

INSTITUTE OF HOSPITALITY

WHITE PAPER

FROM MOMENT TO MOMENTUM:
IS BELFAST'S HOSPITALITY SECTOR
READY FOR THE NEXT FLEADH?

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Author: Aymen Fetouak MIH

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



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I described it as a social experiment where Belfast fell in love with itself again.

Michael Stewart, Director at Bar Czar Ltd., Belfast

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The background

Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann brought an exceptional number of visitors into Belfast, filling streets with music and creating an atmosphere that participants described with pride. Hotels, hospitality businesses, volunteers, transport providers and public agencies helped make the event work. Its success also exposed a planning question: if the Fleadh returns at greater scale, can the people and services behind the visitor experience sustain it?

At an Institute of Hospitality round table hosted by Ulster Bank on 10th September 2026, representatives from hospitality, tourism, the event, volunteering, policing, transport and local government reviewed the first Belfast Fleadh and considered what should change next time. Their discussion offered a clear answer. The city has proved that it can welcome a major cultural event, but readiness for another year depends on earlier coordination, more realistic demand forecasts and explicit support for the workforce and public services that carry the event.

The challenge

The first year was difficult to forecast. Several participants described a quieter Monday to Wednesday than anticipated at their own venues, followed by a sharp rise from Thursday into the weekend. This was not a quiet week overall: demand remained substantial, but its distribution mattered to staffing, stock, transport and revenue. People who had planned around a steady flow faced the cost of bringing in extra staff early, sending some home, and then trying to bring them back for the busiest days.

The pressure was shared beyond hotels and restaurants. Police and transport teams increased their presence and capacity, while visitor services handled a surge in requests for directions and information. Volunteers were vital to a welcoming atmosphere, but specialist roles, including Irish language support, could prove exhausting over long shifts. Participants also observed that parts of the city outside the event's busiest streets, and some permanent businesses competing with pop-up traders, benefited less evenly.

The round table therefore asked what can be learned without diminishing what went well. Participants repeatedly stressed that the event's reach and public goodwill were the result of years of planning and strong relationships, rather than a one-week effort.

Round table findings

An event built on partnerships

The relationship between Belfast City Council, Visit Belfast, tourism bodies, Translink, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Volunteer Now, event organisers and hospitality operators allowed teams to adapt when crowd movement or transport arrangements changed. Participants credited existing contacts and trust with enabling quick decisions on the ground. Public and private partners had worked together before the Fleadh and could call on one another when a new problem appeared.

The event also broadened engagement with Belfast itself. Participants described residents visiting parts of the city they did not ordinarily use, families staying into the evening and a sense of civic pride that was unusually visible. Hotels reported positive guest feedback and bookings for the comparable period next year. These accounts show why the legacy of a major event should be judged through both visitor activity and the confidence it gives a destination.

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Michael Stewart, Director at Bar Czar Ltd., Belfast

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Forecast demand by day and by place

Hospitality businesses need a forecast of the shape of the week, not only a headline attendance projection. Some venues staffed heavily for the opening weekdays and then cut casual shifts before demand accelerated. The same pattern was not universal. The round table heard that central locations, hotels, neighbourhood venues and the airport experienced different flows. Some participants expected stronger weekday demand in a second year as visitors who first sampled the event return for longer stays, but this remains a planning assumption rather than a confirmed forecast.

A shared planning picture should therefore include likely dayparts, transport arrival and departure points, the geographical spread of programming and scenarios for higher or lower footfall. Venues can use it to set flexible rotas and stock levels, while recognising that any projection will change during a live event.

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A lot of staff were then sent home.

Michael Stewart, Director at Bar Czar Ltd., Belfast

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Protect the people delivering the welcome

The atmosphere carried teams through demanding shifts, but enjoyment did not remove the strain. The round table heard of hotel staff still working at 3.00 am, and of operators drawing people from other properties and departments to help at peak periods. Some brought in casual staff for extra shifts. When weekday demand fell short of forecasts at individual venues, cancelled or shortened shifts created a fairness problem for workers who had reserved their availability.

Participants also explained how service models changed under pressure. Shorter bar menus and different glassware helped teams serve high volumes safely, while staff attitude and local knowledge maintained the welcome. A repeat event should build in a staffing plan for surge periods, clear expectations for temporary workers and recovery time after exceptionally long shifts. Cross-training can help, but workers need role clarity and appropriate supervision.

Volunteer Now described a substantial programme of general and role-specific training for welcome ambassadors, music-school and competition roles, volunteer leaders and safeguarding. Volunteers were trained to observe, report and refer safety concerns rather than intervene beyond their role. A lesson for the next event was to shorten particularly intensive assignments, including those requiring sustained Irish language support, and to use feedback from volunteers to adjust rotas.

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We were very clear in terms of what your role is, what it's not, but importantly, what is the reporting mechanism?

Lindsay Armstrong, Volunteer Now

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Make the whole city easier to navigate

Visit Belfast described a large increase in face-to-face and email enquiries during the event. A practical “what’s on” guide proved especially useful. Yet information about hospitality activity outside the official programme did not always reach visitor teams in time. Businesses produced their own material, and visitor advisers sometimes discovered relevant offers by chance. The mechanisms for submitting wider event information exist; the opportunity is to open and promote them earlier, with a clear deadline and point of contact.

Participants also called for wider coverage of visitor information and better signposting between the city centre, neighbourhoods, permanent venues and hotels. Temporary traders were needed to serve the crowds, but their presence should sit alongside visibility for businesses that operate throughout the year. The discussion raised the possibility of extending pedestrian areas and spreading activity to quieter locations. Such changes would require joint assessment of access, safety, transport and the trading implications.

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We didn’t really get that information.

Nicola McCulloch, Visit Belfast, on hospitality activity beyond the official programme

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Plan for safety and its cost

People around the table recalled a strong feeling of safety in the city. The police representative said the operational picture was more complex: recorded crime for the comparable period had increased alongside a substantial increase in footfall, and the force was still analysing what the figures meant. The discussion should therefore not be read as a claim that crime fell. The visible policing and safer-neighbourhood presence contributed to reassurance, while the scale of the operation created a material cost for public services.

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The cost for us, though, was quite significant.

Amanda Ford, Police Service of Northern Ireland

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Translink described high passenger demand, a positive customer response and the need to make dynamic decisions around road closures and pedestrianisation. The lesson for a second year is to agree operational triggers, communications and resource requirements across agencies in advance, while allowing managers on the ground to respond to actual conditions. Participants also raised the need for reliable late transport so visitors and staff can leave the city safely.

Turn a successful first year into a lasting gain

A first Belfast Fleadh required an explanation of what the event was and who it was for. That baseline awareness now exists. Participants saw an opportunity to market earlier across Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland, encourage longer stays and connect the event to the region's wider culture, hospitality and tourism offer. They also wanted the relationships and volunteer capability built for the Fleadh to strengthen other major events throughout the year.

The benefits were not evenly spread, and a repeat should address that directly. The round table called for a wider geographic reach, better routes to neighbouring areas, earlier engagement with businesses, and a stronger offer for visitors seeking traditional sessions and suitable accommodation. These suggestions are proposals arising from the discussion; they require feasibility work with organisers, communities and statutory partners.

Best practice and practical solutions

Build one shared demand picture. Combine event programming, booking patterns, transport forecasts and visitor enquiries into a weekly and daily planning brief. Update it during the event and make uncertainty visible.

Bring hospitality into planning early. Give permanent venues, hotels and trade bodies time to develop offers, submit listings, prepare staff and feed operational concerns into multi-agency exercises.

Plan workforce capacity and recovery. Agree flexible but fair shift arrangements, cross-train for pressure points and schedule rest and cover for teams working late or supporting repeated peaks.

Train volunteers for the role they will actually perform. Include safeguarding, reporting routes, realistic shift lengths and team leaders, then use their feedback to change the next programme.

Join up the visitor journey. Publish one dependable source for official and wider hospitality activity, supported by trained information teams, transport updates and clear on-street signposting.

Measure public value alongside commercial value. Review venue trading, visitor stay, worker experience, accessibility, safety, public-service costs and the spread of benefits across the city and region.

Next steps

- 1)** Before the next Fleadh, the partners should hold a joint lessons-learned session that includes hospitality operators and front-line staff as well as the agencies responsible for transport, safety and visitor services.
- 2)** The output should be a concise action plan with named owners and decision dates.
- 3)** Four priorities emerged from this discussion:
 - a)** an earlier sector engagement calendar
 - b)** shared demand scenarios by day and area
 - c)** an agreed workforce and volunteer support plan
 - d)** a single route for businesses to submit accurate visitor information
- 4)** The city can build on a remarkable first year. The most useful response is to turn its goodwill and practical learning into plans that allow the next event to work for guests, residents, workers, permanent businesses and public services alike.

Methodology

This white paper draws on a facilitated Institute of Hospitality round-table discussion held on 10th September 2026 at Ulster Bank Commercial and Institutional in Belfast. It is a thematic account of participants' experiences and proposals, not an independent evaluation of the event.

The round table brought together representatives of the Institute of Hospitality, Ulster Bank, Belfast City Council, Visit Belfast, Tourism Northern Ireland, Volunteer Now, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Translink, Springboard UK, Hastings Hotels, the Ringland Group and hospitality and visitor operations.

Facilitated by Aymen Fetouak MIH, Head of Professional Development, Institute of Hospitality. Hosted by Ulster Bank Commercial and Institutional, with thanks to Richard Lusty and the participating organisations.

Methodology

Facilitated by



Aymen Fetouak MIH
Head of Professional Development
Institute of Hospitality



Richard Lusty
Corporate Banking Relationship Director
Ulster Bank



Martina Connolly
Chief Executive
Belfast One BID



Eoin McGrath FIH
Director of Sales & Revenue
Hastings Hotels



Aaron Logan FIH
Chair, Institute of Hospitality Northern
Ireland



Damien Bannon
Belfast Area Manager
Translink



Sean McGreevy
Translink



Amanda Ford
Chief Superintendent
PSNI



Andrew McWhirter
Group Operations Manager
The Ringland Group



Joanne Smith FIH
Head of Operations
Institute of Hospitality



Lindsay Armstrong
Community Engagement Manager
Volunteer Now



Michael Stewart
Director
Bar Czar



Caitriona Lennox FIH
Head of Northern Ireland,
Springboard



Ian Campbell
Director of Service Operations
Translink



Jonathan Mallon
Chief Operating Officer
Mount Charles



Heather Wilson
Lounge General Manager, Aspire Pre-Flight
Hospitality, Belfast City Airport



Carolyn Boyd
Industry Development Manager
Tourism Northern Ireland



Rachael McGuickin
Deputy CEO & Director of Business Development
Sustainability and Transformation, Visit Belfast



Nicola McCullough
Head of Visitor Service and Operations
Visit Belfast



Caitriona Lavery
Sales Manager
Hastings Hotels



Niall McClean
Chair of the Ards Branch
Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann