



The National Conference Centre is the key to achieving a dramatic revenue boost by 2010, writes Ruth Wildgust

Business tourism in Ireland could generate annual revenues of up to €1 billion by 2010. Peter Malone, chairman of Ireland's Business Tourism Forum, said "all indications were" that this target could be reached if current plans to build a National Conference Centre in Dublin go ahead (see page 2).

"We have the facilities in this country," Malone said. "I've spoken to Dermot Mannion, chief executive of Aer Lingus. He is also keen to promote business tourism and hoping to have new business routes in and out of Ireland in the next couple of years."

Ireland currently has a one per cent share of the €40 billion global business tourism market. According to Deirdre Mulligan, business tourism manager of Fáilte Ireland, the business tourism sector in Ireland generated revenues of €423 million in 2004.

Just over 200,000 people attended international conferences, meetings and exhibitions in Ireland in that year. They spent an estimated €175 million. Independent business travellers boosted revenues by a further €248 million.

Mulligan said €4 billion had been invested in the tourism industry in the past 10 years, driving ongoing improvement in Ireland's hotels and conferencing venues.

Nicola McGrane, managing director of Conference Partners, believes the Irish government is beginning to realise the value of business tourism to the Irish economy. "Between registration fees,

accommodation, social events and gala dinners, the average spend before delegates get here is €1,500," McGrane said. "That's before they even pay for meals and taxis. The multiplier effect of business tourism spend is significant."

Orlagh Carbery, director of Ireland Inbound, said there had been a shift away from long-haul travel in favour of shorter conferences closer to home.

Carbery said there were now about 130 conferencing venues in the Republic of Ireland. Of these, 110 are hotels, seven are universities, eight include more unusual venues such as Dublin Castle, the Royal Hospital Kilmainham and Kilkenny's Parade Tower. There are also five purpose-built conferencing venues, including the Irish Management Institute, Croke Park Conference Centre and The National Events Centre in Killarney.

John Power, chief executive of the Irish Hotels Federation, said that, until recently, the business tourism sector in Ireland had under-performed.

"Whereas Dublin features in the top five destinations for short breaks, it ranks only twenty-first among business tourism destinations," Power said. "Business tourism has enormous potential for the country. We're bringing in the key decision-makers of key sectors and businesses. They could be looking at business opportunities in Ireland."

McGrane said Ireland "fell down" because of the perception overseas that conferencing, and general costs here, were expensive. It is becoming increasingly difficult, said McGrane, for delegates from

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non-EU countries to get visas, which can result in reduced attendance at international association forums.

As Ireland is a "world star" in terms of economic performance, Power said it made sense to use this window of opportunity to attract business people to Ireland so they could see, first-hand, the positive environment for state agencies and industry bodies.

Abbey Conference Services' Marina Finn said there was ongoing investment in a growing range of conferencing products, services and venues.

Many universities hire out campus facilities for confer-

ences during the summer months. Large hotels, including the Burlington and Citywest in Dublin, also have in-house conference facilities. Croke Park opened its own conferencing venue three years ago and the National Event Centre (NEC) in Killarney can host up to 2,000 people.

Other exciting venues, said Finn, include 'conferencing castles' such as Dunboyne Castle, Co. Meath, and Lyrath Estate in Kilkenny.

According to the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), Ireland currently ranks 37th in the list of preferred conference destinations worldwide. Dublin is 21st on the preferred list of preferred conferencing cities.

According to Jean Evans, chief executive of the Dublin Convention Bureau, Dublin is not as well known for its business facilities as other well-known European cities. She said promoters had to start "serious selling" of the convention centre as soon as the contract was finalised. "If we do not promote the centre, we will lose out on business for 2009 and 2010. We're currently losing about 19 conferences a year at a value of €50 million," she said.

Evans said that, as a conferencing destination, Dublin was attractive because of its ease of access to Britain and Europe. It is quicker to get from Birmingham to Dublin than from Birmingham to London. Eighty per cent of international conferences in Ireland comes to Dublin.