

Board Meeting 29 December 2020

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND NOTE OF EXTRAORDINARY BOARD MEETING HELD REMOTELY BY VIDEO CONFERENCING ON TUESDAY 29 DECEMBER 2020

Participating:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Mr John West
- Ms Patricia Corbett
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Colin Neill
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Terry McCartney
- Ms Denise McAnena, Boardroom Apprentice
- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director Business Support and Events
- Ms Lesley McKeown, Director of Finance
- Ms Dorothy Erskine, Interim Director
- Ms Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Interim Director
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

1. Introduction

The Chairman welcomed participants and thanked them for taking the time to join the meeting called at short notice over the holiday period. He explained that it had been felt necessary to seek the Board's views on a number of urgent issues that emerged following the last Board Meeting.

Members were advised that following the Board Meeting the Chairman and Chief Executive held a lengthy debrief meeting with DfE officials, at which Tourism NI was advised of the Department's proposed approach to funding for major events. This approach was subsequently set out in correspondence from the Permanent Secretary and proposed two categories for major events. Category One events represent those for which Tourism NI or the Department itself do not have the capacity to fund by themselves, and which would require approval of support by the Northern Ireland Executive. Category Two events are those for which Tourism NI would have to find support in the first instance from within its own budgets, with bids to the Department for additional in-year resource where necessary. It was emphasised that there could be no guarantee that additional resource would be forthcoming.

Part of the following section is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 – Commercial Interests of the Freedom of Information Act 2000

[REDACTED]

The Board also received an update on the Experience Development programme, indicating that a number of projects due for completion by the year end had encountered issues meaning that they cannot proceed within the expected timeframes. As a result it was proposed to release another £500k of capital expenditure to the Department, on the understanding that this will be provided to Tourism NI in next year's budget allocation. Additionally, further newly introduced Covid restrictions meant that a number of pilot projects to test the reopening of larger venues are unlikely to be deliverable before 31 March 2021. As a result a sum of £250k which was identified as "at risk" under the events budget is unlikely to be spent as planned.

A number of options were outlined for how the £250k might be used. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The other options were to surrender it to the Department or retaining it within Tourism NI resources for use elsewhere. A decision was required urgently for an immediate response to the Department.

More broadly the Board was advised that decisions on support for events would have to be made in the context of further pressure on budgets, with the Department having sought scenario planning from Tourism NI for both a 4% and 8% reduction in budgets.

Members suggested that there was a need to consider tourism priorities as a whole and to evaluate whether the continued focus on events was appropriate in current circumstances, at the expense of other core objectives. It was also stressed that the Board had previously taken a policy decision to set an upper limit on the amount of support provided to any event within a single year. Members also discussed whether events could be expected to fulfil their tourism objectives given the prospect of continuing restrictions for some time to come. It was noted that evaluation of the previous events strategy identified that it had delivered significant benefits for Northern Ireland.

The Board was advised that retaining the £250k presented a risk that Tourism NI would not fulfil its obligation to stay within a 1% tolerance level on underspend, should restrictions prevent expenditure. It was observed that this is a problem faced by many branches of government in the current circumstances.

Considering the available options the Board supported the proposal that Tourism NI should retain the £250k to further consider how this can best be used [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Members also recommended that Tourism NI should review the current portfolio of events based on the expected return on investment, to assess if and how they should be supported. The Board also

stressed that as outlined in the Permanent Secretary's letter, the Department itself should be looking for resource within its budgets to support events where necessary.

The Board also supported the proposal to surrender £500k against the Experience Development Programme projects that had experienced delays, in the expectation that Tourism NI will receive an adequate capital budget in the next financial year to allow for the completion of these projects.

The Board asked to be kept updated on progress with these issues.

The impact of Brexit on Tourism NI and the NI tourism sector was discussed and it was noted that given the fact that the Common Travel Area remains in place the impact for the majority of visitors in the short term was minimal. There would be however a loss of substantial ERDF funding which would impact the Department's resources and potentially indirectly impact the Tourism NI budget next year. The Board agreed it would be useful to have a briefing paper on the issues as part of a future agenda (**ACTION:** JMcG).

The Chairman thanked participants again for joining the meeting during the holiday period, and brought the meeting to a close.