



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HOTELS
FEDERATION

Liquor Licensing Review

Submission to the Committee for Communities
from the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation.

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Introduction

Background to NIHF and the hotel sector

The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation (NIHF) is the representative trade body for the hotel and guesthouse sector. The Federation and its members are committed to a regulated accommodation product, an increase in promotable tourism numbers and contributing to the economic growth of Northern Ireland.

Having invested in the region of £650m since 2015 in hotel expansion, extension and refurbishment, hoteliers are keen to see opportunities for tourism maximised and for liquor licensing to be more reflective of contemporary society.

The significant impact on the industry of COVID-19 has heightened the need for change, made a realignment of the legal framework all the more important and increased the need for Northern Ireland to maximise tourism opportunities in the future.

The Federation welcomes this review and welcomes the majority of the changes proposed.



Liquor Licensing

Commentary of proposed changes

Easter Opening Hours

The removal of all restrictions is imperative, and this should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Northern Ireland is at a considerable disadvantage over this period particularly for the staging of events and the attraction of leisure tourism visitors.

Additional Increase in Hours

This measure is welcomed particularly for events, festivals and to give increased flexibility to premises.

Drinking up Time

This is welcomed as it will assist in managing the clearance of premises and assist with moderating consumption at the end of the evening.

Alignment of Alcohol & Entertainment Licences

This is welcomed and is a more logical approach than the current position.

Children's Certificates

The removal of these is welcomed but the conditions will need to be clearly set out and understood for those in enforcement.

Staging of Underage Functions

Hotels have been the venue of choice for school formals and graduation events. In the past many have staged alcohol free teenage discos and parties for those under 18. The hotel setting offers a regulated and controlled environment for younger people and are a valuable source of income for many properties, particularly over the winter months in rural areas.

Many of the events which are staged are a rite of passage and are notable in a person's journey to adulthood. The relationship that is cemented when young is not to be undervalued with many forming a lifelong attachment to a property based on special occasions and the formation of happy memories. The proposed change to the law will allow hotels to stage these events again and restore a much-needed income stream for the future.

The industry will continue to operate in a safe and secure manner and would see the following being incorporated into any event:

- Ensuring parents, guardians or teachers were involved in the planning.
- Putting in place effective security and safety measures for hosting the event.
- Provision of a soft drink only bar when appropriate.
- Proof of age checks and staff training carried out prior to the event.

Codes of Practice

There is no disagreement in principle with the statutory approval of codes of practice but there would be a concern about how they are created, the extent to which any such codes are mandatory and their interpretation. The legal framework is clear and enforceable; a code of practice may add some confusion.

Restrictions on advertisements for functions held in Private Members Clubs' premises

There would be some concern in relation to this change as it effectively opens up clubs as function and event spaces. The membership rule has been navigated around successfully in the past with a small fee, reduced membership period or the introduction of an associate or new category. The majority of clubs do not pay rates nor are they subject to the same fixed cost base as other licensed commercial venues. This development will be difficult to enforce, is open interpretation and may set a precedent for unfair commercial advantage.

Categories of Licence

This is an important measure which will allow the further development of a food and drink offering for tourists. It will greatly add to the appeal of distilleries and breweries and is welcomed by the industry.

Major Events

The attraction of events of international and global appeal is an important part of tourism growth. The staging of such events increases the attractiveness of the destination, brings significant income region and is a great means for showcasing a destination. In the past, the inability to include a licensing option within the current framework has been an obstacle and has been a barrier to certain events being staged in Northern Ireland.

The concern is the designation of "major event" and the criteria for such a process. This needs to be well thought through, inclusive and flexible in order to promote and facilitate growth in this area.

Allowing young people to attend private functions

This is a welcome development and is reflective of changes in society. It is important that young people are included in family events and that they have an opportunity to engage in social activity in a controlled and regulated environment. The criteria may need to be looked at closely. If a party is a buffet or more casual dining this will need to be addressed.

Conclusion

The NIHF welcomes the changes to liquor licensing and feel that in the main they offer a greatly improved framework which is more reflective of 21st century society. Their breadth will enable the removal of some barriers in attracting major events, increase tourism appeal and help with economic growth.

The changes also address some of the disparities between this jurisdiction and others which will help our attractiveness as a destination. The changes allow hotels to restore some important income streams and at this time this is a most welcome development.

