

Introduction

The Dublin Chamber of Commerce welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Tourism Renewal Group. The tourism sector is an essential component of the Dublin economy, and contributes in a unique and dynamic way to the city's cultural mix and vibrancy. Recognising the importance of this industry for Ireland, the Chamber presented a comprehensive tourism policy paper entitled '*Tourism ABC: Promoting Dublin as a location for Arts, Business and Culture*' to the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism in 2006. The paper focused on transforming Dublin into a leading destination for business and cultural tourists by the end of the decade. Whilst there has been progress, more concerted action by Government is required to regenerate the Dublin tourism "product", to ensure value for money and attract higher value-added visitors to the city.

Consumer/tourist behaviour and value for money

Feedback from members who have attended trade shows this year indicate that promoting Ireland is increasingly difficult because our hotel, food and beverage prices are perceived to be expensive in major markets, such as the UK. Tourists are selecting locations with less safety and policing than Ireland, but where food and drink is much cheaper. The problem is particularly acute in the 'short city breaks' market. Visitors want good deals and are willing to engage in research before travelling. This can be seen in the number of users of 'visitdublin.com', which received 9 million hits in 2008. Furthermore, members have noticed a large drop in incentive groups and conferences coming from the United Kingdom and the United States. While there is little that can be done about the appreciation of the euro, Government should ensure that the cost of visiting Dublin is kept in check. This can be achieved by ensuring business costs are kept in line with competitor destinations and reducing indirect taxes.

Dublin Chamber recognises that Ireland cannot compete exclusively as a low cost destination. Nonetheless, there is a concern that potential visitors are not aware of recent price cuts and still consider Ireland an expensive destination, without fully appreciating the price/quality mix. Immediate steps are required to develop the city's tourism offering which maximises upon its unique history and culture. Dublin must become a welcoming location where standards of service are personable and professional, and where the entire city's cultural offerings are fully accessible. In particular, barriers to the promotion of Dublin as a family friendly destination must be eliminated. Many bars now serve competitively priced food, yet tourist families cannot avail of these prices as they are prevented from eating in such establishments after 9pm if any of their party is under the age of 18 years.

Recommendations:

- **Reduce the Rate of VAT:** Ireland's high rates of VAT reduce its attractiveness to tourists, particularly when compared with the UK. While Dublin Chamber recognises the challenge of restoring the public finances, we are concerned that an excessive focus on tax increases will simply prolong the cycle of contracting economic activity and consumer spending. We believe that the lower rate of VAT, which is on labour intensive services, should be reduced from 13.5% to 10% for the remainder of 2009 to stimulate consumer confidence. In addition, the rate of excise on alcohol should be brought more in line with UK levels.
- **Abolish the Airport Tax:** The airport tax reduces tourism levels and costs jobs in the retailing, hotel and restaurant sectors. The tax does not support infrastructural development at the airport.

- **Improve Opening Times:** Many of the cultural centres in Dublin remain closed on Mondays, in the evenings and are limited to a few short opening hours on a Sunday. This is an outdated tradition that no longer caters to the need of tourists and should be re-examined. During the high season, changes should include Monday opening, late opening mid-week, and earlier opening at weekends.
- **Review Licensing Laws:** the licensing laws should be amended to ensure that Dublin is not losing the important family segment of the tourism market. Under the current rules, venues holding pantomimes cannot allow children into the bar at the interval and families with children must be turned away from cultural events (such as Irish music performances) when alcohol is served.

Marketing and Promotion

Continued investment in tourism infrastructure and marketing is required. Budget cuts have led to a curtailment of the annual programming of institutions, such as the National Museum of Ireland, and efforts at targeting a wider visitor base. These cuts come at a time when it has never been more critical to develop Dublin's tourism offering. Other economies are likely to improve more swiftly than Ireland. This suggests that tourism could be one of the first sectors to experience an economic upturn.

Recommendations:

- **Advertising:** The Chamber believes that there is a need to fund an advertising campaign that focuses upon the many existing cultural attractions in the city. There is an untapped opportunity in the city for cultural attractions to be given a theme and "packaged". The promotional campaign must also tackle the belief that Dublin is too expensive.
- **Cultural Tourism:** Dublin Tourism should appoint a 'Cultural Ambassador' for the city, who's remit includes the provision of a comprehensive listing of events and a proactive marketing of a series of thematic programmes in the city.

Product Development

In our 2006 paper, we identified the lack of non-hotel public venues suitable to host a dinner reception for large audience numbers (in excess of 300 persons) as a blockage to developing Dublin's business tourism sector. We called for creative discussion and co-operation between local and national Government, state agencies, third level institutions and the business community to identify possible high status venues – existing and new. We are disappointed that, with the exception of the banqueting space that will come available when the Conference Centre opens in 2010, this infrastructure gap has not been addressed.

Furthermore Dublin needs a "Major Events" strategy to clarify and improve its offering in this area. Australia provides a useful case study. It has made major sporting and cultural events a key component of their tourism strategy through the use of the Melbourne Cup, Commonwealth Games, and Sydney Olympics etc. At present in Ireland, major events are run on an ad-hoc basis, largely through the efforts of a small number of individuals, associations and local authorities.

Recommendations:

- **Choice of Venues:** The OPW should proactively identify, and open, new venues that can facilitate the needs of the business tourism sector.
- **Venue Capacity:** The Health and Safety Authority should work with industry and the Dublin local authorities to maximise the capacity of all non-hotel venues.
- **Establish a Major Events Forum:** Fáilte Ireland should establish a Major Events Forum, gathering together senior experienced people from both public and private sector to provide their input, and use this forum to put together a strategy through to 2025. A small group of individuals who are part of the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism or Fáilte Ireland, working in partnership with other public sector bodies, the national governing bodies, volunteer groups and private organizations, should implement the approved strategy.

Infrastructure and Transport

Government should continue to support the development of public transport in Dublin. In particular, there are a large number of rail projects, including LUAS, Metro and DART Underground, that will considerably enhance the tourist experience and provide the backbone of an integrated transport service. Visitors will be able to take a Metro from the new Terminal 2 at Dublin Airport and switch to the Docklands LUAS extension to go to the new Convention Centre. Improvements to the quality and efficiency of the bus service are being made that will, for example, provide visitors with real time passenger information and an integrated ticket between bus and rail.

Recommendations:

- **Public Transport:** The programme for public transport development in Dublin must be maintained.
- **Port Developments:** Government must support the development and enhancement of Dublin and Ireland's air and sea port access to ensure the customer experience and service is world-class.
- **Improve Taxi Standards:** The de-regulation of the taxi industry has resulted in a much-needed increase in taxi provision on the streets of Dublin. However, the Taxi regulator must introduce legislation that ensures a high minimum standard of cleanliness, hygiene and service in each taxi.
- **Improve Coach Movement and Facilities:** Tourism locations and hotels in the city centre need safe pick up and drop off points for passengers travelling by coach. Furthermore, parking facilities for coaches in the capital need to be improved. Local authorities must be encouraged to work with tourism providers and the hospitality sector to ensure traffic plans and parking arrangements satisfy the needs of all concerned.

Innovation

Dublin Chamber supports the vision set out in Fáilte Ireland's tourism product development strategy for continuous product innovation to improve communications with visitors. In particular, we believe there are opportunities to enhance communications using technology such as PDAs and mobile phones to facilitate activities such as tourism itinerary planning and mapping. We believe that Government should support and encourage a cooperative approach between tourism bodies and private enterprises to implement the strategy and the capital infrastructure it may require.

General Environment

The attractiveness and cleanliness of Dublin's civic space is a critical element in the tourist experience. Government must support local authorities in the region in ensuring that Dublin is clean and that it is promoted as such. Dublin Chamber is actively working with Dublin City Council to this end. In addition, businesses in the city, through BIDS, are working to ensure Dublin city centre is a welcoming urban environment.

Recommendations:

- **Street Vending:** Street vending and persons standing with advertisement boards need to be regulated. These often cause obstructions on the pavement and inconvenience tourists walking from location to location.
- **Crime:** Government must reduce crime levels to ensure that visitors are safe and feel safe. Government should explore the use of Community Courts to deal effectively with low level crime.

Conclusion

The city of Dublin is renowned worldwide for its energetic pulse and important heritage. However, as travel becomes more widely accessible and affordable, and tourists become more sophisticated, Dublin's tourism offering must evolve, Government must support continued investment in public transport, the training and development of persons in the hospitality sector, in technology that will improve our tourism product and in ensuring Dublin is litter and crime free. Tourism is an important source of economic activity and employment. Therefore it is important that actions are taken to ensure that the city becomes a safe, clean, accessible and welcoming tourist destination.