



World-Class
Belfast

Simon Hamilton
Belfast Chamber of Trade
and Commerce



“Very rarely does a player pick up the ball on their own goal line, run the length of the pitch and score without anyone else touching the ball,” begins Simon Hamilton, Chief Executive of Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce.

“Somebody has to pass the ball to them, to allow them to play as a striker and score the goals. I suppose I’d seen in government that very often you get to finalise things, you get to put the ball in the net, but you don’t get to be the person who starts the whole move.”

Hamilton is a former Minister in the NI Executive having headed three different departments in his years in Stormont: Minister of Finance and Personnel, Health Minister, and Economy Minister. Stymied by the deadlock at Stormont, he moved to head the 108-year old institution which allowed him to return to the role he loves the best: playmaker.

“When I was considering the new role, it didn’t seem a million miles away from what I had done previously. It was essentially an advocacy and championing role: the same ingredients but a different recipe. I started the role expecting that there would be less public profile and less media work to do. But the events of the last 10 months has meant that there’s probably been more public profile than I had anticipated, or even maybe would have had at times in my previous job.”

The public nature of his work is bringing dividends: the Chamber has coordinated a Building Belfast Back Better campaign that seems to be pulling off the amazing trick of being both the zeitgeist but also helping to grow and broaden the Chamber’s membership base.

“In spite of the difficulties over the last 10 months or so, the organisation continues to grow and I hope that’s because we have been that strong voice saying things that businesses can’t always jump up and say themselves. I hope that what we have been doing has made sure that the city is to the fore in any policy discussions.

“I also think our growth has happened in a way that has reflected the changing nature of the city’s economy.

“Ten years ago, a lot of these sectors like cybersecurity and fintech just didn’t exist here. So we’ve been growing our membership and representation in the tech sector and in professional services. And that’s good because we need that breath of fresh air.”

“Traditionally, we were a bit more sort of retail-focused. And retail is still a hugely important part of our membership. But, to be a good Chamber of Commerce, it can’t just be retail any more than it could just be hospitality . To be a good business network, you need to be as diverse as you possibly can to have the strongest voice. So we’ve been trying to grow and that’s been quite successful so far and we hope that that continues.”

As for what’s next, Hamilton is clear that Belfast needs to be ready to take its place in a post-pandemic world: “We’re ready and we have the appetite for change. Even though things are really difficult at the moment, if we were able to jump into a DeLorean and go into the future, our city would be utterly, utterly transformed, and I’m glad that we and our members are playing our part in that.”

Metaphorically, he’s already set off for goal with the ball at his feet. I think we all know what happens next.



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