

Can Belfast party its way to prosperity?

Gareth Hetherington

Director, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre



For eight days Belfast sounded and felt like a different city. Fiddles and tin whistles replaced traffic as the dominant noise, pavements became stages and the city centre filled with competitors and visitors from across Ireland and further afield. Organisers estimate the final Fleadh Cheoil footfall to exceed one million, making it the best attended Fleadh ever. Hotels, pubs, restaurants and shops all benefited and initial estimates suggested the event could generate an economic impact of over £50 million.

The photographs captured the colour and the crowds, but what exactly does an economist see when a city hosts a party on this scale? Can a successful event change the economic fortunes of a place long after the last session has ended?

Major events were once treated as entertainment, separate from the serious business of economic development. That view has changed. Cities now compete for concerts, conferences, festivals and sporting fixtures because people are spending a rising share of their income on experiences rather than on goods. Hosting events fills hotel rooms, brings life to public spaces, raises the profile of a destination and gives residents a reason to feel good about where they live. As a result, the events calendar has become an important part of the economic infrastructure of a modern city.

A factory announces its arrival with jobs and machinery, while an event announces itself with crowds and noise. The factory is easy to recognise as economic activity, but events can also stimulate entire supply chains. A visitor pays for a room, dinner, public transport and gifts to take home. The hotel buys laundry services and food, the restaurant pays suppliers and staff, and some of those wages are then spent again in the local economy. Economists call this the multiplier effect, one person's spending becoming another person's income.

The greatest value comes from people who would not o the crowd size, a million visitors is impressive, but where they come from, how long they stay and how much they spend tells us much more.

The Fleadh was not a one-off, last year Portrush played host to the Open Championship Golf. It attracted a record 278,000 spectators, with almost sixty per cent travelling from outside Northern Ireland. Independent research estimated an economic impact of almost £90 million, thanks to high spending golf fans. Global television, digital and media coverage was valued separately at approximately £190 million in destination marketing.

In addition to the hotel rooms, food and drink sold, these events also sell an image of this place to potential visitors for years to come. That legacy may be the most valuable and the hardest to measure. Someone who came to Belfast for the Fleadh may return for a weekend, recommend the city to friends or decide that Belfast feels more welcoming than they had imagined. Local firms learn how to handle exceptional demand, public agencies get better at working together and volunteers acquire skills and confidence. Young people who saw traditional music occupying the city's biggest stages may take up an instrument, while established musicians and cultural organisations gain new audiences.

The event can also alter how residents see their own city and factors such as confidence, reputation and social connection are not inputs to a spreadsheet. However, these softer aspects influence investment, tourism and the ability to attract and retain people to make their lives here. Businesses want a highly skilled local workforce and highly skilled people want to live in an attractive place with a strong cultural offering.

This creates a virtuous economic cycle and the policy challenge is to turn a memorable week into a stronger economy. That means attracting events with a cultural fit, using venues and transport that already exist, spreading activity across the city or region

and encouraging visitors to extend their stay. A well-managed events portfolio can support hospitality, strengthen the region's brand and make assets and infrastructure work harder throughout the year.

Importantly, the stage for the Fleadh was the city centre itself and maximising its potential for future events requires continued investment. This is a challenge in the current economic environment and requires the coordination of a wide range of public bodies.

But we did this before with the creation of the Laganside Corporation which provided a laser focus on developing under-utilised land along the Lagan. A similar model with a long term mandate focused on the city's core to unlock stalled regeneration projects, increase city centre living and improve the public realm is a potential next step to underpin current momentum.

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Gareth Hetherington

Director, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre

g.hetherington@ulster.ac.uk

About UUEPC

UUEPC is an independent economic research centre focused on producing evidence-based research to inform policy development and implementation. It engages with all organisations that have an interest in enhancing the Northern Ireland economy. The UUEPC's work is relevant to government, business and the wider public with the aim of engaging those who may previously have been disengaged from economic debate.

