



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Licensing and Registration of Clubs
(Amendment) Bill: Belfast Chamber

14 January 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Paula Bradley (Chairperson)
Ms Kellie Armstrong (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Alex Easton
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Simon Hamilton	Belfast Chamber
Mr Michael Stewart	Belfast Chamber

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I welcome Simon Hamilton, chief executive, and Michael Stewart, the president. You are both very welcome; sorry to have kept you waiting. Simon, will you go ahead and begin your briefing?

Mr Simon Hamilton (Belfast Chamber): Thank you, Chair and Committee members. I very much welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee this morning. Thank you for the invitation.

For those who do not know, the Belfast Chamber is an organisation representing around 600 businesses of all sizes, from all sectors and all parts of our capital city. About one fifth of those members are in the hospitality, leisure and tourism sector, and the majority of those are licensed premises. We are not a trade body in the way that Hospitality Ulster is. We agree with almost everything that Hospitality Ulster said in its briefing, with one notable exception. I will have words with Stephen Magorrian later about his "stopping people coming to Belfast" comments. That is worth a sidebar conversation with Stephen later. Our interest and support for reforming our licensing laws, as well as modernising and aligning with our neighbours, is very much focused on the importance of hospitality and the licensed trade to the wider city's economy, in two particular areas. One that Colin and colleagues mentioned in their briefing was Belfast's status as a driver of tourism and a major tourism destination. Members will note that in our briefing we talk about how Belfast has become a must-visit destination and is recognised as such by many notable tourism and travel publications. Belfast is home to approximately half of Northern Ireland's hotel beds and accounts for a sizeable amount of our out-of-state visitor revenue. Licensed premises, whether hotels, pubs, bars or restaurants, are a huge attractor and a huge part of that tourism mix. Responding to the evolving and changing status of that over the years is something that needs to be reflected in our licensing laws.

Second is the important role that hospitality has as part of our wider economic ecosystem in Belfast. Particularly at this time when most licensed premises are closed and not open to trade, we can see

how that impacts, along with other closures and restrictions, on the city's economy. We have learnt, over the last 10 months, just how reliant one sector is on the other. It is sometimes easy to see how our licensed premises are reliant on, for example, people working in banks, financial services companies and tech companies coming after work for a drink, going out with friends on a Friday night or whatever it might be, but it works the other way as well. Those companies, in many cases, have made Belfast their home or have started up their businesses in Belfast. They rely on the ability to attract and retain talent. That talent is very mobile. It can take its skills anywhere, but what helps to attract it and retain it in Belfast is the lifestyle that the city has to offer: that city buzz and energy that is generated in no small measure because of our hospitality, leisure and tourism sector. As others have said, it is a sector that is struggling at the moment. In a survey of our members before Christmas, we found that 46% of members, including a large percentage of hospitality businesses, have already made redundancies; 45% anticipated more redundancies in the next six months; and 64% — nearly two thirds — of members were somewhat or very concerned about the future of their business. Reforming licensing laws and getting them in place as quickly as possible is also part of aiding the recovery of the city and the wider region's economy.

Chair, if you are happy, I will briefly pass on to our president, Michael Stewart, who, as well as being president of Belfast Chamber, has a lifetime of experience in the licensed trade.

Mr Michael Stewart (Belfast Chamber): Thank you, Chair and members, for the opportunity this morning. Like Colin Neill, I have been through many conversations around licensing reform. I am into my thirty-fifth year in the hospitality industry, and, as a previous board member of Hospitality Ulster, I know the pain that Colin has gone through. He has been championing the cause along with Stephen Magorrian, Phil Patterson and other members of the industry.

I would like to paint a little bit of a picture of a brief of what those thirty-five years have meant. I am not going to take you through my CV. The point that I want to raise is that, when I came home from London at the height of the Troubles in 1987, we opened a bar on the Lisburn Road called Bob Cratchit's. It was Belfast's first theme bar, and it was the newest thing to hit Belfast, created by Croft Inns and Diageo. It was a big thing. I was a young 26-year-old — or a younger 26-year-old. The pubs then were very different from what they are now. Through those 35 years, I have seen the reform of licensing in 1996 and I have seen the smoking legislation come in. I remember Cratchit's being closed at 2.00 pm or 3.00 pm on a Sunday and then reopening at 7.00 pm, so I have seen Sunday reform. As for me, I diversified and became a trainer, and I have trained 400 door staff for the Security Industry Authority (SIA) so that they are licensed door staff. I have trained staff in bars for what is known as "responsible alcohol training", and I have worked with the PSNI on drugs awareness and vulnerability training.

Why am I saying all this? The pub and the bar has evolved from what it was in 1987 when Bob Cratchit's opened. Belfast has evolved as we have come through the Troubles and gone through a meteoric rise in tourism, cruise ships etc. I see the chance to reform licensing as well overdue but also as part of the organic growth that Belfast and Northern Ireland deserve. I welcome the opportunity. Hospitality Ulster is obviously the expert on the detail, but, from the Belfast Chamber's point of view, there is a symbiotic relationship between retail business, technology business and hospitality. There was a recent survey where Zoopla highlighted Belfast as the number-one tech city in the UK. A lot of the reasons that it listed there were good infrastructure, city centre living and transport but also a great and vibrant nightlife, hospitality and social scene. That is just a brief on me as to where my journey has been and why I see this as an important and organic next stage in the growth of hospitality.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you, Michael and Simon. I am glad that you came in there, Michael, because, when Simon was speaking, I was thinking about Belfast. Where I come from, we do not even call it "Belfast" or "the city"; we call it "the town". I was in the town during the week before Christmas; I was in getting a few bits and pieces and walking about, and I just thought, "My goodness". I was a teenager in the '80s, and I remember walking around Belfast then, even though I was not allowed in at that stage. If my mother had known, she would have killed me. There was a buzz then. Even though the life of our city was being blown to bits, there was still a buzz about the city centre. I remember, during that Christmas week, I walked around and thought, "My goodness, the buzz is gone. This is awful; this is just terrible". You mentioned Bob Cratchit's. I remember Bob Cratchit's well; you were talking me back to all my yesterdays, Michael. After that day walking around town during the Christmas week, as I saw just what the town has become, how quiet it was and how the life just seemed to have been drained from it, I found it really sad considering all that we have been through in Northern Ireland. This awful pandemic has led to that.

That leads me on to the stuff to do with the scrutiny of the Bill and us putting down the extension. I know that that will not have helped many of those businesses in the city centre. I said this to Colin, and I want to say it to you as well: we understand that parts of the new regulations in the Bill will help the hospitality trade. They absolutely are. We know that we want to do this and scrutinise the Bill to the best of our ability, because we know that it is not just for the recovery from COVID; it will be there for many years to come to build that vibrancy again in the many towns and cities across Northern Ireland so that we have a thriving hospitality industry. I just want to put that on record.

Simon, do you feel that the members of the hospitality industry that you are contact with understand why we are delaying the Bill and asking for the extension? Do you think that it will be of any great detriment to the hospitality industry?

Mr Hamilton: I think that there is an understanding, yes, in the sense that those who have followed the journey of the Bill know that it is serious legislation. The point that you made, Chair, is relevant: the Bill is not just for the here and now but will be for a considerable period to come. As Michael mentioned from his experience of over 35 years, we do not reform the licensing laws often in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Bill has a life beyond the next couple of years and the crisis that we are going through.

Many would express an impatience that it has taken so long for the legislation to come through. There are lots of reasons for that. The Committee, obviously, has to do its job to ensure that the legislation is right. The discussion earlier with Hospitality Ulster touched on some interesting points. As is always the case with legislation, on the face of it, it looks like sensible reform, but you need to get into it, test it and come from slightly different perspectives. I think that there is an understanding of that. However, I would stress the hope that it is in place as quickly as possible to aid the recovery that you spoke about. That buzz and energy is not there in Belfast at the moment, and we all know why. It needs to come back. I think that it will come back. We need to be optimistic, and we are. One of the reasons why we are optimistic is that Belfast is such a strong, vibrant city in terms of what it has to offer. It has huge potential. One thing that sets us apart is that we are incredibly resilient as well. As others have said, we have been through a lot down through the years. We keep bouncing back, and we will do so again. The legislation and the reforms contained in it will help us to do that.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thanks, Simon. I just want to ask you a specific question about the Bill. It is to do with some of the changes that will extend opening hours, drinking-up time and things like that. I suppose that you have first-hand knowledge of the impact that it might have, certainly in the city centre. Do you want to make any comment on that part of the Bill?

Mr Hamilton: Maybe Michael will want to talk a little more about his front-line experience in that regard and how the proposed changes will help. Again, with regard to the comments that Colin made earlier, it is not entirely different from some of those rural settings. Obviously, there is a big difference in how Belfast looks and feels, but Belfast has different dynamics. In normal times, it has huge numbers of tourists, particularly international visitors, who have slightly different expectations with regard to when they go out to eat and when entertainment will be provided. Belfast also has that big student market, which will, hopefully, get a massive boost in the next nine months with the opening of the new Ulster University campus and 15,000 staff and students coming into the city. Therefore, there are those slightly different elements to the city that the proposed changes will greatly assist. Michael can talk in much better detail about that.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Simon. Chair, if you are a certain age and you go into the town, you are not going in to do your shopping; you are going in to do your "messages", as your mummy would know.

As I said, I have been in the hospitality industry for 35 years. I have seen late licences come and go. Unfortunately, this has taken so long that some of the licensees who started on this journey are no longer with us. Hospitality Ulster, the trade bodies and Belfast Chamber have worked closely with other agencies, notably the PSNI. Obviously, it has the responsibility for patrolling the late nights, making sure that there is no disorder etc. However, I have to say that the hospitality industry, bars, restaurants and pubs, are some of the most if not the most highly regulated businesses in our city. That has been more than amplified through COVID, with safe practices and so on. I think that most people will welcome the extension of the hours. Also, we need to flip this on to other people. I think that the public in general will welcome the extension of hours, because gone are the days of 1987 of Bob Cratchit's and Botanic Inns — I worked with Stephen Magorrian for a period there — when it was all about vertical drinking and, to use a phrase, getting as much down you as you could. Things have changed, and people have changed. They are more widely travelled and are better at cooking at

home. Going to the bar is more experiential. It is the experiential thing about having a meal. People are coming out later — they absolutely are — and, unfortunately, more people now drink at home than back in the day. That is because alcohol is cheaper from supermarkets, and that is why it is highly regulated with professional staff in bars. To answer your question, we welcome additional hours because, first, it will help with revenues and, secondly, it will help to show that the pub is a safe environment. I think that that would be endorsed by the PSNI in many areas across Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thanks, Michael, for that. I will open up to members. I have Kellie, and then I have Robin.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Chair. I hope that I am not on mute any more. That is the whole thing now: "I am on mute!"

Guys, thank you very much for your presentation. Simon, you have left Strangford and you are looking younger. There must be something in leaving politics. Michael, I worked in Russell Court for GCAS Advertising for many years, so, unfortunately, I spent too much time in Bob Cratchit's. We will not go there. I remember Spuds being the lonely heart club many years ago when I was frequenting your premises.

I want to ask you about the night-time economy. One of the things that we will find is people coming out of bars slightly later. I am not imagining huge crowds, but there will be congregations of people at that later time. One of the things that we do not have in Belfast is a vast night-time economy, and what I mean by that is the transport networks to enable people to move on to other places. If the legislation goes through, there is potential for a growth in the market for Translink's Metro services. Obviously, taxis are there and will be able to provide that but, when people come out and have had a great night and maybe want to go for a chip or something else, are there development opportunities for Chamber members to expand their businesses later to match that need?

Mr Hamilton: Thank you very much for your comments. I certainly can recommend the move, but not to all of you all at the one time. We need some people to govern the country, particularly at this time.

As a chamber, we are incredibly interested in the broader regeneration and redevelopment of the city. In spite of the huge strides that Belfast has made and the massive potential that we still have, there are weaknesses in the city that have been exposed, particularly over the past 10 months. We have seen that exacerbated particularly during the week. You get to about 5.00 pm or 6.00 pm and the city does not really have that buzz and that energy that you would expect to have in a modern, cosmopolitan city. I think that we can deliver that. I mentioned the university campus, and it will help in that regard.

Relevant to the Committee's work is the fact that we have a big policy focus on the need to increase residential living across all tenure types in the city centre. If you compare us with our competitor cities that are in the hunt for that same talent and investment, you will see that they are much better equipped than we are. We also want to get that sense broadly of a 24/7 city, and residential is part of it. You do need those, and that does require lots of, let us call it, essential infrastructure. Our public transport has taken a huge hit over the last period, but it needs to come back, and it will come back because it is a hugely important part of our city's infrastructure. There are opportunities; you are right about that. I am not trying to overstate it, because the Chair is right that this is a Bill for a decade and more before it may be looked at again, but I think that many of our members who are in other sectors or other parts or elements of hospitality will seize the opportunities that this presents to help their businesses. That will certainly help aid recovery and the bounceback that we all hope for.

Michael, you have experience of how the licensed trade can stimulate other businesses.

Mr Stewart: Yes, absolutely. I always use the example of Bob Cratchit's; it is my "get out of jail free" card. There are very few people who do not know it; either they do or their parents do. In particular, a superintendent in the PSNI personally holds me responsible for the fact that he got married to a girl he met in Bob Cratchit's, but that is another day's conversation.

It is inevitable that, with the night-time economy, opportunities will come. During my years in this industry, Translink has tried late-night buses etc on many occasions, and they either failed or had issues with security guys and stuff. There are other opportunities around late-night food operations etc. This is about growing, developing and communicating. There is confusion out there amongst the general public as to what time bars and restaurants open and close at, and that equally means issues

around transport, but this will not be about licensing on its own. This will be a joined-up approach, especially for Belfast Chamber and Belfast city centre. One of our main members is Translink, and Norman Maynes sits on the board, as does Christopher McCausland from Value Cabs, so there is a network there that absolutely will benefit. Earlier, I used the word "symbiotic", which is a term that I found out about in biology class. There is a symbiotic relationship. Some people say that when the tide rises, all boats float. That is not always true for everyone. This needs to be looked at and worked on, and the opportunity needs to be given. When you consider that there are 104 weekend nights in a year, adding an extra hour is not a lot of hours in reality, but it can make a lot of difference for a lot of people in Belfast and in Northern Ireland.

This is just an anecdotal point. Back in 1990, I nipped over to Glasgow quite often when it had European City of Culture status. It was granting 24-hour licences, which some people took and some people did not. The interesting thing is that I read a report from Strathclyde police a while afterwards, and they were very clear in saying that staggering the hours and allowing people to come out at different times reduced the crime rates in Glasgow city centre by something like 30%, 40% or 50%. That all has to be taken into consideration, and I am sure that it will be, but, more than anything, it is a positive thing.

There is other stuff. I may get a chance to talk later about travel from the Republic of Ireland, especially around Easter opening hours, but I will stop at that and take more questions.

Ms Armstrong: My other question is one that I brought it up with Colin and the guys at Hospitality Ulster. I am thinking about planning permission. It is less of an issue in Belfast city centre, because it is less residential than other areas, but we may develop Belfast in the future with the new type of urban living where you have ground-level retail and the upper levels are more residential. While later opening hours give great opportunities, might there be any negative sides if we are trying to develop Belfast more with that residential offer?

Mr Hamilton: I completely understand and get the point. We all know that there are times when licences, or extensions of licences, can create rubbing points between settled, existing residential populations and the premises. There is a process to work all that through, and that is why, as others have said in their evidence, it is a highly regulated sector. There are processes that people have to go through and systems that folk can use to object. All that needs to remain there and remain robust. Notwithstanding all of that — and that would have to remain in order for Belfast to be able to hit the kind of targets that the council, in its Belfast agenda, has set for growing the city-centre population by around 30,000 by 2035, which is a very ambitious target — perhaps a slight difference is that it is almost the other way round. In a lot of the cases that we are talking about, it is a licensed premises coming into or doing something in an area that is settled. This is the reverse. Many of the people who want to live in those high-rise apartment blocks are buying or renting almost on the basis of what is on ground-floor level. They expect — hope, almost — that there will be a pub, cafe or bar at ground level; they are buying into a lifestyle every bit as much as they are buying the apartment or flat that they are purchasing. It is a slightly different context in a city than it might be elsewhere. Obviously, I appreciate that there are rubbing points, which is why a robust system is needed.

Mr Stewart: I will jump in for 30 seconds, Kellie. If I ever went on 'Mastermind', my chosen specialist subject would be residents' objections to entertainment licensing etc from 1987 to 2020. You said that you worked in Russell Court. You will be very aware that there was housing development above Russell Court. As the manager, I went through four years of trying to get an entertainment licence for what was known as the Russell nightclub. We eventually got it. In another world, I was a director of the Hudson bar in Smithfield, where we had residents etc. I will not go into the detail of that, but the issue is about partnership and communication. Some people raise an issue for the sake of raising it; others raise it because it is a very valid point. With Russell Court, it was. I physically went into people's apartments and listened to the vibrations of our nightclub coming up through. It was a fair point, and we had to take steps to sort it out. The point is that the process is taking an extended time: so that everybody can be listened to. It is about partnership, communication, results and resolution.

Ms Armstrong: I read the 'Belfast Agenda' before the meeting, and I was amazed. It is always assumed that Dublin is a very young city, but Belfast is a very young city; the average age of people in Belfast is 21. That is incredible. There is a huge opportunity.

I note that there is not a lot of disagreement from you with the proposals in the legislation. We will, as a Committee, have further discussions about the taproom. I just was very interested in the planning issue because, as we develop more, the council will have to take decisions when it comes to

residential versus business. We do not want that to happen. You are right, Simon: people will want to live in a place where they do not have to have a car and there is good access and all of the items that they want are on their doorstep. This will provide that. I do not think that we will make it in time for Easter this year, given the pandemic and the roll-out of the vaccine. The pandemic is a terrible thing to have happened, but it may not hit so hard this year.

Thank you very much for that. It is good to see you both.

Mr Newton: I thank Michael and Simon for coming to the Committee. Michael has actually answered my query — it was around clause 2 and the further additional hours — in his comments to Kellie around the relationships between pubs and residents.

Mr Durkan: Thanks to Simon and Michael for the presentation. I congratulate Michael on having the best bookshelf that I have seen in all these interactive meetings.

Mr Hamilton: There are not too many books, Mark, as you can see.

Mr Durkan: It is a booze shelf.

Mr Stewart: Let me give you a quick anecdote about that, Mark. I get fed up with all these politicians, yourself included, with all these books behind them. As Michelle O'Neill said on one occasion, the difference is that those bottles get opened, whereas the books in the background do not. There you go. Anyway, they are collector's items; they are not for drinking.

Mr Durkan: Mine is not that impressive; you cannot [*Inaudible.*] It is good to see you, Simon; I hope that you are keeping well. Obviously, you are here representing commerce and industries that welcome the Bill, by and large. Given your ministerial experience and your experience as an MLA, you will be conscious of the need for us to balance this against public health. We were due to have an evidence session with the Public Health Agency this morning, but we have not managed to do so. How do you address the concerns that it has expressed about increasing opportunities for alcohol consumption and the consequential health impacts on individuals and society as a whole?

Mr Hamilton: Michael, with his experience, will have some good things to say on this front too. Every one of us understands that alcohol is a regulated substance for very good reason, and the licensed premise is a way its consumption can be regulated. Earlier, Colin from Hospitality Ulster mentioned that the vast majority of alcohol is consumed at home and, given the circumstances over the last 10 months, that percentage has vastly increased. Consumption at home is very much unregulated.

A good, cogent argument has been put forward about how this helps the sector survive, stabilise and thrive in the longer term. As Stephen Magorrian said earlier, a lot of what has been proposed, particularly for additional hours and drinking-up time is about the good management of licensed premises. We are dealing with the acceleration of a lot of trends as a result of the pandemic. Yes, the percentage of the consumption in the home or private environment will go down as pubs and licensed premises open up again, but will that be completely reversed over time? No, it will not. Will this legislation have that impact? No, I do not think so.

The legislation is about modernising and bringing us into line with our neighbours. It also helps to stabilise an industry that has had a really difficult year, perhaps a year and a half before this is over. The industry has been going through a lot of challenges over the previous decade or more. The legislation gives the industry a chance to stabilise and grow. However, because of the changes in behaviour, habit and trends, it is not likely to result in massive additional alcohol consumption in licensed premises. It is the increase in alcohol consumption in a private setting that people need to be worried about. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen that private settings have been difficult to manage and control. If one sees dangers of overconsumption of alcohol, it is the private environment that we should be worried about rather than licensed premises.

From his experience, Michael may be able to elaborate a little on that point. However, that is broadly my personal view and our view as an organisation.

Mr Durkan: It is my personal view as well, Simon, but I just want to have that on record.

Mr Stewart: I will not go over what Simon and Colin have already said. There has been a massive increase in home drinking, especially during COVID. Over the years, alcohol has become more freely available at cheaper prices via supermarkets. Earlier, Colin said that 23% of the alcohol consumed is in licensed premises. As I said, I deliver responsible alcohol training courses with strict enforcement, both the on-trade and the off-trade. It is not a cliché: it is a very regulated business with strict enforcement. However, there is one thing that has to be brought up here: the R word — not the R rate, the "R word" — responsibility. There is a responsibility on the licensee to dispense alcohol in a safe environment. There is also a responsibility on the consumer to consume alcohol according to their ability and make sure they get home safely. There is a responsibility and a choice. If extra hours are given, the customers or the licensee do not have to avail themselves of those extra hours. It is about having a choice. I have been wheeled out on many occasions at Easter time to talk about the restricted hours, and that is what I always talk about: responsibility and choice. You have a choice to go in and drink or not.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Michael.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I have no other members who have indicated they want to ask a question. Thank you, Simon and Michael. It was good to go down memory lane to all those good times, Michael. It was great to see you again, Simon. I have to say that you are looking awfully well. Thank you very much.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you. Take care. Thank you very much, Chair.