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Friday, 31 October 2008

Retail and community leaders last night said they hoped it would be business as usual this Sunday in Belfast City Centre.

There has been concern that supporters of the Royal Irish homecoming parade and the Sinn Fein protest could clash as both sides come face to face as troops march past Donegall Place shortly after noon on Sunday.

Only a space of 40m will separate the crowd of 500 people expected to gather in Donegall Place to register their protest at the homecoming parade by troops recently returned from Afghanistan.

The soldiers are scheduled to make their way along Donegall Square North where there will be a salute outside City Hall before continuing on to Oxford Street with the parade expected to finish at about 12.10pm.

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However, with the weather forecast predicting bright and sunny intervals for Sunday and a large crowd expected in the city centre for the parades, as well as the Halloween holidays, it is hoped shops will benefit from the crowds.

What are these?

Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce has appealed to all those attending the homecoming parade and the protest to behave with respect and dignity this Sunday.

Past president of the organisation Dave Pennick said: "We hope that everyone recognises the great strides our city has made in the last decade and we need to continue to promote the city as Northern Ireland's premier leisure and shopping destination."

Mr Pennick also reminded shoppers that the events are due to finish well before the usual shopping time begins.

"Sunday is a family day for shoppers to enjoy and we are glad that both sides have adopted a flexible approach to the timing of their events, allowing the city to return to business as usual very soon after lunchtime."

Provided trouble does not erupt, public transport in the city centre is also expected to run as normal on Sunday — apart from services affected by the routes being followed by the parade and counter protest.

A spokeswoman from Translink said: "We plan to run a normal service with the expected PSNI diversions in place.

"We will monitor services accordingly on the day."

And George Grimley, general manager of Belfast City Sightseeing, which operates the well-known red tourist bus around Belfast, said he hopes it will be business as usual on Sunday.

"We're really going to be playing it by ear although we are planning to operate the service as normal," he said.

While the bus passes some of the most infamous flashpoints around Belfast, he said it is the city centre which the company is most worried about and they will be taking advice from the PSNI regarding the situation and whether it is safe to operate.

"Sunday is the second most important day in terms of revenue after Saturday so hopefully everything will pass off peacefully. We have about five or six buses run on a Sunday and there is an average of about 50 passengers on each bus so if there is disruption there will obviously be financial implications for us."

Sunday services at Belfast Cathedral are also expected to carry on as normal.

A PSNI spokeswoman said she could not discuss planned operational procedures for the marches but said: "The parade and any associated protests will be policed in an appropriate and proportionate way to ensure public safety, minimum disruption and an early return to normality.

"Any peaceful and lawful protest will be facilitated, however anyone in breach of the law will be fully investigated. Police in south Belfast have been liaising closely with traders and businesses along the parade route in the city centre providing them with general security and other crime prevention advice."

The chairman of the Community Relations Council urged people not to turn Sunday's parade and protest into a "re-run of the Troubles".

Dr Duncan Morrow said he hoped the military parade and Sinn Fein counter demonstration would pass off peacefully and urged politicians and community leaders to use their influence wisely.

"There are concerns out there about what is known in the trade as 'dog whistle messages'. There are posters going up all over the place which people can hear if they want to hear.

"And people are piggy-backing on what are, in a sense, normal democratic political disputes, to turn them into a re-run of the Troubles. And we have of course form in this.

"What we are very keen to do is to make absolutely clear that this is what it is. It is a homecoming parade and a protest against that. And that is a legitimate and a democratic and a useful thing to do and everything else is not."

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