

Board Meeting 14 May 2025

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST
ON WEDNESDAY 14 MAY 2025**

Participating:

- Ms Ellvena Graham OBE (Chairman)
- Ms Aileen Martin
- Ms Karly Greene
- Mr Colin Johnston
- Mr John Hood
- Ms Linda MacHugh

In attendance:

- Ms Aine Kearney, Interim Chief Executive
- Ms Siobhan McGuigan, Head of Events
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Services
- Mr Chris Newell, Head of Management Accounting
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

- Ms Aine Gallagher
- Mr Ciaran O'Neill
- Mr Michael Counahan
- Mr John McGrillen
- Mr John West

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed those present. 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 Meetings

Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 20th March 2025 and an extraordinary meeting of the Board held by remote call on 15th April were approved as accurate records.

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

The Board reviewed the status of action points from previous meetings. It was also noted that one action recorded in the minutes of the Board on 20th March had been omitted from the tracker and is to be added. Members were advised that IT staff would be on hand following the meeting to support those still requiring a tourismni.com email address.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Tourism Events – Future Vision

The following is exempt from disclosure under Section 36 (“Prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs”) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

2 (ii) Sustainability Action Plan

The Director of Strategic Development presented the Board with an update on progress with the Sustainability Action Plan approved by the Board in August 2024. The primary focus of the Plan had been on actions within Tourism NI's control, such as reducing the carbon footprint of the staff commute. In parallel with this a draft Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Framework had been developed for Tourism NI and a draft was presented for approval. Members suggested that the ESG Framework should include further detail on how Tourism NI will improve inclusivity and sustainability and it was agreed that the document would be updated to draw this detail out more clearly (**ACTION**: DR).

Tourism NI had also undertaken activity to put in place workplace accreditation including the IIP Gold standard and is currently seeking accreditation as a Wellbeing Workplace. Emphasis was again placed on constraints on capital budget and it was suggested that the Comprehensive Spending Review might present new opportunities. The need was again emphasised for Tourism NI's powers to be updated through a review of the Tourism (NI) Order. The Board also recommended that the ESG should include further detail on the meaning and benefits for Tourism NI of community engagement and the dividend that tourism can bring to communities.

The Board was content to approve the ESG subject to updates on existing and enhanced activity around social impact, including a focus on inclusivity in Tourism NI's industry development and

marketing activity. Also stressed was the need for a measure of community engagement and sentiment. **(ACTION: DR)**.

2 (iii) Stakeholder Engagement Policy

At its last meeting the Board asked the Executive Leadership Team to develop a policy governing the Board's programme of industry engagement, in line with a recommendation arising from the recent Internal Audit Service review of procurement and contract management. A draft of the policy was presented for consideration and IAS had recommended that the Department's approval should also be sought. The Board commented that in line with the Minister's stated objective of achieving greater regional spread, there was an obligation on the Board's part to meet and engage with the industry right across Northern Ireland. Additionally, Members considered that this represented an important aspect of the Board's learning and development, offering them a deeper understanding of the industry. The Board suggested that the policy should be expanded around Regional Growth, include engagement with other government departments, arms-length bodies and Hospitality Ulster, insight into challenges such as Translink's night buses and include learning opportunities. **(ACTION: AD)**

Members discussed how the goals of the policy could best be quantified and the activity's value underlined. It was noted that the Board routinely seeks feedback from the clients with whom it engages, to ensure that the activity is worthwhile and to identify matters requiring to be followed up. The Board agreed that the draft policy represented a good step forward and approved it, subject to endorsement by the Department.

2 (iv) Quality & Standards System Migration Update

The Director of Strategic Development and Director of Corporate Services provided the Board with an update on work to streamline and progress the project. A plan had been developed and approved to address the issue of a lack of IT specialist skills and a procurement exercise had taken place. A local company had been appointed. Also built into this appointment was a short readiness review to give independent assurance that EY's plan is deliverable in terms of approach, timeline and budget. The Board agreed that the update presented a more positive picture and continuing to stress the need for a swift resolution, noted that the plan would be independently evaluated.

The Head of Management Accounting joined the meeting for the next item.

2 (v) 2025-26 Budget Allocation

Following the presentation of the 2025-26 Operating Plan and the topline budget at the last meeting, some members had requested a breakdown of the budget allocation in more granular detail. A paper was presented setting out the allocation.

Discussing forecasts, the Board queried the details of a projected impact related to the reduction of the campaign budget and asked the Director of Corporate Services to review this and provide clarification **(ACTION: AD)**.

Members also raised anecdotal evidence from the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation that suggested the forward picture for the coming months is more severe than simply a softening of the market. It was noted that both the Corporate Plan for 2025-28 and the Operating Plan 2025-26 are with the Minister for approval.

3. Quarter IV 2024-25 Performance Reports

3 (i) Operating Plan 2024-25 Performance Monitoring

The Board noted a report setting out the status of Operating Plan objectives at the conclusion of the business cycle. Observing that objectives which remained partially or wholly incomplete were largely dependent on actions by other agencies, Members commented that this underlined the need for future Operating Plans to define objectives that are entirely within Tourism NI's ability to control. The Board also commented that it was somewhat disappointing that the objective on compliance with financial and governance controls was designated incomplete due to a single audit report giving a limited opinion.

3 (ii) Risk Management

The Board noted the final position in relation to the corporate risk register for 2024-25. Noting the proposal to include a new risk relating to delivery of the digital transformation plan, the Board commented that this was too specific and should be expanded to encompass Tourism NI's capacity to deliver IT projects (**ACTION: AD**).

Members also discussed the need to urgently progress work to review and update the Tourism (NI) Order so that Tourism NI has the necessary legislative powers to fulfil all its functions. The Board asked for an update on the work to be provided as an item at future meetings in the Chief Executive's Report (**ACTION: AK**).

An update was given on work to develop a new Risk Register aligned to the new Corporate and Operating Plans. It was proposed to hold a further workshop with the Board in the early autumn to refine and finalise the Register with the new Corporate Governance and Risk Manager now appointed. The Board proposed that this meeting could be held online and suggested the duration should be limited to two hours (**ACTION: AD**).

3 (iii) Finance

The Board was presented with a report on the final outturn position with Tourism NI's budget spend for 2024-25. This was noted to be comfortably within the 1% tolerance. The Finance and Casework Committee had reviewed the report in detail at its recent meeting and the Committee's Chair advised that Members were content that this represented a very positive outcome. The Board noted that the Mourne Gateway City Deal project will not proceed in the anticipated form. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is considering options for how the City Deal allocation of £30m to the project may now be used, in conjunction with the Executive Board of the Belfast Region City Deal.

3 (iv) People and Organisational Development

The Board noted a report on HR and staff development issues for the final quarter of 2024-25 and was pleased to see that absences were significantly lower in this period.

4. Reports

4 (i) Chairman's Report

The Board noted the Chairman's report on engagements she had undertaken in the period since the last Board Meeting. The Chairman gave reports on her participation in a number of recent key engagements including the opening of Dunluce Lodge, a breakfast meeting with the US Consul General and the Belfast leg of the Epic Journey to the Open.

4 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

The interim Chief Executive provided a brief report covering key stakeholder engagement activity and giving an update on the City & Region Growth Deals, focused on the Mournes Gateway project. A report was also given on continuing preparations for the Open Championship at Royal Portrush, including the arrangements for the Board's participation in hosting stakeholders at the tournament.

Discussing a number of recent new accommodation developments, the Board noted that recruitment of skilled staff was presenting challenges for some businesses. Members commented that this was particularly important in light of the prices that some properties are charging for accommodation around the Open and stressed the need for the industry to take a long-term view on this. The Board suggested that it would be useful to get some feedback on the visitor experience at newer properties and engagement with owners to get a sense of their forward plans (**ACTION**: DR / NW).

The Board was also advised of the prospect of Northern Ireland being involved in hosting the Women's Football World Cup in 2035 and agreed that such opportunities underlined the need to have a long-term events vision in place. Updates were also given on progress with tenders for procurement of marketing and advertising services and on alignment with the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand. Discussing the Shared Island Programme, the Board was positive about the opportunities that this would present but stressed the need for local authorities to engage in meaningful collaboration to derive collective benefits. Members also requested briefing to support a forthcoming meeting with the Board of Failte Ireland (**ACTION**: AK).

4 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports

Finance & Casework Committee - The Chair of the Finance and Casework Committee reported on its meeting held on 6th May. As reported earlier in the meeting, the Committee had reviewed in detail the 2024-25 budget outturn at the end of Quarter IV. As part of the review of Tourism NI's corporate policies, the Committee had also reviewed a revised Grievance Policy, a revised Mobile Devices Policy and a new draft policy on Tourism NI's use of Generative Artificial Intelligence. The Committee had been content to recommend approval of the Mobile Devices and Grievance policies, subject to a number of minor amendments.

In the case of the Generative AI policy the Committee considered that more clarity and context was required. Noting that guidance for Tourism NI staff on the use of the technology was still in development, the Committee also recommended that the policy should not be approved until that guidance had been finalised and was implemented. The Board stressed that the policy should align with that adopted by the mainstream NI Civil Service and it was confirmed that this was the intended approach. Members also commented that, given the fast-evolving nature of the technology, there would be a need to keep the policy and guidance under regular review.

The Board was content to approve the Mobile Devices and Grievance policies subject to the amendments recommended by the Committee. The Chairman commented that approval should only be withheld in a case where a policy may require substantive changes.

The Committee had also discussed arrangements for its annual review of performance. A template for self-assessment used by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee had been circulated for consideration and the general view of members was that this was too detailed. Each Committee is also required to present an annual report to the Board – the ARAC already does this. The Board asked the interim CEO to look into the format for reviews and to circulate the annual report template to the other Committees for adaptation (**ACTION: AK/AD**).

Audit & Risk Assurance Committee – In the absence of the Committee’s Chair, John Hood reported on the ARAC meeting held on 6th May. A written report on the meeting was taken as read. The Committee had reviewed a draft Audit Plan for 2025-26 and recommended this to the Board for approval. The Committee had also reviewed corporate policies on ICT Security, Privacy & Data Protection, Learning & Development and Complaints. These were all recommended for approval, subject to a minor amendment to the Complaints Policy. The Board approved these policies and the draft Audit Plan. It was noted that the Committee had also recommended substantial revisions to a new draft Fraud Policy, which had therefore not been presented for the Board’s approval.

5. Items for Noting

5 (i) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the latest report on visitor trends.

5 (ii) Draft Agenda for June Board Meeting

The Board noted the draft agenda for its next meeting, scheduled for 26 June. Noting that the DfE Permanent Secretary is due to attend the meeting, the Board suggested that the regular ‘deep dive’ slot should be allocated to a general discussion with him. Members suggested that this should touch on topics such as tourism events, marketing budgets, revision of the Tourism Order and a perspective on where tourism fits within the Department’s strategic priorities, related to the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review (**ACTION: AK**). It was suggested that the Department for Communities, Invest NI and the National Lottery Heritage Fund should also be considered for future deep dives.

6. Any Other Business

Members raised the work of the NI Bureau in Washington and commented that its website appeared to require some updating as it still referenced the 2019 Open Championship as a coming event.

Karly Greene reported on a Visit Britain Board review and advised that she is due to attend its Nations Meeting on 17 June and invited Members to suggest topics that might be raised at this. The Board commented that it would be useful to have a better understanding of the key markets that VB operates within. It was also suggested that the Board's forthcoming learning journey to meet with VisitScotland might inform this.

The Chairman advised that she is due to attend the forthcoming launch of Visit Belfast's Action Plan. As there was no other business she thanked Members and brought the meeting to a close.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Thursday 26 June 2025 at Tourism NI Headquarters, Linum Chambers.