



Subject:	Conference Tourism: Economic Impact and Future Development
Date:	7th August 2019
Reporting Officer:	John Greer, Director of Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Naomi Doak, 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/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. It also includes a request to extend the eligibility period for the current Conference Subvention Scheme to 2030.
1.2	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.

<p>1.3</p> <p>1.4</p>	<p>The Scheme has been a critical element of Belfast’s ability to attract conferences and boost the City’s growing reputation as a premier conference location. Last year, Visit Belfast reported that Belfast welcomed over 55,000 national and international delegates to the city. This was a 77% increase on the previous year and is estimated to have generated £52million for the local economy. In 2018, Belfast was also named as the Best Events Destination by Conference and Incentive Travel (C&IT) while the International Conference Centre (ICC) won the accolade of Best Events Venue.</p> <p>One feature of business and conference tourism is the long lead-in times for attracting new business. As part of the operation of the Conference Subvention Scheme, Visit Belfast have requested that the Council and Tourism NI agrees to a longer timeframe for the scheme. This will allow them to make recommendations for support for events that are planning to come to the city in coming years. It does not involve a request for additional financial support beyond the current commitments.</p>
<p>2.0</p>	<p>Recommendations</p>
<p>2.1</p>	<p>The Committee is requested to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. agree to extend the Conference Subvention Scheme end date to 2030, subject to resource availability; ii. note the importance and economic value of conference tourism to the city and the projected growth of this sector; and iii. note the importance of support mechanisms such as the Conference Subvention Scheme in attracting events.
<p>3.0</p>	<p>Main Report</p>
<p>3.1</p>	<p><u>Key Issues</u></p> <p>The Conference Support Scheme is administered by Visit Belfast and provides financial support to encourage conference organisers to choose Belfast as a destination for their event. The key objectives of the Conference Support Scheme are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to raise the profile of Belfast and Northern Ireland as a leading business and conference destination • to consolidate existing investment in Belfast and Northern Ireland hotel and conference infrastructure • to increase the contribution of business and conference tourism to Belfast and Northern Ireland economy • to change the international perception of Belfast and Northern Ireland • to encourage investment to Belfast and Northern Ireland

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to grow the number of leisure visitors by encouraging conferences to run partner and extender programmes and • to increase the value of business tourism and visitor spend through encouraging partner, social and extended programmes.
3.2	<p>The Scheme has been a crucial element of Belfast’s ability to attract conferences to the city, particularly given some of the challenges that the city faces around issues such as transport accessibility. It has helped to enhance Belfast’s reputation as a city for conferences and is leading to repeat conferences in the city as well as highlighting the city’s leisure tourism offer.</p>
3.3	<p>The 2015 Integrated Tourism Strategy identified business tourism as a key area of focus and the mid-term review of the strategy undertaken in 2018 emphasised that business tourism in Belfast is growing at an international level which demonstrates the importance of having an effective support scheme in place. Conference and business tourism is a global business so Belfast is competing with cities all across the world and we need to have all the relevant tools at our disposal to make a compelling bid to host relevant events. As part of a 2016 review of the scheme, an assessment of conference support schemes in other cities was undertaken in order to benchmark the Belfast offer and understand what was being presented by competitor cities. This identified that the Belfast budget is still very modest in comparison to other cities. In addition, other locations provide additional incentives on top of the financial offer e.g. access to free public transport for all conference delegates, interest free loans for conference organisers.</p>
3.4	<p>Since its inception in 2011, the Scheme has helped to secure 88 conferences which have been awarded support funding worth £1.55m, generating £97.2m of economic impact. In 2018-19, conference wins were worth approximately £52.1m to the local economy. Furthermore, Visit Belfast presently has a strong pipeline of over £50 million of active leads. In recent years, Belfast has also been able to benefit from the development of the ICC and can now attract large international conferences to the city. Visit Belfast has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with ICC to encourage new business to the city and they have been working to increase awareness of the enhanced facilities as well as the wider positioning of Belfast as a cost-competitive, business-friendly conference location. However, the ICC is not the only venue available, and other locations such as local hotels and the universities have also been successful in attracting conference and business events.</p>

3.5	<p>Conferences taking place later this year that have been secured as part of the Support Scheme include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CHRO 2019 (Campylobacter, Helicobacter and Related Microorganisms) in September with 2500 bed nights and £965,150 economic impact • European Conference on Mental Health in October with 1590 bed nights and £613,835 economic impact • The Association of Simulated Practice in Healthcare (ASPIH) in November with 1275 bed nights and £623,398 economic impact.
3.6	<p>The end date for financial commitments as part of the Support Scheme is currently 2025. However Visit Belfast has recently been approached about hosting a major event in the city in 2027. This event is projected to deliver 5200 bed nights and generate £2,542,488 of economic impact. Visit Belfast considers that their engagement with conference organisers is increasingly likely to relate to events beyond the 2025 time period. As a result, they have asked approval from the key funders (Belfast City Council and Tourism NI) to extend the end date for the scheme to 2030. This does not mean that the Council will be making a commitment to maintaining specific levels of resources until this timeframe but that Visit Belfast can bid for new business development opportunities within a wider timeframe, subject to financial resources being in place at that time. Officers have engaged with Tourism NI who have agreed to the revised timescale.</p> <p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p>
3.7	<p>At present Belfast City Council's annual financial contribution to the Conference Support Scheme is £200,000. This funding was approved by the City Growth and Regeneration Committee on 3rd April 2019, as part of the Tourism Development Action Plan for the 2019/20 period. This is match-funded by resources from Tourism NI.</p>
3.8	<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> <p><u>Equality and Good Relations Implications/Rural Impact Assessment</u></p>
3.9	<p>No specific equality or good relations implications. No rural impact assessment.</p>
4.0	Documents Attached
	None