruise ship market, he confirmed that this had shown a year-on-year increase and that it had accounted for around 200,000 tourists in the previous year. Discussions were, he pointed out, taking place with the Belfast Harbour

**Special City Growth and Regeneration Committee,
Wednesday, 23rd January, 2019**

Commissioners around the provision of a much-needed bespoke berthing facility. He added also that the focus of Visit Belfast would, post-Brexit, be on flexibility and adaptability and that it was working with Tourism NI to collate meaningful data to inform business tourism.

Ms. Toolan, in addressing a number of queries from the Members, explained that the catering contract for the International Convention Centre Belfast had been terminated in the previous year and that an interim arrangement which had been put in place had proven to be a success. A tendering exercise was due to commence shortly and it was anticipated that a new contract would be in place by April. She then confirmed that the convention centre was on course to meet its target of conference bookings for 2019/20 and that, whilst a number of decisions were pending from United Kingdom-based conference organisers for 2020/21, there was some uncertainty on the part of European-based organisers relating to Brexit. She provided details around the enhancements to signage which had been undertaken to date and added that further work was required, in light of the recent rebranding exercise. Finally, she referred to issues being experienced currently at the Belfast International Airport and highlighted the potential benefits to be derived from the establishment of a rail link between Dublin and Belfast for business tourism and economic growth.

Mr. Lennon and Ms. Toolan were thanked by the Chairperson, following which the Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Chairperson