1. Introduction

Despite its capital city status and high international profile, Belfast is a small regional city with a population of 275,000. However it has become one of the first cities in Europe to specifically target the cultural tourism market and attempt to assert its position as a cultural tourism destination. With a completely unique heritage linked to art and literature, shipbuilding and community activism, set against its recent culture of violence and conflict, Belfast hopes to completely change its international perception and to have its cultural credentials recognised. The city recognises the contribution that cultural tourism could make to improving the international reputation not just of Belfast but the whole region of Northern Ireland, and also in the potential benefits to be gained socially, culturally and economically.

2. Belfast’s Image

The tourism industry in Belfast was devastated during the 30 years of conflict dating from the late 1960’s (known as “The Troubles”), with the subsequent lack of product development and inward investment. The prevailing image of Belfast was one of “bombs, bullets and balaclavas” and it is this fearful received image of Belfast by the international audience (that) formed the mountain which local city tourism bodies had to climb. The paramilitary ceasefires and political agreements of the mid 1990’s brought the hope of a “peace dividend” in terms of tourism, but ongoing violence still dominated the newspaper front pages with headlines such as “Streets of Fear” prevailing well into the new millennium.

It is this history and culture of conflict and violence in Belfast that provides a ‘double edged sword” in marketing terms – satisfying the “uniqueness” demanded by the contemporary tourist constantly seeking the next new and challenging destination, but at the same time rooting the place in its past and preventing social and political progress towards lasting stability. In Glenn Patterson’s 1992 novel “Fat Lad” Belfast’s image in the eyes of the tourist is described as a “ghoulish
fairground with a murderous significance ascribed to every street corner” 3. There was an understandable reluctance in the city to acknowledge that the very problems that were so damaging to the image of the city could perhaps in fact be used to market the city. The West Belfast Black Taxi Association however has long run very successful tours of Belfast’s Peace walls, paramilitary murals and memorial sites. The perplexing issue for local tourism bodies such as the Belfast Visitor and convention Bureau or Fáilte Feirste Thiar (Visit West Belfast), is how to find the balance to be struck in satisfying visitor curiosity about “the troubles” without either turning the city into some kind of conflict theme park relying on “zoo tourism”. As Neil (2001) succinctly puts it, “it is a sad city that has to market its own misery”4.

Belfast City Council grasped the opportunities offered by the new climate of change, following the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998, with a determination to banish old perceptions, and declaring Belfast a “Renaissance City”. Tourism was seen as central to the Renaissance City development strategy (2000-2003). In particular, there was a desire to focus on a cultural tourism product which could not only pay in terms of attracting visitors, but that could also play a key role in the physical regeneration of the city – promoting investment, attracting visitors and ultimately in changing the old received image of Belfast from that of violence to one of a modern vibrant European city.

3. European Capital of Culture (ECOC) Participation 5

These aims were an important part of Belfast’s European Capital of Culture (ECOC) 2008 bid, which sought not only to completely change international perceptions but also to provide a vision for a city undergoing tremendous physical and cultural change. From the very outset the Belfast bidding team had strong ambitions – regarding the potential designation as a major opportunity to break down barriers and get people talking to each other. Central to the city’s bid was the opportunity for social regeneration – a chance for Belfast to bring its divided people together and to reimagine itself as a city known for its literary, artistic and sporting traditions rather than that of the gun and bomb. Indeed the title of the bid and the company established to manage this process evoked these sentiments:- “Imagine Belfast 2008”. Although the bid was unsuccessful, participation in the process triggered several key elements – joint working, cross community discussion and a coming together of the city’s cultural resources. As a result, the decision was
quickly taken to continue to harness this effort in order to produce a strategy for developing and promoting cultural tourism. Building upon the multi agency steering group set up to devise the bid and led by Belfast City Council, a methodology was devised for effectively taking the ECOC bid and turning it into a strategic cultural tourism plan. This consisted of the following steps a) Desk research on best practice within the UK, Ireland and rest of Europe, b) hosting a programme of key informant interviews c) hosting workshops for representatives of both public and private sectors d) joint seminars between the steering group and European experts e) focus group market research, f) analysis of information and development of strategy, and g) preparation of an action plan for implementation.

4. The Cultural Tourism strategy

This document adopted in 2003 was prepared following the work described in the above section and after an extensive programme of consultation - with political parties, the tourism and cultural sectors, and many other relevant groups. The document provides the strategic context, defines the implementing strategy and actions arising, identifies the resources required; research monitoring and evaluation steps and sets out the overall action plan.

Some of the key cultural tourism development initiatives arising from the strategy:

A. Cultural Tourism Networking Group and Newsletter - a group was established to bring together the many arts and tourism bodies in the city, private, public and voluntary and all previously working in a disparate nature. The CTNG is brought together twice a year – primarily to raise awareness, share working practices and to find a common way to promote and market cultural tourism in the city in a co-ordinated manner. A Newsletter is also published to promote activities and awareness.

B. Cultural Cities Network - This Network was established to explore ways in which the work, commitment and creative thinking invested in the Capital of Culture submissions could be carried forward. The network is comprised of Liverpool, Belfast, Birmingham, Bradford, Brighton and Hove, Bristol, Canterbury and East Kent, Cardiff, Inverness and the Highlands, Newcastle/Gateshead, Norwich and Oxford.

C. Celebrate Belfast 2006 - the City Council put together a package of funding to have its own Cultural Year outside of the ECOC process – known as “Celebrate
Belfast 2006”. This has resulted in a year long mini ECOC – with a wide range of cultural events aimed at raising Belfast’s European and international profile, attracting visitors and benefiting local residents.

The programme included new events such as the Maritime Festival and CS Lewis Festival, as well as enhancing and embracing existing activities including the Belfast Film Festival, Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival and a wide range of community based events.

D. Cultural Quarters – this initiative brings together tourism development and local urban planning. The aim is to market the unique history and culture of each particular quarter of the city in an integrated approach which will bring together all the local actors (businesses, arts groups etc) to secure funding for physical enhancements, organise events and activities and to work jointly to promote the area to visitors. The four quarters are:-

- the Cathedral Quarter – the oldest part of Belfast and home to many local arts groups, cultural organisations, nightclubs and bars.
- the Queens Quarter – to the south of the city centre, based around the academic and cultural heritage of Queen’s University and associated student life. Home of the annual Belfast Festival at Queens.
- the Titanic Quarter – one of the largest brownfield redevelopment sites in Europe, this quarter...
promotes Belfast’s industrial heritage and great shipbuilding legacy. This quarter is currently the focus of major investment plans intended too turn the area into the largest visitor attraction in Northern Ireland.

- The Gaeltacht quarter – based around the Irish speaking cultural area of west Belfast and a fine example of local tourism initiatives developing out of the strong cultural identity of local residents. Home of “Féile An Phobail” – Europe’s largest Community Festival.

The development of these cultural quarters (with interpretative signposting, guided maps and trails), aims to share local knowledge and stories with both citizens and visitors. The world’s first interactive GPS digital city tour is being introduced as part of Celebrate Belfast 2006 which will highlight the Titanic story within the Titanic Quarter. This trail, developed by Awakin Ltd, is set to place Belfast at the forefront of innovation both within the tourism and technology sector. It is envisaged that this device will extend to the other cultural quarters changing how visitors and tourists explore the city of Belfast.

It is still early days, since Belfast’s Cultural Strategy was published in 2003. However the tourism monitoring figures for 2004 show that Belfast is on target to meet the strategy’s aims with visitor numbers increasing by 11% on 2003. Not only have total visitor numbers increased but the frequency of visits have increased with 17% of tourists stating that they came to Belfast frequently – i.e. more than once a year compared to 10% in 2003. The Tourism Monitor discovered that the main reason for visitors coming to Belfast was that they were “curious” to see Belfast (42%), whilst the prime motivator for visitors was seeing Belfast as a short break destination (53% of visitors in 2004). The 2005 figures show tourism numbers continuing to grow from 2004 to 2005 by a further 8.5 %. In total numbers this means that 6.4 million people visited the city reinforcing the economy by £285.2 million and helping to sustain 16,000 jobs. This figure of 6.4 million compares with the figure of 321,000 recorded for the whole of Northern Ireland by the North Ireland Tourist Board at the height of the Troubles.

As part of the PICTURE research, 3000 households were surveyed in order to help provide an insight into the potential impact that such significant cultural tourism development has had on local resident quality of life. Almost 90% of respondents in this survey indicated that meeting tourists had a positive impact on their lives and indeed 30% of respondents agreed strongly that such encounters with tourists were life enriching. Furthermore 70% of respondents felt that the knock-on impact from the increasing number of events and festivals in the city had
contributed to an increasing feeling of community spirit not only within their local area but within Belfast city as a whole. Overall the findings from this resident’s survey highlight the important spin offs for Belfast in terms of resident satisfaction and contribution to local quality of life as a result of developing their cultural tourism strategy and embarking on such a focussed approach to the development opportunities offered.

5. CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubting Belfast’s commitment to becoming a significant European cultural tourism destination. Although the ECOC process was first viewed as the main means of achieving this target the process itself became the reward for Belfast – providing impetus, direction and a policy framework for successfully managing urban cultural tourism. As a result, Belfast provides a very strong example of how a city can quickly harness available resources and good will to promote and develop a city as a cultural tourism destination with resulting positive impacts not only for the local economy but also for the cultural identity of the city and quality of life of its residents.

By so doing, the city has successfully managed to change its international image and now visitors from all over the world come to the city, attracted by its culture and vibrancy. Although visitors will continue to be curious about Belfast’s darker side, such a turbulent history can now be set within the wider context of a city that has a rich cultural offering sufficient to attract visitors to make return journeys to the city – simply for its existing local identity rather than being a one-off curiosity destination.

6. REFERENCES AND NOTES

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For further information on the Belfast City Council Cultural Tourism Strategy, please visit: http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk


2 Headline from the Belfast Telegraph 2000


Process”, Deliverable D16, EU FP6 PICTURE project (www.picture-project.com)


8 Sutherland (2006) “Tourism in Belfast” survey of 3000 households in Belfast conducted as part of the PICTURE research for Deliverable D17 “Effects of Cultural Tourism on Urban Quality of Life” (www.picture-project.com).