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CBI Northern Ireland response to the Committee for Social Development's Call for Evidence on the Committee Stage of the Licensing of Pavement Cafes Bill

Introduction

CBI Northern Ireland is an independent, non-party political organisation funded entirely by its members in industry and commerce. Across the UK, the CBI speaks for some 240,000 businesses which together employ around a third of the private sector workforce. Our membership in Northern Ireland includes businesses from all sectors and of all sizes. It includes the majority of the top 100 companies, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), social enterprises, manufacturers and sectoral associations.

CBI Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's Call for Evidence on the Committee Stage of the Licensing of Pavement Cafes Bill.

Comments

We very much welcome the introduction of this legislation to the Assembly. As we noted in our response to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's draft Tourism Strategy in 2010 it is important to remove *'the barriers...to creating a café culture'*. At the time of our 2010 submission one CBI member noted the negative implications for tourism of having little in the way of pavement cafes in Belfast on a Sunday morning. While this does of course link into trading and opening hours issues which are not part of this Bill, we do believe it is important that the Executive takes steps to further promote a well-managed café culture – we believe this Bill is one such step.

Growing revenues from tourism is, and must continue to be, a key target for the Executive and local economy. By putting in place measures which bring us more into line with, not just the rest of the UK, but also continental Europe and other key tourist locations, we undoubtedly enhance Northern Ireland's offering. In addition developing thriving local communities in our towns and cities requires the creating of attractive environments to live, work, and play, and the provision of services, such as a café culture, which exist in most other countries, is a fundamental part of that environment.

It is right that this Bill proposes that local councils are responsible for the licensing regime that will be put in place. As several MLAs noted during the Second Stage debate of the Bill



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in the Assembly on 25 June 2013, they are best placed to understand the needs of their local towns and villages – rather than central Government.

It is beyond question that our town centres, like many others in the UK and Republic of Ireland, have been done significant harm by the impacts of the recession. While the Department for Social Development's various public realm schemes have done much to improve the 'look' of town centres right across Northern Ireland and we have welcomed the creation of Business Improvement Districts in Northern Ireland, it remains important that additional measures are taken to assist in regeneration and, therefore, developing opportunities for investment.

In terms of the detail of the Bill we welcome the intention in Clause 12 that councils will only be able to set licensing fees, if they wish to charge them, which cover their administration costs, rather than act as a revenue raiser. It is also important that councils make publicly available the detail of their fees and how these were calculated. We agree with the comments of the Deputy Chair of the Social Development Committee, Mr Mickey Brady MLA, during the Second Stage debate when he said, "*such transparency is important if traders are to buy into the need for a licence fee*".

In respect of the three new offences that will be introduced as part of enforcement of the new licensing system, we would urge, much like we would with environmental legislation as an example, that councils seek to enter into constructive engagement with businesses that are seen to be in breach of the system, rather than seek to prosecute as a first step. The new licensing system can only work properly if it is seen to be fair and balanced.

As the countdown to local government reform continues, it is vitally important that councils, within the proposed statutory transition committees, begin to take into consideration the new powers in respect of urban regeneration that they will have at their disposal. They will be able to take steps to shape local towns and communities in order to open up opportunities for economic growth. This Bill will assist the new councils to target areas that they believe will benefit from the pavement café culture, in terms of approving some applications over others, and we look forward to it coming into law and being seen to work in practice.

CBI Northern Ireland

July 2013