



Subject:	Conference Tourism: economic impact and future growth
Date:	13 September 2017
Reporting Officer:	Donal Durkan, Director of Development,
Contact Officer:	Clare Mullen, Tourism, Culture, Heritage & Arts Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of Main Issues
1.1	The purpose of this report is to update Members on the growth of conference tourism over recent years and the potential for future growth, as a key element of tourism development in the City.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	The Committee is asked to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Note the importance and economic value of conference tourism to the city and the projected growth of this sector- Note the importance of Conference support mechanisms such as the Subvention Scheme in attracting events

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agree to extend the scheme end date to 2025, subject to agreement with Tourism NI and subject to resource availability.
3.0	Main Report
	<u>Background</u>
3.1	Business and conference tourism is a key priority of the Integrated Tourism Strategy which was approved by the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee in May 2015. The Strategy was developed in tandem with the City Centre Regeneration Strategy and Investment Plan and the proposals are aligned to support the future development, economic growth and profile of the city.
3.2	Belfast City Council and Tourism NI both provide financial support towards a Conference Subvention Scheme which is administered by Visit Belfast. This provides financial incentives to encourage Conference organisers to choose Belfast as a destination for their event. An independent review of the scheme was conducted at the end of 2016 and, as a result, new guidelines have been developed in order to streamline the process and ensure that the fund meets the changing needs of the Conference sector.
3.3	The Scheme has been a critical element of Belfast's ability to attract conferences to the City. Last year, conference tourism contributed over £35million to the City's economy in terms of spend on venues, accommodation, hospitality and leisure activities.
	<u>Key Issues</u>
3.4	The investment in the new Conference and Exhibition facilities at Belfast Waterfront has been a "game-changer" in terms of the City's activity to host large-scale Conferences and events as well as associated exhibitions. Working with local Ambassadors (principally aligned to the local universities) and with local venues, the Business Tourism team at Visit Belfast has been working to raise awareness of the enhanced facilities as well as the wider positioning of Belfast as a cost-competitive, business-friendly Conference location.
3.4	Over the course of the last financial year, the continued efforts of those involved helped secure the following conference tourism deliverables: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 69 major conferences - 25,000 delegates - 75,000 bed nights - Economic value of £35 million to the city.

<p>3.5</p>	<p>Some of the events recently secured by Visit Belfast for the coming years include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - European Conference on Personalised Medicine: 1,250 delegates, 5,000 bed nights worth £1.9m in 2017 - IDF World Dairy Summit: 1,200 delegates, 6,250 bed nights worth £2.4m 2017 - WHO Healthy Cities Conference: 1,000 delegates, 5,000 bed nights worth £1.9m in 2018. - British Ecological Society Annual Meeting: 1,500 delegates, 4,500 bed nights worth £2.2m in 2019 - College of Occupational Therapists: 1,500 delegates. 3,000 bed nights worth £1.4m 2019 - Microbiology Society Conference 2019 and 2022 1,400 delegates, 5,600 bed nights worth £2.7m per conference.
<p>3.6</p>	<p>Having the physical infrastructure in place is just one element of a city’s activity to attract large-scale Conferences and Events. Conference organisers also look for elements such as ease of access, alignment to Conference objectives (e.g. areas of research excellence) and the “city welcome”. Members will be aware that the City Hall can provide a spectacular backdrop for events and the ability to provide access to the venue for Conference receptions is an important selling tool for the city.</p>
<p>3.7</p>	<p>In a highly competitive, global business environment, it is important to be able to offer a “package” of support in order to allow the city to compete favourably. Most cities have access to a Conference Subvention Scheme which can provide Conference organisers with financial incentives to secure the Conference or event for their city.</p>
<p>3.8</p>	<p>In Belfast, the Council and Tourism NI have been investing in the Conference Subvention Fund for a number of years. The scheme has evolved as the market has changed and as the City offer has moved on. Following some competitor benchmarking, as part of the independent review, Visit Belfast has worked with the Council and Tourism NI to revise the operational arrangements around the scheme, focusing on maximising economic return while providing optimal flexibility to Conference organisers in terms of eligible expenditure. While details are currently being finalised, it is proposed that the product offer is re-branded to demonstrate the breadth of the support services available to Conference organisers – not just the financial incentive. This may include opportunities to support familiarisation trips if Belfast is shortlisted as a host city for an event, or providing hospitality at City Hall for those</p>

3.9	<p>events that meet the revised criteria for these functions.</p> <p>Visit Belfast currently has a strong pipeline of £180 million of active leads and is prioritising research and sales activity into two identified sectors, namely Life and Health Sciences and Agri-Food. These sectors provide a stronger and quicker return due to the pool of Ambassador talent within the local universities. In addition to these sectors, they will continue to focus on wider economic sectors that align to areas of research and industry expertise in the City.</p>
3.10	<p>When the current Conference Subvention Scheme was put in place, the end date for financial commitments was set as 2020. Given that Visit Belfast is currently exploring opportunities to bid for Conferences beyond this date, it is proposed that the end date for the scheme is extended to 2025. This does not mean that the Council will be committing to maintaining specific levels of resources until this timeframe. Instead, it means that Visit Belfast will be able to look ahead to a wider timeframe for new business development opportunities, subject to financial resources being in place. Officers are currently engaging with Tourism NI to ensure that they can also agree to these revised timeframes.</p>
3.11	<p><u>Equality and Good Relations Implications</u></p> <p>No specific equality or good relations implications.</p>
3.12	<p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>At present Belfast City Council’s annual financial contribution to the Conference Subvention Scheme is £200,000. This is match-funded by resources from Tourism NI. This allocation has been set aside in existing budgets for the current financial year.</p> <p>The Council contribution to the scheme will be reviewed on an ongoing basis, in conjunction with Tourism NI and in line with available resources.</p>
4.0	Appendices – Documents Attached
	None