

Northern Ireland Hotels Federation (NIHF)

Response to Belfast City Council Consultation on Sunday Openings

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on extending Sunday trading hours through potential 'holiday resort' designation across the Belfast City Council area.

Overall, we are supportive of the proposal and believe it represents a positive and pragmatic step towards strengthening Belfast's weekend economy, enhancing the visitor experience, and supporting the hospitality sector.

Supporting a More Vibrant Sunday Economy

Current Sunday trading restrictions limit large retailers to opening between 1pm and 6pm. This creates a clear gap in city centre activity during the morning period, at a time when there is already strong demand from both residents and visitors.

Evidence within the consultation highlights that:

- Sunday footfall is significantly lower than other days, with activity only peaking mid-afternoon
- Saturday nights are among the busiest for hotel occupancy, exceeding 85%
- There is growing demand for Sunday morning activities, including brunch and family-friendly experiences

Extending retail opening hours would help address this imbalance by encouraging earlier movement into the city centre and creating a more complete and attractive Sunday offer.

Benefits for Hotels and the Visitor Economy

Hotels are particularly well placed to benefit from increased Sunday morning activity. A significant proportion of hotel guests stay on Saturday night, yet currently encounter a limited offer on Sunday mornings. Extending opening hours would:

- Improve the overall guest experience by providing more things to see and do before departure
- Encourage visitors to stay longer in the city, increasing secondary spend across retail, food and beverage and attractions
- Strengthen Belfast's competitiveness as a weekend destination, aligning more closely with other UK and Irish cities where Sunday trading is less restrictive

In practical terms, a more active Sunday morning economy supports higher spend per visitor and reinforces the value of overnight stays, which is critical to the sustainability of the hotel sector.

Supporting City Animation and Family-Friendly Activity

The proposal aligns with wider ambitions to make Belfast a more vibrant, accessible and family-friendly city.

At present, options for families and visitors on Sunday mornings are relatively limited, with only a small number of attractions operating early in the day.

Allowing greater retail participation would:

- Create a more balanced and engaging city centre experience
- Support linked activity across cafés, restaurants and attractions
- Encourage a shift towards a full-day Sunday economy rather than a compressed afternoon peak

Proportionate and Flexible Approach

We note that the proposed approach is limited and controlled, allowing extended opening on up to 18 Sundays between March and September. This provides:

- Flexibility for businesses to opt in where there is demand
- A seasonal focus aligned with peak tourism periods
- A balanced approach that respects existing legislation and local considerations

Conclusion

We support the introduction of holiday resort designation for Belfast as a means of extending Sunday trading hours on a limited and managed basis.

From a hospitality perspective, the proposal would:

- Enhance the visitor experience
- Increase city centre footfall earlier in the day
- Drive additional spend and economic activity
- Strengthen the overall competitiveness of Belfast as a destination

We would encourage the Council to proceed with the proposal and to continue working with the hospitality sector to maximise the benefits of a more vibrant and commercially sustainable Sunday economy.