

Board Meeting 13 August 2025

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST
ON WEDNESDAY 13 AUGUST 2025**

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:

- Ms Áine Kearney, Interim Chief Executive
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development
- Mr John West, Strategic Adviser to the Board
- Ms Laura McCorry, Chief Executive Designate (attending as observer)
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed those present including Laura McCorry, who was attending as an observer and is due to take up post as Tourism NI's Chief Executive in September. Attendees were reminded that minutes of the meeting would be published and were asked to declare any interests in respect of agenda items. It was noted that a number of members might have potential conflicts in respect of agenda items 2 (ii) and 2 (iii) – however as no decisions were required of the Board it was agreed that they would not be required to withdraw from the meeting.

1 (i) Minutes of Previous Meetings

Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 14th May 2025 were reviewed. Áine Gallagher requested some minor amendments to highlight conditions attached to the Board's approval of the Fleadh Cheoil OBC.

The Board also asked for some details of a discussion of hybrid working arrangements to be revised and it was agreed that amended minutes would be circulated for the Board's approval (**ACTION:** JD).

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

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

It was also agreed that the Executive Leadership Team should review the Action Points Summary to add target completion dates and provide more detailed updates where actions are recorded as 'ongoing' (**ACTION:** ELT).

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Tourism NI Industry Stakeholder Survey

Tourism NI's Director of Strategic Development presented the findings of a recent survey, seeking stakeholders' views of Tourism NI's performance and areas for improvement that might be addressed in delivery of the new Corporate Plan. The survey highlighted a belief that Tourism NI performs well in its strategic leadership role, is effective in promotion of Northern Ireland and generally engages well with the industry. The findings also indicated that the industry felt a need for greater clarity on the capital support programmes available and an opportunity for Tourism NI to further enhance its understanding of the needs of tourism businesses and the issues that they face. The Board discussed the potential merits of establishing a user panel and was advised that to address the issues in relation to awareness and understanding, the Executive Team was discussing options for a co-ordinated approach to continue to drive stakeholder satisfaction. It is hoped that proposals will be brought to the Board for consideration in Quarter 4. It was also stressed that in view of the challenging budgetary outlook, the lack of capital resource in the coming year could present an issue.

The Board also noted comments in relation to developing a portfolio of homegrown events and suggested that as Tourism NI had stepped back from that activity in recent years, there was a need to revisit the position.

Members agreed that conducting the survey had been a worthwhile exercise and noting proposals to conduct further such surveys on a biannual basis the Board suggested that in the first instance it might be better to carry them out on an annual basis, with as wide a sample as possible.

2 (ii) Provision of Visitor Accommodation and Transfer of Invest NI Functions

The Board noted that Aileen Martin, Ciaran O'Neill and Colin Johnston had declared an interest in relation to this item but as previously agreed, they were not required to withdraw from the meeting since no decision was being taken. The Board received an update on work to prepare for the transfer of Invest NI's tourism functions to Tourism NI, which is due to take place from April 2026. The most significant such function was noted to be powers to provide financial assistance towards the development of visitor accommodation. The Board was advised that an external assessment had been carried out to explore the case for public sector intervention and whether there are other forms of support or services which should be put in place by Tourism NI. In parallel, consideration was being given to the operational handover from Invest NI, whilst DfE

works on developing new policy on visitor accommodation. A further issue requiring consideration is a continuing moratorium on financial support for accommodation proposals within a ten-mile radius of Belfast.

The Board was advised that there would be a need both for staff and financial resource to properly fulfil the functions that transfer and a bid had been made to DfE for this purpose. It was stressed that the Department needs to communicate its vision for effective use of the new functions and give assurance that Tourism NI has appropriate legislative cover to perform its new obligations in full. Members commented that DfE must have a clear understanding of the nuances involved in achieving this. The Board was advised that it is hoped to effect the transfer through amended regulations rather than changes to primary legislation.

Members also discussed the likely split between capital support to develop accommodation and experiences, and the need for assurance that levels of support on offer will be compliant with the accepted subsidy control limits. Also discussed was the need to manage the likely influx of applications once a new support scheme is announced and to manage the expectations of clients in terms of the support on offer. In respect of resource to support the transfer of functions, the Board suggested that it would be useful for Tourism NI to have a conversation with the Minister's adviser prior to completion of the Comprehensive Spending Review process. Members also remarked on the need for both Tourism NI and the Department to better understand the impact of transferring functions on those businesses currently receiving support from Invest NI but which will be unable to access such supports in the future. It was suggested that John Hood and Ciaran O'Neill could usefully offer advice on these issues.

2 (iii) Visit Derry

The following minute is exempt from disclosure under Section 36 (2) b-c of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

3. Reports

3 (i) Chairman's Report

The Chairman gave a verbal report on her engagements in the period since the last Board Meeting. She advised that together with the interim Chief Executive, she had undertaken a tour of new golf facilities at Galgorm Resort.

Reflecting on the recent 153rd Open Championship at Portrush the Chairman remarked that it had been a huge success and warmly commended all Tourism NI staff and partner organisations involved in delivering the event, generating a huge amount of civic pride in addition to very positive international coverage.

The Chairman advised that she had been invited by the ICC to speak at the forthcoming launch of its five-year strategy.

3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

The Board noted the content of a report from the interim Chief Executive on emerging and ongoing issues and engagement activity since the last Board Meeting. Updates were given as follows:

Spending Review – the Board received a report on discussions with the Department regarding the NI Executive's Spending Review and associated exercises on resource and capital budgets. It was noted that this will be an iterative process and Tourism NI is undertaking work with Oxford Economics to collate evidence in support of its funding bids.

City and Region Growth Deals – The Chairman suggested that it would be useful for the Board to receive a comprehensive update on the current status of City and Region Growth Deals projects (**ACTION: DR**). It was felt that it would be useful to compare progress with the original delivery dates and to understand to what degree slippage may have occurred, the likely outcomes and

deliverables such as percentages of visitors expected from GB / ROI / USA.

As part of these discussions, the Chairman outlined the importance of Board agendas to focus on matters requiring decisions from the Board.

The Board was advised that a presentation is due to be given at a forthcoming DfE Oversight & Liaison meeting on strategic focus and the value / impact of tourism. The Board suggested that it would be useful to invite Paul Grocott to attend a future Board Meeting (**ACTION:** AK). The Chairman and Board also extended condolences to the DfE Permanent Secretary following the passing of his father.

Electronic Travel Authorisations - The Chief Executive also reported on a recent meeting with the UK Minister for Migration to discuss the impact on tourism of the introduction of ETAs. The Board stressed the need for a strong evidence base to support any arguments, noting that it understood that a major local attraction had been performing strongly despite expressing concern about the effect that ETAs might have on coach tours. The Chief Executive agreed to discuss the matter in a forthcoming meeting with the centre's management. The Board was advised that Tourism NI was also carrying out a survey of businesses with support from NITA and using its channels to monitor any impact of the new visa requirement on demand.

The Board suggested that it would be useful to invite the Incoming Tour Operators' Association to give a deep dive presentation once this survey is complete and that it would be useful also to hear from European tour operators (**ACTION:** AK). The Board acknowledged that attitudinal surveys were an important source of intelligence but added that further hard data is necessary to gain a true picture. Noting that no data is yet available on ETA applications, the Board suggested a comparison of out-of-state visitor numbers with visa applications to help assess the initial impact, stressing also that it may take some time for the full impact to be apparent. Additionally, it was noted that there is no onus on accommodation providers to verify the ETA status of visitors.

The 153rd Open Championship – The Chief Executive gave a report on the initial outputs of the event, which had proved to be extremely successful, welcoming 278,000 participants and visitors over the course of the week. It was noted that international media coverage had not simply featured the golf tournament itself but included very prominent and positive destination messaging thanks to Tourism NI's marketing teams close working with the broadcasters involved. A preliminary assessment by the R&A of the full impact of the event including its media / PR value is expected to be available by the end of August. The Board noted that feedback from the industry had been extremely positive, especially in relation to the networking opportunities provided by the event. Commenting on the Tourism NI/NI hosting programme for the week, it was suggested that it would be useful in the future to have a TNI or DfE speaker present to open each day of the programme. Tourism NI teams are compiling learnings from the event and evaluating the impact of their activity. Further reviews will be completed in twelve months and three years' time, to give a fuller picture of the event's legacy and long-term impact. It is expected that a full report will be given at the November Board Meeting (**ACTION:** AK).

Marketing – The Board noted that a number of new appointments had been made to the Marketing team. Members discussed summer visitor performance – this had been good so far and forward bookings also appear to be positive. The Board sounded a note of caution about using the performance of summer 2024 as the only evidence of a need for marketing resource, given the poor weather over that period. Also discussed was the need for an evaluation of industry

performance across the whole of Northern Ireland during the Open, to get a sense of how regions performed and which activity worked particularly well.

Quality & Standards – An update was given on progress with a project to migrate the Q&S team's digital infrastructure from the old TIDI system to Microsoft Dynamics. An enhanced governance and delivery mechanism had been put in place and the work was being redefined in order to focus on delivery of the essential elements. A revised business case for the project would be brought to the Finance & Casework Committee for consideration, the decisions of which will allow the revised outcomes of the project to be agreed.

The Board received updates on a number of senior staff absences. It was noted that these underlined the impact that such absences can have on a relatively small organisation such as Tourism NI.

The Board returned to the subject of the Open to discuss concurrent events taking place in Portrush over the same period as the tournament. It was noted that the events had generally taken place without major disruption and lessons learned would be gathered as part of the debrief process, including feedback from the R&A in relation to the 153rd Open and potential future Open events. Input from Board members on lessons learned was welcomed and should be directed to the major events team.

3 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports

The Board received a report from the Chair of the Finance & Casework Committee on a meeting to review an updated Outline Business Case for hosting the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Belfast. The Board noted the scale of the Fleadh currently taking place in Wexford, which had reportedly attracted 750,000 visitors. On the basis of the additional information supplied the Committee was content to recommend that the OBC now proceeded to DfE for consideration and the Board endorsed this recommendation.

The Committee had also undertaken its first annual self-assessment. This was largely felt to have been positive but Members commented that the questionnaire supplied was overly complex and tailored more towards a review of the full Board. Future surveys would require further refinement to be more relevant to the Committee's work. The Committee would discuss the details further at its meeting due to take place later that afternoon before finalising its report. It was noted that the Marketing Committee and the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee would also undertake their own self-assessments soon – Members were asked to provide feedback on the process to the Director of Corporate Services and his team.

The Board also discussed the timing of Quarter I performance updates, which are due to be presented at the September Board Meeting.

4. Items for Noting

4 (i) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the latest report on visitor trends.

4 (ii) Draft Agenda for September Board Meeting

The Board noted the draft agenda for its next meeting.

5. Any Other Business

Members also were advised of the substance of correspondence received by Tourism NI in relation to the support and promotion of a number of festivals / events.

The Board was also advised of the expected timescale for completing work on integrating Northern Ireland experiences into the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand. A related programme of industry engagement is hoped to later this quarter.

It was noted that a presentation on golf tourism is to be given at a forthcoming meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council. A presentation on the Golf Strategic Framework is to be given at the November Board Meeting.

Karly Greene reported on proceedings at a meeting of the Visit Britain Board. These included a governance review of its Board and proposals to share learning on areas of common interest to the UK regional tourism authorities, including matters such as tourism levies and the need for a common voice in relation to tourism's economic impact and value. Greater involvement of the regions in VB Board meetings was also discussed and it was noted that Northern Ireland tourism is only represented by an observer. Noting that the way forward is to be agreed at September's meeting of the VB Board, Members agreed in principle that it would be useful for Tourism NI to have a greater measure of advocacy but there was a need to understand the resource needs that might be required for the purpose of closer collaboration.

The Board also noted that in cases where senior staff due to present or sponsor papers to the Board are absent, the associated papers should list their deputies as sponsoring the papers.

The Chairman gave details of a number of forthcoming speaking engagements including the launch of a new strategy for Belfast City Airport – it was agreed that the messaging should emphasise the importance of air connectivity from Great Britain to realising strategic goals.

As there was no further business the Chairman thanked Members and drew the meeting to a close to permit the Board to hold a short closed session.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Thursday 18 September 2025 at Tourism NI Headquarters, Linum Chambers.