

Board Meeting 15 December 2022

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST
ON THURSDAY 15 DECEMBER 2022**

Participating:

- Ms Ellvena Graham OBE (Chair)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Ms Patricia Corbett
- Mr John West
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Colin Neill
- Mr Terry McCartney
- Mr Stephen Garvin

In attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Naomi Waite, Director of Marketing
- Ms Lesley Shannon, Head of Finance
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chair welcomed participants and reminded them that minutes of the meeting will be published. No apologies were recorded. Attendees were asked if they wished to declare interests or conflicts in relation to agenda items. Geoff Wilson declared an interest in respect of the item relating to the Euros bid and the Chair advised that she had an interest in respect of an item requiring discussion under 'any other business'.

1 (i) Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 10th November 2022 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 and updates were given as follows:

Employee Relations – the Board received an update on a grievance case. The Chief Executive advised that the Department had already been advised of the issue and that he proposed to write formally setting out the detail. The Board recommended that the CEO should also advise DfE of the process that Tourism NI intends to adopt in order to address the matter (**ACTION**: JMcG).

Subsistence Expenses – the issue was noted to be ongoing and the Chief Executive is to speak to Invest NI regarding the approach that it adopts to the issue (**ACTION**: JMcG).

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Tourism NI Annual Report and Accounts 2020-21 / Tourism NI Annual Report and Accounts 2021-22

The Board received a verbal update from the Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, on progress towards completion of Tourism NI's Annual Reports and Accounts for 2020-21 and 2021-22. The Committee had held an extraordinary meeting on 12th December, in the expectation that it would be able to recommend to the Board that the accounts could be signed. However the NI Audit Office had subsequently advised that it would not be in a position to supply final accounts for signature before Christmas. The Board was advised that the delay appeared to be the result of a capacity issue within the NIAO. The Board was also advised of the likely timeline for completion of the accounts; it was noted that the Department is also aware of the issue.

2 (ii) Board Response to Windfarm Proposals

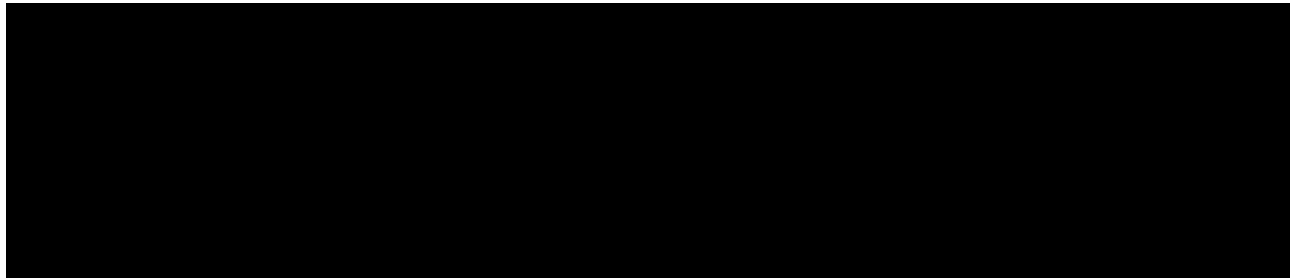
The Board was presented with a paper summarising the findings of a review of available research on the potential impact on tourism of windfarm proposals. Members were advised that the Chair had requested an evaluation of the existing evidence, in response to recent correspondence querying Tourism NI's position on such schemes. The review of evidence had looked at a 2021 study of wind farms and tourism trends in Scotland conducted by BiGGAR Economics, and a Welsh government study into the potential economic impact of windfarms and associated grid infrastructure, carried out in 2014. The Scottish study had concluded that there was no link between growth in the number of wind turbines and tourism-related employment, while the Wales study found no evidence of any significant impacts on tourism.

As a result the Board was content to endorse the position previously adopted by Tourism NI, that planning authorities are best placed to determine the implications of wind turbine development for tourism assets. The Board agreed that the Chair should reply to the recent correspondence to reaffirm this position.

Members also discussed the process by which Tourism NI's policies are reviewed and updated, and asked that a summary of policies and positions taken over the last ten years should be brought to the Board for consideration (**ACTION**: JD).

Having declared an interest, Geoff Wilson left the meeting to permit discussion of the next item.

(Exempt from disclosure under 'Section 43 – Commercial Interests' of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)



With the discussion concluded, Geoff Wilson rejoined the meeting.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chair's Report

Members noted the detail of engagements undertaken by the Chair in the period since the last Board Meeting. Members discussed the recent dinner meeting held with the Board of Tourism Ireland, which they felt was a positive first engagement. It was agreed that Tourism NI should seek to host a follow-up dinner discussion soon. The Board also suggested that similar engagement with the Boards of Invest NI and Visit Belfast would also prove useful. It was agreed that this could be discussed when Visit Belfast attends the "Deep Dive" prior to the January Board meeting. The CEO agreed to discuss the potential for a joint board session with Invest NI's CEO. **(ACTION: JMcG).**

The Chair also reported on a meeting to discuss the scope of a planned review of DfE's arms-length bodies including Tourism NI; it was noted that Terms of Reference for the review remain to be developed.

The Board was also advised that Tourism NI had received an indication that it could engage with Tourism Ireland and Failte Ireland on projects linked with Shared Island funding. The Board was advised that relevant local authorities have already been working well together on a number of cross-border tourism initiatives some of which had been successful in securing funding for feasibility studies.

5 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

The content of the report was noted and updates were given as follows:

Levelling Up - The Board was advised that the NI Future Prosperity Programme had just been published. The Programme makes reference to a small fund of £5m, yet to be defined, to support the tourism, hospitality and retail contribution to the levelling-up agenda. Members discussed how the issue might be progressed, commenting that Tourism NI would be the most appropriate agency to administer any levelling-up funding associated with tourism. The Board suggested that the Chief Executive should write to Sue Gray at the Cabinet Office and to the head of the relevant equivalent unit in Northern Ireland **(ACTION: JMcG).**

UK Inbound Conference – The Board was advised of the outline arrangements for the Conference and asked the Senior Management Team to give thought to which groups and delegates could benefit from engagement with the Board (**ACTION**: SMT).

Electronic Travel Authorisations – The Board was advised on the potential impact of the introduction of an ETA on overseas visitors travelling to Northern Ireland via the ROI and on ROI residents who were not UK or Irish citizens who might wish to travel across the border. NITA is currently lobbying heavily for a mitigation to the rules for those visitors coming to Northern Ireland via the Republic of Ireland for short stays. Members suggested it would be useful to engage with other sectors – for example language schools and in higher education – that are similarly affected by the issue and that MCE should be asked to give consideration to how Tourism NI might broaden the conversation with its stakeholders.

Visitor Statistics – the Board discussed the need to look at sources of data other than hotel occupancy rates in evaluating tourism's contribution to 10X objectives and suggested there was value in also looking at food and beverage sales as well as the information that could be derived from exit interviews at gateways. The Board suggested that it would be useful to have a deep dive session soon that considers sources of visitor data, including the exploration of alternative sources of data. (**ACTION**: DE).

For the next deep dive session it was proposed that Visit Belfast should be invited for a presentation and discussion, and the Board asked that a short briefing paper be prepared ahead of this (**ACTION**: NW).

3 (iii) Sub- Committee Reports

Reports were given by the sub-committee chairs as follows:

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee – the Board had already received a verbal update from the Committee's chair earlier in the meeting, in respect of the 2020-21 and 2021-22 Annual Reports and Accounts. At its meeting on 12 December the Committee had also been presented with proposals for a new 'fam framework' governing the management of familiarisation visits. This had been developed as a result of recommendations in the recent Internal Audit Service review of fam trips, and a need to consider matters such as approvals and hospitality limits. It was proposed as part of this that the Committee and the Senior Management Team would receive regular reports on the fam programme. The Committee had made a number of comments and recommendations which are now being considered by the SMT, following which a revised version of the framework will be presented to the Board (**ACTION**: NW).

Finance and Casework Committee – Michele Shirlow reported on the Committee's meeting held on 5th December. Draft minutes were provided for information. Members had received an update on management accounts and the budget position for the year to date, which had given a measure of reassurance that expenditure remained on target. The Committee was happy to see that previous issues raised in respect of budget management by business units had been addressed.

4. Papers for Noting

4 (i) Draft Agenda for January Board Meeting

The Board noted the proposed draft agenda for its next meeting.

5. Any Other Business

5 (i) DfE Permanent Secretary

The Permanent Secretary of DfE joined the meeting at this point. In her welcoming remarks the Chair advised that prior to the meeting, the Board had held a very useful deep dive session at which DfE representatives presented the guiding principles and timeline for development of the new Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy, with a particular focus on the contribution that tourism can make to realising the objectives of the 10X economic vision. The Permanent Secretary set out the current policy and budgetary environment and highlighted the progress being made on legislative mechanisms that will allow the business of government to go forward in the absence of the NI Executive.

It was emphasised that the forward budgetary picture across government will remain very challenging for some time to come and the Board was advised of the likely implications for the delivery of work programmes, both for Departments and their arms-length bodies. It was noted that Tourism NI had already done a great deal of work to align its objectives with 10X, focusing on how tourism can deliver on sustainability and inclusivity themes of the policy. Tourism is particularly relevant to the inclusion objectives because of its relevance to regional job creation, the labour market and the skills agenda. There was a discussion of what Tourism NI might need to stop doing, whether that would mean cessation or simply putting activity on hold, and how that will be determined. It was emphasised that Tourism NI would need to maintain the ability to be flexible so it can respond quickly, should additional resource become available. Members suggested that the formatting of future Board papers should be framed to place emphasis on delivery of 10X objectives.

There was also a discussion of capital projects and the difficulty of working within the constraints of 1 year capital budgets. It was noted that deliverability is being compromised by increasing material and construction costs, particularly the larger City Deal Projects. As a result a zero-based re-assessment of the City and Growth Deal programme is likely to be required. The Board was advised that while resource remains ring-fenced for City Deal projects, consideration may need to be given to elements of these that can be revised or dropped. It was again emphasised that all activity needs to be seen in the context of the 10X vision and to contribute towards fulfilling it.

Members thanked the Permanent Secretary for taking the time to meet with the Board and agreed that this and the earlier engagement with the Department had been hugely positive and encouraging.

5 (ii) Titanic and Maritime Belfast – Direct Award Contract

The Chair declared an interest in relation to this item due to her chairmanship of Catalyst Inc.

The Board was advised that Tourism NI proposes to offer a Direct Award Contract to recommence concept development for a Titanic Quarter Maritime Heritage Visitor Experience centred around the Thompson Dock, Pumphouse and HMS Caroline sites. This was due to the work being paused during the Covid pandemic and the term of the original contract had expired. Approval is currently being sought from Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD), following which approval will be formally sought from the Board via correspondence.

5 (iv) Marketing Sub-Committee

The Board was advised that due to a combination of workload and staff absences, and the lack of availability of committee members the Committee's last few meetings had been cancelled. The Board agreed to a suggestion that the Terms of Reference for the Committee should be revised to focus on the impact of marketing activity. **(ACTION: NW)**.

5 (v) Cost of Living

The issue of cost-of-living payments to staff of arms-length bodies was raised.

5 (vi) Learning Journeys

The Board had previously been advised that a programme of learning journeys is being planned. A Board member is to be sought to participate in a planned visit to Slovenia to explore sustainability issues. This is scheduled to take place from 21st 24th March 2023.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 26th January 2023.