

Opening Address to the Oireachtas Committee

Wednesday 22nd September 2021 - Feargal Barton, CTTC

On behalf of the members of the CTTC, I would like to thank the Chair, Deputy Smyth and the Committee for inviting us to present here today and for providing us with an opportunity to discuss the very serious issues affecting coach tour operators in Ireland. By way of introduction, my name is Feargal Barton, and I am member of the Executive Council of the CTTC and MD of Barton's Transport in Kildare. I am joined here today by my CTTC Executive Council colleagues James McGinley of John McGinley Travel in Donegal and Mike Buckley of Kerry Coaches.

The Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland is the country's largest representative body for private bus and coach operators, with some key industry names among our membership. We are a pro-active organisation focused on engaging collaboratively with stakeholders in the transport arena and we are focused on delivering real results for our members who have a wide-reaching geographical spread across every constituency in Ireland.

Covid-19 has brought severe disruption to the sector and to the membership of the CTTC. In particular, international tourism has been brought to an abrupt halt while domestic business for members has disappeared over the course of successive lockdowns introduced from mid-March 2020. With the country entering a new Covid phase, passenger demand remains greatly dissipated – a fact exacerbated by the imposition of maximum capacity rates and low consumer confidence.

When the 2019 tourism season ended, little did coach tourism operators think that they would still be wondering about the viability of the industry in summer 2021. In March 2020 the industry ground to a complete halt with the onset of the pandemic. In 2019, a record 11.2 million overseas visitors came to Ireland and coach tour operators made a significant contribution to the overall success of our tourism product. Responsible for directly attracting two million international visitors every year, coach tour operators invest substantial sums of money in marketing Ireland's tourism product abroad - at zero cost to the State or State agencies. The industry carries coach passengers to every corner of Ireland, giving employment not just to coach tour operators and drivers, but also to hotels, retail and hospitality outlets, visitor centres, and other small enterprises. In 2018, coach tourism helped to contribute €400m to the Irish economy. On the foregoing basis our strategic value to Ireland cannot be underestimated.

Government last provided funding to the coach tourism sector in the July Stimulus Plan 2020. While this funding was hugely appreciated by the industry at the time, many operators had exhausted their resources by the time the monies were allocated in March 2021. With no further support forthcoming in 2021 this has created a major viability problem for a sector responsible for, as I said, bringing two million international tourists to Ireland on an annual basis. For this reason, the CTTC is calling on Government to urgently provide funding to the sector by way of a supplementary budget allocation under the upcoming Finance Bill. This is a necessary step to safeguard an industry with a real, tangible and strategic value to the state which ensuring the quality of the fleets remain of a standard that markets Ireland's tourism product positively.

Funding should be made available to cover losses in 2021 and it should replicate the amount of €10 million provided under the Business Continuity Scheme for coach tourism. Its implementation should mirror the same form as the previous scheme. This would be of huge help to the industry and it would assist in keeping many operators in business as they await a partial return to normality in the 2022 tourism season.

The CTTC also recommends continued funding for 2022 under the Business Continuity Fund for Coach Tourism to reflect the real and actual damage done to the sector. The peculiarities of our industry means that there is a long lead in time for international bookings and with huge uncertainty engulfing us all around other variants, the continued effectiveness of vaccines and a crisis in confidence of our consumer markets, it is essential that a support net is provided on a contingency basis in 2022. This is crucial so we are ready to scale up operations when the country's tourism revival begins in earnest .

Once again, on behalf of the CTTC, I thank the committee for their invitation today and we would be happy to hear your observations and take any questions you may have.