

## Board Meeting 30 September 2021

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND  
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING  
HELD AT THE CLAYTON HOTEL, BELFAST  
ON THURSDAY 30 SEPTEMBER 2021**

Present:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman – by remote call)
- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Mr John West
- Ms Patricia Corbett (by remote call)
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Colin Neill
- Mr Terry McCartney
- Mr Geoff Wilson

In Attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development
- Ms Naomi Waite, Director of Marketing
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Business Support & Events
- Ms Jill O'Reilly, Director of Organisational Development & HR
- Ms Lesley McKeown, Director of Finance (by remote call)
- Mr David Daley, Business Planning & Improvement Manager (item 2, by remote call)
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

Ms Angelina Fusco

Ms Sarah Jayne Smith, Boardroom Apprentice

### **1. Introduction / Standing Items**

The Chairman welcomed participants and prefaced the meeting with a reminder that minutes of the meeting will be published.

Participants were asked if they wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items. No declarations were made at this point.

#### **1 (i) Minutes of Previous Board Meeting**

Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2021 were approved as an accurate record.

## **1 (ii) Matters Arising – Actions from Previous Meeting**

The Board noted the status of actions agreed at its last meeting. For the most part these were complete or would be dealt with as part of the agenda. The Board was advised that in addition to engaging with the Centre for Local Economic Studies on the 'trickle down' value of tourism, Tourism NI is also engaging with Team Tourism Consulting which is undertaking some work on the subject. A report would be brought back to a future meeting of the Board.

## **2. Items for Discussion**

### **2 (i) Risk Management Review**

The Board received an update on an ongoing risk management review. In the course of work on the review, Members had referred to work by the Department for Communities, linking its risk register to strategic objectives and the delivery of outcomes. As a result Tourism NI met with DfC officials to explore how its practices might be adopted into the review already underway. A number of key learnings from the ongoing work were highlighted, including the need for a new risk appetite statement.

The Board also discussed the Department for Economy's approach to risk, which was observed to be risk averse and was impacting upon Tourism NI's agility in its response to the needs of the tourism sector. It was noted that Tourism NI's own approach already aligns with principles set out in the Treasury's Orange Book. The Board suggested that it would be useful to see DFE's new risk appetite statement and discussed the role of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee in reviewing the register. It was emphasised that the Board's role should be to review and discuss the mitigation of strategic risks.

The Board noted the progress to date and agreed as a next step that it should convene a workshop with the Senior Management Team to consider these issues in greater depth (**ACTION:** JMcG / LMCK).

### **2 (ii) Staff Recruitment, Retention and Succession Planning**

A paper was presented on a number of related issues that were creating significant human resource pressures and risks for Tourism NI. These include a dependence upon a number of individuals in key roles representing potential single points of failure should someone leave or become unwell. Separately there is an increasing turnover of experienced staff, moving on because of perceived lack of opportunity for progression and better salaries on offer elsewhere. In addition to creating retention problems the organisation was finding it difficult to recruit into certain positions, resulting in vacancies often filled from within the organisation and in doing so creating vacancies elsewhere.

The Board was reminded of the process undertaken to establish the new organisational structure, arising from 2014's Hunter Review. This had involved lengthy engagement between Tourism NI and DFE, which originally gave an 'in principle' undertaking to fund 50% of the cost of new posts, subject to affordability, with Tourism NI finding the remainder from efficiencies. More recently the Department had granted resource to fund four posts to support delivery of the City and Region Deals; however these posts would be reviewed after a two-year period. Additional pressures have arisen from the increasing demands on Tourism NI to support delivery of major

events such as The Open. A request to the Department for resource for two additional posts to fulfil this demand had so far met with a disappointing response.


As these issues combined to limit Tourism NI's ability to progress its plans, the Board's permission was sought to reallocate £280k of programme resource to the administration budget, in order to implement the posts required. The Board was advised that additional HR resource had also been secured to ensure that recruitment can be progressed as quickly as possible.

Geoff Wilson joined the meeting at this point.

Discussing the paper, the Board commented that robust conversations were needed with the Department that highlight impacts resulting from Tourism NI not being adequately resourced. Tourism NI has also been trying to progress a longstanding issue relating to staff pay and pensions which had meant that staff had not received pay increases due to them for a considerable period of time. This was felt to be a contributing factor in the higher staff turnover.

The Board also acknowledged that, in the period since Tourism NI began negotiating with DFE on the business case for the new organisational structure, it has been tasked with significant additional responsibilities, relating to the delivery of the City and Region Deals, COVID recovery programmes under ERAP and TRAP, and the need to support delivery of a growing range of major events.

(The below paragraph is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 – Commercial Interests of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)



The Board agreed that Tourism NI should proceed with seeking £280k to fund new posts from within its programme budgets while at the same time pursuing the contribution previously committed to by the Department.

Members further recommended that a process review be undertaken with the Department to reduce the burden of bureaucracy. The Board also asked that the issues discussed should form part of the briefing and agenda for the Board's forthcoming engagement with the Minister (**ACTION:** JMcG).

## **2 (iii) ROI Market Strategy Action Plan**

At its last meeting the Board received a presentation on a review of the ROI market and asked for details of how the report's recommendations would be implemented. The Director of Marketing now presented an Action Plan setting out activity to achieve the overall goal of 10% value share of the ROI market. Actions fall under three pillars – engaging and developing collective effort by the tourism industry; developing powerful messaging with communications that build knowledge of what Northern Ireland offers and present compelling reasons for visiting; and creating the conditions for constant easy access to, and purchase of, short breaks.

The Board discussed the metrics for success. It was noted that some councils had enthusiastically embraced the proposals, adapting their own communications to reflect the brand; however work

was still needed to bring Visit Belfast on board with the proposals. Members raised the digital relationship with individual consumers and were advised of the potential that the TXGB platform holds in that regard. In view of the prior discussion of resources, the Board also stressed the need to balance ambition with capacity to deliver.

The Board approved the action plan and commended the Director of Marketing and her team for their work on the review.

Geoff Wilson declared an interest and withdrew from the meeting during discussion of the next item.

## **2 (iv) International Tourism Events Support Programme**

The Director of Business Support and Events presented a proposed new model for supporting international events in 2022-23. The Board was given a summary of the previous year's approach adopted to supporting events under the Covid-19 pandemic. It was emphasised that no 'one size fits all' approach would work under the current conditions and an approach was now proposed with three main strands. This would involve deciding not to run an open call support scheme for new events in 2022-23, continuing the policy of offering 'in principle' support to events that had cancelled in 2021-22 and 2022-23, but plan to proceed in 2023-24; and making a closed call offer of 'in principle' support to events that had proceeded in 2021-22 and plan to go ahead in 2022-23.

The Board approved the proposed approach, commenting that it was sensible in the prevailing conditions and suggested that if it is successful, Tourism NI should continue with it going forward. Members also noted the distinction between events supported under the programme and major events such as The Open, for which Tourism NI is required to bid given their significance and value in terms of income generated and media reach. The Board thanked the Director of Business Support and Events for the paper.

## **2 (v) Principles Underpinning Tourism NI Support Programmes**

As part of a previous discussion the Board had recommended that Tourism NI should establish a set of core principles that would inform investment decisions in the various support programmes under the Economic Recovery Action Plan and Tourism Recovery Action Plan. The Director of Strategic Development introduced a paper setting out these principles. It was emphasised that proportionality would be required in how the principles are applied across the various schemes.

The Board also discussed the issue of the need for support – it was stressed that this was factored into considerations of additionality and that the Senior Management Team's review of projects at the Programme Board would include a 'sense check' of such issues. The Board was also advised that there was ongoing engagement with Internal Audit Service to ensure that the application of each scheme is robust. Additionally, much of the activity under the programmes is being delivered by Tourism NI itself, or by its delivery partners.

The Board approved the principles and it was agreed that these will be used to develop a guidance document for staff working on the programmes.

## **2 (vi) Tourism Exchange Great Britain (TXGB) – Direct Award Contract**

The Board was presented with a request to grant approval for a Direct Award Contract (DAC) for a twelve-month pilot Tourism Exchange GB programme, creating a business-to-business platform that would assist Northern Ireland SMEs in finding a route to market. The Board was advised that Central Procurement Directorate had indicated that it is content with the DAC.

The Board granted approval in principle, subject to the provision of a statement of benefits and indication of the return on investment that could be expected from the exercise (**ACTION:** JMcG).

## **2 (vii) Proposed 2022 Board Meeting Dates**

The Board approved a programme of meeting dates and key agenda items for 2022.

## **3. Reports**

### **3 (i) Chairman's Report**

The Board noted the engagements undertaken since the last meeting. The Chairman reported on the last debrief meeting held with the Department, where he had raised the pressures on resources associated with programmes to deliver ERAP.

### **3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report**

The content of the report was noted. The Chief Executive advised that he had recently given a presentation on the work of Tourism NI to policy officers within Sinn Fein. He also gave a report on participation in the recent NI Business and Innovation showcase in London.

The Board was advised that DFE had initiated an organisational transformation programme and a review of its sponsorship functions. As part of that process, Tourism NI's Senior Management Team had a useful engagement with Departmental officials.

In the context of the Board's dinner discussion on 29 September with the executive Board of the Irish Tour Operators Association, Members discussed the increasingly severe impact that ongoing restrictions on travel were having on tour operator business from the Republic of Ireland. Operators had been excluding Northern Ireland from all-island itineraries given the difficulty presented by bringing tours across the border and as they were now planning tour programmes for 2022 there is potential for the situation to persist throughout the coming year. The Board felt that there was an urgent need to engage now with the relevant branches of government on the need for a change to restrictions and it was agreed that a letter to that effect should be drafted for the Chairman (**ACTION:** JMcG).

### **3 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports**

Chairs of the Board's sub-committees reported on recent meetings as follows:

*Marketing Sub-Committee* – There had been no meeting of the Marketing Sub-Committee in the period since the last Board Meeting. In the Chairman's absence Terry McCartney had chaired the dinner discussion with the ITOA Board, which was felt to have been a very positive engagement. The Board also discussed the possibility of extending the conference subvention fund, given the significant return on investment that is achievable from incentive business and corporate

meetings, but it was noted that this is not a decision that Tourism NI can make on its own. It was observed that there are also opportunities to engage with Invest NI to seek a more strategic approach in securing conference and corporate business.

*Audit and Risk Assurance Committee* – In the absence of Angelina Fusco, John West gave a report on the Committee's most recent meeting held on 21 September. He advised the Board that the Committee had been notified of a possible qualification to Tourism NI's accounts, and also to the accounts of the Department, in respect of grant to Tourism Ireland which had been paid prior to formal approval of the business case. It was noted that Tourism NI is usually the conduit for paying the grant to Tourism Ireland, as DFE itself does not have vires to do so.

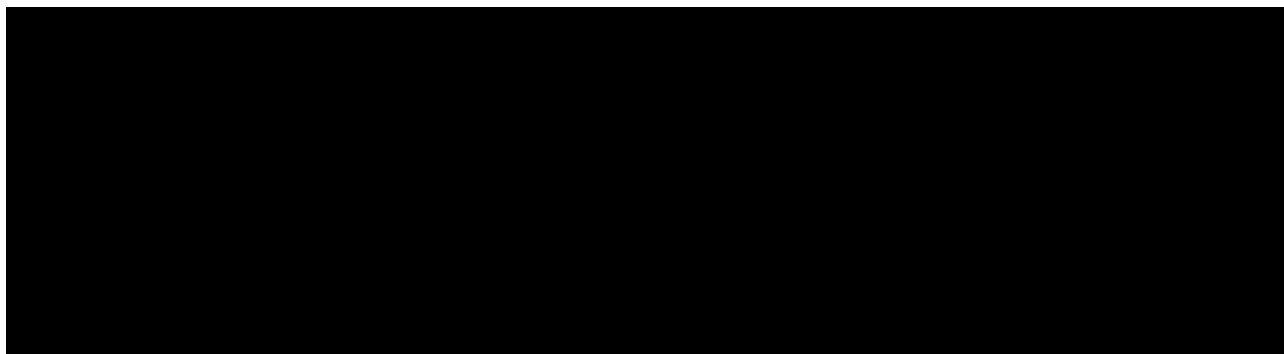
The Board was also advised that there was a possibility that the annual report and accounts might not be available for approval by the Board before December.

The Committee had also discussed the register of gifts and hospitality and proposed that the Board should review this on a regular basis.

*Finance and Casework Committee* – Michele Shirlow reported on two meetings of the Committee held in the period since the last Board Meeting. At its meeting on 1 September, the Committee received a paper on support for projects under the Market Led Product Development Programme. The awards, totalling £3.36m, support bespoke projects by local authorities that enhance the visitor experience and align with the Northern Ireland Embrace a Giant Spirit experience brand. The Committee had granted approval following receipt of additional information setting out how the impacts of the programme would be measured and its benefits quantified.

The Committee also considered a paper reviewing Tourism NI's Economic Recovery Action Plan (ERAP) budgets. DFE had asked its arms-length bodies to evaluate potential underspend on ERAP programmes. Since certain Tourism NI activity still could not be delivered as a result of ongoing COVID restrictions, a sum of £2m, representing 10% of the allocation to Tourism NI, had been identified that could be surrendered for use elsewhere. It had been proposed that a further £2m should be reallocated for use on the Holiday at Home voucher scheme – however DfE had not approved this reallocation and was seeking evidence of demand for the scheme, with the funds to be held centrally until this is established. A transfer of a further £400k to a marketing programme had been approved. The Committee also received an update on the Gateway to the Mourne Project.

(The below section is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 – Commercial Interests of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)





#### **4. Papers for Noting**

##### **4 (i) Draft Agenda for next Board Meeting**

The Board noted the proposed agenda for its next meeting.

#### **5. Any Other Business**

There were no other items of substantive business. The Chairman thanked Terry McCartney for chairing the previous evening's dinner and drawing proceedings to a close, thanked participants in the Board Meeting.

#### **6. Date of Next Meeting**

The next scheduled Board Meeting will be on Thursday 4 November 2021.