

Board Meeting 12 December 2024

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST
ON THURSDAY 12 DECEMBER 2024**

Participating:

- Ms Ellvena Graham OBE (Chairman)
- Ms Aileen Martin
- Ms Áine Gallagher
- Ms Karly Greene
- Mr Ciaran O'Neill
- Mr Colin Johnston
- Mr John Hood
- Ms Linda MacHugh
- Mr Michael Counahan

In attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Mr John West, Strategic Adviser to the Board
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Events
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Services
- Mrs Dorothy Erskine, Head of Research and Insights
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed those present. No apologies were recorded. Attendees were reminded that minutes of the meeting would be published and were asked to declare any interests in respect of agenda items. No declarations were made at this point.

1 (i) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Minutes of the previous Board Meeting held on 14th November 2024 were approved subject to a number of minor amendments.

1 (ii) Matters Arising – Actions from Previous Meeting.

The Board noted the status of action points from previous meetings.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Tourism NI Data Hub

At its meeting on 21 March the Board discussed work on development of a data hub, to support data driven decision-making by Tourism NI and the wider industry. As part of that discussion the Board requested a statement of benefit for the Data Hub in the form of a business case substantiating the expenditure and giving a sense of how clients wish to see data presented.

The Board was advised that the Hub would represent a valuable tool to demonstrate the impact of interventions by Tourism NI and DfE, and to evaluate the impact of spend by region. This would help to make the case for where future investment in accommodation and attractions can best be made. Hillsborough Castle was cited as a recent example of an instance in which an investment was informed by data provided by Tourism NI.

The annual cost of the investment in the Data Hub was noted to be around £400k, representing 2% of Tourism NI's annual budget. It was emphasised that this will represent a worthwhile investment given that it will demonstrate the impact of Tourism NI's activity and support decision making on the allocation of resource.

The Board asked if there was a possibility that data produced by the hub might conflict with the findings of NISRA statistics. Members were advised that the methodology and focus of the data hub's output is different and focused on visitor trends. That being the case, the output from the data hub should complement work undertaken by NISRA. It was noted that Tourism NI is discussing with NISRA the uses that it might make of TNI-produced data.

The data produced will include value and percentage of visitor spend, the markets from which this comes, and insights on how it may shift. It was also emphasised that the hub could produce such data at a much more granular level than NISRA surveys. Local authorities were noted to find great value in the data produced by the hub and were using it to inform decision-making and support business cases for external funding applications. The Board asked if some work might be done to quantify and assess the investment decisions being influenced by data. It was suggested that an evaluation of how the data has been utilised and the economic benefits derived should be carried out after two years. This would allow Tourism NI to assess the value in continuing to invest in the service at that point. It was observed that the data is likely also to be required to establish the extent to which the Minister's objectives for greater regional balance are being achieved.

The Board discussed the costs and was advised that a sum of around £150k per year was built in for maintenance and support work – while not all of this may be required in each year, the costs still need to be budgeted for.

The Board advised that in presenting the business case to the Department, it should be made clear that the majority of the costs identified were already being incurred as part of the work that Tourism NI has already been doing in this area and were not therefore additional to the current budget.

The Board was also advised of discussions with NITA about how a broader evidence base might be derived from greater participation by visitor attractions, although some success had already been achieved in collaboration directly with those attractions that are willing to participate.

The Board agreed that the hub was necessary and stressed the need for Tourism NI to have skills in place that keep the service up-to-date and delivering outputs that are relevant and meet users' requirements.

Another issue the Board discussed was the potential to charge clients for the data provided to them at some future point, once the value of the service is established. It was noted that Tourism NI now has legal advice confirming that it can charge fees for services that it provides.

2 (ii) Travel Trade Strategy

The Board was presented with draft Terms of Reference for a Travel Trade Strategy to create sustainable growth within the sector, to run from 2025-2035.

The Board was also asked to nominate a member to participate in the Steering Group that will oversee development of the strategy. It was agreed that Aileen Martin should join given her extensive relevant experience. The Board proposed that another Board Member should join the group as an observer and agreed that Linda MacHugh should take up this role as a learning and development opportunity.

A number of recommendations were made regarding the content of the Terms of Reference and the CEO agreed to discuss these with the Director of Marketing on her return from holiday

(ACTION: JMcG / NW).

2 (iii) PA Consulting Report

The Board was provided with details of the findings and recommendations of a report by PA Consulting into Tourism NI's senior management structures. A Service Design and Transformation Review was carried out in 2019, but not all of the posts recommended by that review had been put in place. The Board was advised that DfE had asked the Chief Executive to undertake a follow-up review in order to give assurance that the structures in place were appropriate and had the relevant skills mix to meet the needs of the organisation.

The Chief Executive stressed that while structures and recruitment represented operational matters, the management team was anxious to secure the Board's endorsement of the recommendations. Resourcing of the Marketing Division had represented a particular challenge and the appointment of two Grade 7 posts to the Marketing Division was highlighted as an immediate priority, the costs being met from within the Department's existing budget. The Board was further advised that the appointment of a Head of Communications was not being progressed for the moment.

Noting the report, the Board gave its endorsement of the recommendations and confirmed its support for the ambition.

2 (iv) Tourism Exchange (TXGB)

The Board was provided with an update on a pilot scheme licensing the TXGB online sales platform. Both industry uptake and sales through the platform were below target and despite efforts by Tourism NI's Social and Digital Team to encourage uptake, there appeared to be a reluctance on the part of businesses to take up the opportunity. Members asked if there was market failure and were advised that there would have been benefits for the self-catering sector but despite efforts to get businesses to engage, they were content to continue with platforms such as AirBnB and booking.com, notwithstanding the costs associated with these.

The Board approved the proposal not to renew the licence when it expires and stressed the importance of retaining evidence that there had been little appetite for the platform within the relevant sectors.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chairman's Report

Members noted the Chairman's report on her activity representing Tourism NI in the period since the last Board meeting. Reflecting on the engagement with North Coast tourism businesses ahead of the November meeting, Members agreed that the discussions had been very positive and it was encouraging to see a number of significant investments being made in the area. The Chairman also reported on her attendance at the recent AVEA conference. It was observed that representation on the association amongst Northern Ireland attractions is low, having dropped off post-Covid, and the Board discussed how better uptake of membership might be encouraged.

The Chairman also reported on a recent meeting of the Public Sector Chairs' Forum.

3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

Members noted the content of the Chief Executive's report on current issues and were provided with the latest version of the Minister's Vision and Action Plan for Tourism, developed by the Tourism Partnership Board. The Board's attention was drawn to the key target which aims to grow overnight visitor revenue from £1.2bn to £2bn by 2035. The Chief Executive also reported on his attendance together with Departmental and Tourism Ireland officials to present the Action Plan to the Assembly's Economy Committee, advising that the focus of discussions had been primarily on events and the proposals to develop political tourism.

The Board was advised that the Chief Executive had provided additional input to the latest iteration of the Action Plan, but it was also emphasised that there is currently no guarantee that resource will be made available to support the ambitions outlined. The funding implications will be one of the topics for discussion at the Board's forthcoming strategic awayday in January.

The Board was also provided with an update on discussions regarding funding of Visit Derry. The Board was advised that Tourism NI would be providing support for a study of how tourism is promoted and delivered in the North West.

Reports were also given on the Minister's meeting with investors in the *Game Of Thrones* Studio Tour, and on preparations for The Open Championship.

The Chief Executive also advised that the requirement for Electronic Travel Authorisations for visitors crossing the border from ROI is expected to come into effect in January. The price of an ETA is reportedly to rise from £10 to £16 and Tourism NI had been asked to provide case studies demonstrating the impact that introduction of the scheme might have on local tourism businesses.

A report was also given on a meeting of the CEOs of UK national tourist authorities. Discussions had included the impact of short-term lets and proposals to introduce tourism levies. The Board discussed the possibility of a learning journey to Scotland to learn more about the work of Events Scotland and their approach to supporting and delivering events.

The Board was also updated on advice received from the Departmental Solicitor's office in respect of Tourism NI's vires to provide financial support. Members were advised that the advice supplied by DSO appeared to cover all Tourism NI expenditure with the possible exception of a sum of £27k relating to NI businesses being supported to participate at international trade shows, to ensure that there was an NI presence at these events. A matrix containing a detailed breakdown of TNI's expenditure for 2022/23 and 2023/24 along with the relevant legal advice and authorisation was being prepared for submission to the NIAO which, if accepted, would permit the accounts for 2022/23 and 2023/24 to be signed off.

The CEO reported that on the basis of the advice which had been received from the DSO, he had given approval for all payments that had been on hold to be released. The Board was also advised that the issues relating to a payment of additional resource to Tourism Ireland had also been resolved.

3 (iii) Sub-Committees

Reports were given by the Chairs of the Board's Sub-committees as follows:

Finance & Casework Committee – The Committee Chair reported on a meeting held on 19 November to review progress on City and Growth Deals projects. The Committee had requested some background briefing to better understand the background to each of these projects and while all the schemes remain at a very early stage of development, a number have already experienced significant delays. The Gobbins Phase II project was noted to be proceeding with fewest issues. It was agreed that site visits to each of the projects should be arranged for Committee members (**ACTION: DR**).

Thanks were extended to all sub-committee members for their work.

4. Items for Noting

4 (i) Green Horizons Bid

The Board was presented with a short report detailing a joint bid to the Peace Plus Programme, developed by Tourism NI with Ulster University, Failte Ireland & Atlantic Technological University. The bid seeks support for a new "Green Horizons: Tourism Innovation for Sustainable Futures"

programme which would enable Tourism NI to provide advice and support for climate action across tourism SMEs. A decision on the proposals is expected in Spring 2025. The Board noted the content of the report.

4 (ii) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the latest report on visitor trends. Members remarked that it would be useful for the Board to discuss and reflect on current trends in more detail. The Chief Executive advised that it is proposed to have a presentation and discussion of trends at the Board's forthcoming strategic awayday in January.

4 (iii) Draft Agenda for February Board Meeting

The Board noted the draft agenda for its next meeting, scheduled to be held at Tourism NI headquarters in February 2025.

5. Any Other Business

As there were no other substantive items of business the Chairman thanked Members and brought the meeting to a close.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is now due to be held on Thursday 20 February 2025 at Tourism NI Headquarters.