



Department for

Communities

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Major Event Order for the Fleadh Cheoil Na hÉireann 'The Fleadh' 2026

Consultation Summary &
Departmental Response Report



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Background

Article 48A of the Licensing (NI) Order 1996 gives the Department for Communities (the Department) the power to make a major event order (MEO). A MEO designates an event taking place in Northern Ireland, which the Department considers will attract significant public interest, as a major event. An MEO also specifies the permitted hours (beyond what is permitted by an existing liquor licence) for the sale of intoxicating liquor for any place or premises included in the order.

Article 26A of the Registration of Clubs (NI) Order 1996 gives the Department a similar power for registered clubs, however such clubs may only supply alcohol to members and their guests.

Belfast City Council applied to the Department to make a MEO in respect of the Fleadh Cheoil Na hÉireann (the Fleadh) which is taking place in Belfast between 2 and 9 August 2026. Belfast City Council requested that the permitted hours to sell/supply alcohol be extended for all premises of a specified kind¹ and any unlicensed place or premises licensed under an occasional licence which has been granted by a court under Article 30 of the Licensing (NI) Order 1996, until 1.00am of the following morning on each day of the Fleadh, in a core area, specified in the map, available to view at [Appendix 1](#). The list of premises is available to view at [Appendix 2](#). This is to ensure premises can operate to the same time to create a uniform position on licensing, to maximise available space, prevent overcrowding in any particular part of the core area and to support a staggered and managed exit from the core area.

Given the event's core area captures a number of streets within the city centre, some of which will contain residential properties, the Department also launched a public consultation which ran from 3 June until the 24 June 2026.

¹ Pubs, hotels, restaurants, conference centres, a higher education institution, places of public entertainment and registered clubs

Executive Summary

The Department received 12 responses (four individuals and eight organisations/stakeholders). Although based on a small sample, findings indicated broad support for the Fleadh and its potential benefits.

Most respondents believed the Fleadh would attract significant public interest, deliver substantial economic benefits to Belfast and Northern Ireland, and strengthen Northern Ireland's reputation as a credible host of major international events. Organisations/stakeholders highlighted expected gains for tourism, hospitality, local businesses, employment and community participation, as well as positive international exposure. Organisations/stakeholders also viewed the Fleadh as a valuable opportunity to widen access to music and arts through an extensive programme of accessible, inclusive and community-focused activities.

Views on the proposed extension of alcohol licensing hours to 1.00am for the duration of the Fleadh were more mixed, particularly among individual respondents. However, most organisations/stakeholders supported the proposal, arguing that consistent opening hours would enhance the visitor experience, increase hospitality revenue and support the event's financial viability and potential return to Northern Ireland.

Concerns raised by a small number of respondents related to possible increases in anti-social behaviour, pressure on emergency and public services, and wider public health impacts. Most respondents did not believe additional conditions were necessary for licensed premises or registered clubs during extended hours, although some suggested measures relating to public safety, noise management, venue capacity and clear communication of licensing arrangements.

Method

The public consultation allowed members of the public to share their views, via Citizen Space, on the request for the designation of a major event and the extension of hours for selling and supplying alcohol.

Stakeholders were also invited to share views directly with the Department on the potential impact of the application. Those who responded included (with one providing comments via the online consultation):

- Hospitality Ulster
- Northern Ireland Ambulance Service
- Northern Ireland Hotels Federation
- Public Health Agency
- Police Service of Northern Ireland
- Tourism NI

The consultation took place between 3 and 24 June 2026 and the results have been used by the Department to inform decision-making. This report provides quantitative and qualitative analysis of the responses received. A total of 12 responses were received either directly by email or via Citizen Space from four individuals and eight organisations / stakeholders. Due to the relatively small number of respondents, findings should be interpreted and applied with caution. Additionally, respondents with strong views may have been more likely to complete the open questions; therefore, recurring themes may not be representative of the entire target population, although they still provide valuable insight. It should be noted that not all respondents answered every question, therefore the number of responses varies across questions.

Findings

A total of six responses were received via Citizen Space, from four individuals and two organisations. A further six responses were received from stakeholders and organisations via email. All responses from stakeholders and organisations have been combined for analysis, equating to a total of 12 responses. The following details the findings against the questions posed in the consultation:

Level of interest the event will attract among the general public

Individuals

Three individuals agreed that the event would attract a high level of interest, while one individual felt that there would be a low level of interest.

Organisations

Two organisations provided an indication on their perception of interest in the event among the general public. One organisation agreed that the event would attract a high level of interest, highlighting that the event attracted 800,000 people last year. The second organisation/stakeholder felt that there would be no interest among the general public but further explained that the MEO being consulted on was a "...technical issue which would be of no interest to the public".

Views on the existing permitted hours in terms of the potential impact on financial viability of the event or its future return to Northern Ireland.

Views were mixed on existing permitted hours and their impact on the event's financial viability and future in Northern Ireland.

Individuals

Two individuals felt no extension was needed, while two raised concerns that current arrangements may limit benefits or that fewer restrictions could improve prospects.

Organisations/Stakeholders

One responding organisation noted that varying opening hours across venues may affect the event's success, suggesting uniform hours would help visitors plan. Another organisation did not object but questioned the value of the application, warning it could add to licensing confusion and suggesting the importance of greater clarity instead.

It was also noted that the NI Ambulance Service is aware of the event, with additional medical provision planned.

Economic benefit of the event to Belfast and/or Northern Ireland

Of those who provided answers, all but one felt that the event will have an economic benefit.

Individuals

Three out of four individuals believed that the event would have an economic benefit to Belfast and/or Northern Ireland. However, one individual felt that the event would have no economic benefit and raised concerns about perceived exclusion based on "religious background or affiliations".

Organisations/Stakeholders

The overall view of the stakeholders/organisations was that the event would deliver substantial economic and reputational benefits.

Several responses highlighted that the event is expected to attract large numbers of local and international visitors, generating

substantial economic impact across hospitality, accommodation, retail and local supply chains. Respondents noted its strong potential to increase visitor numbers, extend stays, and boost spending, with previous Fleadh events held in other parts of Ireland providing demonstrable benefits for host locations. In addition, the event was seen as an important opportunity to enhance Northern Ireland's international profile as a cultural and tourism destination, supported by extensive media exposure and engagement with key markets. Wider benefits were identified, including employment opportunities, support for the tourism and hospitality sectors, community participation through volunteering, and longer-term legacy impacts such as skills development, strengthened infrastructure, and increased capacity to host major events.



“It is Ireland’s largest cultural event and brings with it huge economic benefits - estimated at £60m for the host city.”

Operational considerations were noted, however, including the potential for increased demand on emergency services, with additional medical provision planned.

Impact of the event in promoting Northern Ireland as a credible world class host of major events

Most respondents felt that hosting the Fleadh will have a positive impact on Northern Ireland in terms of being a credible host of major events.

Individuals

Three out of the four individual respondents agreed that the event would have a positive impact on promoting Northern Ireland as a credible, world-class host of major events, while one respondent felt it would have no impact in this regard.

Organisations/Stakeholders

All organisations/stakeholders who provided a response regarding potential for promoting Northern Ireland as a world class host either explicitly stated that hosting the Fleadh would have a positive impact or provided an open response stating that it would provide an opportunity to promote Northern Ireland as a world class host.

Responses consistently highlighted the Fleadh's strong potential to enhance Northern Ireland's international profile and reputation. It was noted that the event has a proven track record in promoting host locations and offers a significant platform to showcase Belfast and the wider region to both all-island and global audiences.

Respondents emphasised the role of the Fleadh in positioning Northern Ireland as a credible host of major international events, supported by extensive visitor numbers, media exposure, and targeted marketing in key markets. The event was also seen as an opportunity to promote the Northern Ireland tourism brand, encourage repeat visitation, and support wider regional tourism.

In addition, the Fleadh was recognised for providing valuable opportunities for local artists to perform to international audiences, while showcasing the region's cultural offering and broader attractions.

"...the Fleadh will position and promote the North of Ireland as a credible world class host of major (international) events and will provide artists with the opportunity to participate in major international events and/or to perform to international audiences."

Tourism NI

The event will widen access and encourage participation in music and arts events

Overall, views given generally agreed that the event would widen access and encourage participation in music and arts events. However, there was variation between respondent groups, with organisations being more positive in their view while those from individuals were more mixed.

Individuals

Individuals were evenly split in their responses with two agreeing with the statement and two disagreeing. One individual provided more detail expressing a concern that performances could be biased towards one side of the community.

Organisations/Stakeholders

All views from organisations/stakeholders who provided thoughts on whether the Fleadh will encourage participation in music and arts events were positive in nature.

Respondents highlighted the extensive programme of free and low-cost events, including street performances, workshops, sessions and community activities, which reduce financial barriers and make participation accessible to a broad audience.

The Fleadh is seen by respondents as providing opportunities for people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds to engage with music, dance and the arts. Respondents also noted the clear progression routes available through competitions, helping to support both emerging and established artists.

Several responses emphasised the Fleadh's strong community focus, including volunteering opportunities, intergenerational engagement and cross-community participation. The programme was viewed as inclusive and culturally diverse, incorporating Irish traditional arts, Ulster-Scots

programming, bands, storytelling, poetry and visual arts, thereby attracting new audiences and broadening artistic engagement.

"This is a great showcase, widens the appeal of music, and gives opportunities to experience and take part in a globally recognised event.

Northern Ireland Hotels Federation

The event will be inclusive and offer equality of opportunity for people to participate

Overall, consultation feedback gave an indication that ‘The Fleadh’ was felt to promote inclusion. However, as with the previous question there was variation between respondent groups, with views of individual respondents being more mixed.

Individuals

Two individual respondents believed that the event will be inclusive and offer equality of opportunity for people to participate, while the other two respondents expressed the opposite view.

Organisations/Stakeholders

Organisations/stakeholders responding to the consultation agreed that the event will be inclusive and provide equality of opportunity for participation. Respondents highlighted a range of measures designed to remove financial, physical and social barriers, ensuring that people from diverse backgrounds can take part as performers, audience members, volunteers and contributors.

Initiatives supporting inclusivity related to the event identified by respondents include free street programming, free concerts, low-cost events and affordable accommodation options, which help ensure participation is accessible regardless of income. Also noted was the provision of accessible venues, mobility support, sensory-friendly spaces, quiet areas and dedicated competitions for performers with additional needs, demonstrating a commitment to inclusion for people with disabilities.

Responses further emphasised the Fleadh’s commitment to diversity and equality through inclusive programming, multicultural performances and opportunities for people from different communities and backgrounds

to participate. The event was also recognised for creating opportunities through volunteering, employment, community-led projects and business engagement, helping to ensure that benefits are widely shared.

“Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2026 strongly promotes and supports equality of opportunity by actively removing financial, physical, and cultural barriers to participation.”

Tourism NI

Specifying 1.00am as the permitted hours for all relevant premises as requested, will support the financial viability of the event or its future return to Northern Ireland

Respondents presented both support and concern about an extension to permitted hours for the sale of alcohol. However, the majority agreed that fewer restrictions on permitted hours would be beneficial for this and future events as well as the reputation of Belfast for hosting major events.

Individuals

Opinions were mixed on whether specifying 1.00am as the permitted hours for all relevant premises as requested would support the financial viability of the event or its future return to Northern Ireland, with two individual respondents agreeing and two disagreeing. One individual expressed concern about a potential increase in anti-social behaviour and additional strain to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) should hours be extended.

Organisations/Stakeholders

Most organisations/stakeholders responding supported the proposal to permit licensed premises to operate until 1.00am, arguing that it would help maximise the Fleadh's economic benefits, enhance the visitor experience and strengthen the likelihood of the event returning to Northern Ireland in the future.

Respondents noted that extended hours would increase hospitality revenue, capture additional late-night visitor spending and provide a more commercially viable environment for businesses. Several emphasised that Belfast is expected to accommodate very large visitor numbers during the event, and that extended opening hours would help licensed premises manage demand more effectively. It was also highlighted that the Fleadh traditionally includes late-night music and entertainment in licensed

venues, and that restrictive hours could negatively affect visitor expectations and the event's reputation.

A few organisations/stakeholders acknowledged that permitted hours could impact future bids for hosting the return of the Fleadh or other such major events.

One organisation/stakeholder was more neutral, noting that existing licensing legislation already provides avenues for extended opening and therefore the proposal may have limited additional impact.

Another organisation/stakeholder expressed reservations about longer opening hours, citing concerns regarding increased alcohol availability, potential health and safety impacts, pressure on public services and wider societal harms. They recommended that, should the extension proceed, appropriate mitigation measures, safeguarding arrangements and public health messaging should be put in place.

"...restrictive hours risk reputational damage to NI as a destination and may also impact consideration for hosting by other global rights holders interested in bringing events to NI."

Tourism NI

"Increased availability of alcohol influences individual and group consumption with the potential to have detrimental impacts on an individual's health and wellbeing outcomes in the short, medium and long term."

Public Health Agency

Conditions on licensed premises during the extended hours

Nine respondents provided a response to this question and the majority (six out of nine) did not think that it was necessary to place any conditions on the specified licensed premises during the extended hours.

Individuals

Three individuals agreed that no conditions should be applied, while one felt that conditions should be applied during the extended hours but provided no further explanation as to what they should be.

Organisations/Stakeholders

Three organisations/stakeholders felt that it was not necessary to apply conditions during the extended hours while a further two believed that conditions should be applied. One respondent was concerned that the MEO and any associated conditions could cause confusion so suggested that there should be clear communication about how the MEO will or will not impact each licence category.

Two other organisations/stakeholders felt that associated conditions should include making a list of premises available to PSNI; ensuring limits to noise and capacity are clearly set out; and that public safety considerations are foremost.

Conditions on registered clubs during extended hours

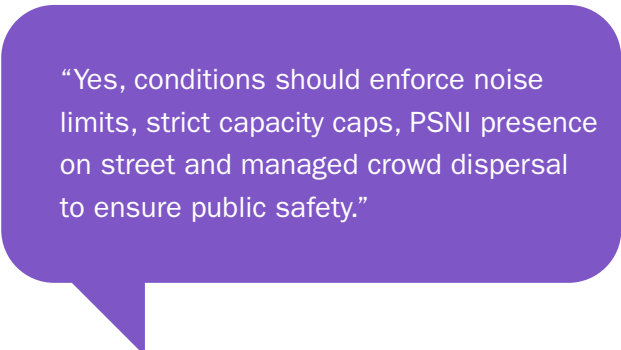
Responses for placing conditions on registered clubs for any additional opening hours almost completely replicated responses given previously for licenced premises, with the exception of one organisation who felt that while licenced premises should be given conditions to comply with, it was not necessary for registered clubs.

Other Information provided by Stakeholders

Two of the stakeholders provided additional input directly that was not captured through the formal survey questions already detailed.

One of the stakeholders reiterated their support for the MEO as it will ensure that all types of licensed venues taking part in the Fleadh will have consistent closing times for the sale of alcohol (i.e. 1.00am) as those who are already permitted under their specific type of licence.

The other stakeholder pointed out that while they fully support the MEO, they have concerns about the capacity of the core area to which it applies. They feel that expected interest and associated needs and considering the scale of previous Fleadhs, means that the current boundaries for the Fleadh in Belfast [as designated by the core area] may need to be extended to the wider city.



“Yes, conditions should enforce noise limits, strict capacity caps, PSNI presence on street and managed crowd dispersal to ensure public safety.”

Departmental Response

The Department welcomes the comments from respondents to the consultation on the MEO for the Fleadh 2026 and has carefully considered the responses.

The underlying principle of the MEO legislation is that the event must attract 'significant public interest' whether throughout Northern Ireland or in certain areas.

When deciding whether an event should be designated as a major event and whether to make a MEO, the Department will take into account all relevant factors, including the following impacts:

- Economic impact
- International profile and reputation
- Social & cultural benefits
- Promotion of equality of opportunity

The Department has assessed the application, taking into account the information provided by Belfast City Council, the responses received through the public consultation, and engagement with key stakeholders. On this basis, the Department is satisfied that the event meets the criteria for designation as a major event.

Significant public interest – the Department has assessed that the event, which is expected to attract around 800,000 visitors, meets the criteria of attracting significant public interest.

Economic impact – the Department has assessed that the event meets this criteria. The application and consultation responses support that the event will generate substantial economic benefits, promote tourism and attract international and local visitors.

International profile and reputation –

the Department has assessed that the event meets this criteria. The application and consultation responses support that the event will position or promote Northern Ireland as a credible world class host of major events, provides opportunities for Northern Irish artists to participate in a major international event and/or to perform to international audiences and provides Northern Ireland audiences with world class experiences.

Social/Cultural – the Department has assessed that the event meets this criteria. The application and consultation responses support that the event will widen access to and encourage participation in the arts.

Promotion of equality of opportunity –

the Department has assessed that the event meets this criteria. The application and consultation responses support that the event promotes equality of opportunity.

Further to meeting these criteria, the Department must also be satisfied that there is a need to extend existing permitted hours and that any extended hours provided for in the MEO will not cause undue inconvenience to persons residing in the vicinity of the premises or place mentioned in the MEO. The Department has considered information provided within Belfast City Council application and consultation responses and is satisfied.

Conditions/Concerns

Conditions

A MEO can impose conditions and as such consultees were asked if they wished to suggest any conditions which should be placed on premises during the extended hours. Consultees proposed the following conditions:

- Clear communication about how the MEO will or will not impact each licence category;
- Provision of a list of premises that the extended hours apply to; and
- Enforcement of limits on noise and capacity and managed crowd dispersal to ensure public safety.

Having carefully considered these requests for conditions, the Department is satisfied that they do not need to be included in the MEO as the following actions are in place:

- Information published alongside the decision to make the MEO will make clear that, with the exception of the extension of licensing hours to 1.00am, the MEO will have no effect on the category of licence held and that the existing terms and conditions of the licence will remain in force.
- The list of premises within the core area which the MEO applies to has been provided by Belfast City Council and is available on the Department's website [Appendix 2](#).
- A list of occasional licences, provided by Belfast City Council, will be shared with the PSNI.
- Noise and crowd control is not within the Department's remit and is a matter for the PSNI and Belfast City Council, however Belfast City Council advised that it has undertaken extensive engagement with local businesses including consideration of traffic management, public safety, event management and community impacts and will continue to work closely with residents, elected members and statutory partners throughout the event planning process and will respond appropriately to any issues that arise during the delivery of the event.

Conditions/Concerns

Concerns

Some concerns were raised by consultees, as follows:

- Possible increases in anti-social behaviour, pressure on emergency and public services, and wider public health impacts;
- An increase of alcohol availability and the potential health and safety impacts, pressure on public services and wider societal harms and that should the extension proceed, appropriate mitigation measures, safeguarding arrangements and public health messaging should be put in place; and
- The MEO should apply to the wider city, not just the city centre.

Having considered these carefully, the Department is satisfied that it does not need to take any further action in relation to these concerns for the following reasons:

- The PSNI has advised it has no objection to the extended permitted hours, and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service advised that Belfast City Council has put in place additional medical provision for the event.
- The Department recognises that the extended permitted hours will increase the time alcohol will be available however as many of the premises can already avail of these permitted hours within existing licensing law, and given it is an adhoc event, it considers the impact to be minimal.
- The proposed core area has been identified by Belfast City Council, based on the operational footprint of the Fleadh and aligns with the area subject to the event's planned pedestrianisation and associated road closure arrangements. The boundary has been developed through detailed operational planning involving Belfast City Council, PSNI, the Department for Infrastructure and other statutory partners. It encompasses a number of event venues, performance spaces, key pedestrian routes and areas where the highest concentrations of visitors are expected throughout the event. Aligning the MEO with the defined pedestrianised area provides a clear and consistent geographical boundary that reflects the operational management of the event.

Departmental Decision

Decision

Having fully considered the Belfast City Council application and the consultation responses, the Department has assessed that the Fleadh is designated as a major event and has made a MEO. Further details regarding the MEO are available to view at [Major Event Orders](#).

A copy of the list of premises within the core area, as provided by Belfast City Council, is included at [Appendix 2](#).

The specified permitted hours for the period from Sunday 2 August until Sunday 9 August 2026 (inclusive) for the sale and supply of alcohol will be:

- Sunday 2 August 2026 and Sunday 9 August 2026, from 12.30pm to 1.00am on the following morning; and
- Monday 2 August 2026 to Saturday 8 August 2026, from 11.30am to 1.00am the following morning.

The extended permitted hours will apply to the following types of premises, which are situated within the core area, as determined by Belfast City Council and outlined in the map at [Appendix 1](#).

- Pubs
- Restaurants
- Hotels
- Conference centres
- Higher Education Institution
- Places of public entertainment
- Places or premises where an occasional licence has been granted
- Registered clubs

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