

Board Meeting 20 March 2025

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING HELD AT MOSSLEY MILL CIVIC CENTRE, NEWTOWNABBEY ON THURSDAY 20 MARCH 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:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Events
- Ms Siobhan McGuigan, Head of Events
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development (item 2 (i))
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Services
- Mrs Dorothy Erskine, Head of Research and Insights
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

- 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 Meeting

Minutes of the previous Board Meeting held on 20th February 2025 were approved as an accurate record.

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

The Board reviewed the status of action points from previous meetings and asked the Executive Team to identify target completion dates for ongoing actions. It was also noted that the Board had been due to receive an update on the Sustainability Action Plan but this had been deferred.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Tourism NI Draft Corporate Plan 2025-28

The Board was presented with a draft Tourism NI Corporate Plan for 2025-28. This had been developed to align with the economic and tourism priorities identified by the Minister and further refined to incorporate input provided by the Board at its strategic awayday in January. The Board discussed how the Plan's narrative should reflect the very challenging public sector budgetary environment and its impact on delivery of the Plan's objectives. Members felt that messaging should emphasise what Tourism NI can do, rather than what it is constrained from doing by limited resources. They also noted that this underlined a need to reduce duplication of effort and ensure better partnership working between the relevant agencies.

Members suggested some refinements to the presentation of key objectives and commented that references to risk management appeared to relate to compliance activity and should focus more upon effectively identifying and mitigating risk. The Board suggested additional amendments to the narrative around organisational values and more generally to the formatting of the document.

Discussion turned to figures on daily visitor spend identified within the Plan and it was noted that these are based on NISRA statistics. It was also observed that rates of spend fluctuate, depending on whether travellers are pure holiday visitors or visiting friends and relatives. The Chief Executive advised that for this reason, marketing activity is focused primarily upon attracting visitors from the ROI who can be expected to spend more. The Board was also advised that the Central Statistics Office would be publishing new statistics for the Island of Ireland that same day. The Board was also advised that the target of increasing Northern Ireland's proportion of overnight expenditure by Irish residents on the Island of Ireland to 10% was a sufficiently challenging target.

Rounding off the discussion the Board was content that its input had been reflected in the revised draft and agreed that the Corporate Plan could now be shared with the Department and proceed to public consultation.

2 (ii) Tourism NI Draft Operating Plan 2025-26

In addition to the draft Corporate Plan, the Board was presented with a draft Operating Plan for 2025-26.

Commenting on the key performance indicators Members asked if the Plan should set an overarching goal, for example moving the dial on regional distribution. The Board was advised that in considering the best approach to this, the Executive Leadership Team had agreed it was more realistic to focus on regional growth, rather than rebalancing spend.

The Board suggested that the ELT should look at setting four or five high level objectives and associated metrics that measure the impact of activity on regional balance and productivity (**ACTION: AD**).

The Board also discussed the need to learn from previous plans by only setting objectives that are within Tourism NI's control. Members suggested defining goals for the delivery of City & Growth Deals in a way that means their fulfilment is not dependent upon action by other bodies.

Proposals were discussed for a Visitor Experience Grading Scheme but the general view was that the case for such a scheme was not sufficiently strong to proceed. Members also suggested there was a need to deploy more staff in the rollout of the new Quality & Standards CRM system. It was noted that there will also be a resource requirement to take on the functions due to transfer to Tourism NI from Invest NI later this year.

The Board discussed productivity objectives, and it was noted that DfE's view is that these should include business events. Members also suggested that references to improving road infrastructure were outside Tourism NI's remit and should be amended to 'route infrastructure'.

Members also considered budget pressures. Noting the requirement in the current year to meet salary increases and rising National Insurance contributions, it was suggested that if there is activity that Tourism NI cannot undertake due to reduced resources, consideration should be given to headcount as a matter of principle. It was noted that future recruitment will be considered in this context, including consideration of vacancies which occur and the redeployment of staff where necessary. The Board also discussed how to maximise the return on investment received from supporting the activity of Visit Belfast and Tourism Ireland.

The Board approved the Plan but also agreed that a paper should be prepared for the next Board Meeting setting out in a more granular level of detail the budget allocation against the Operating Plan (**ACTION: AD**).

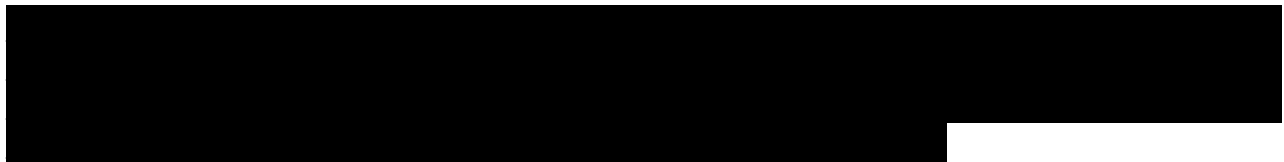
2 (iii) Tourism NI Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23

The draft Annual Report and Accounts were presented and were noted to give a qualified audit opinion. The Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee advised that the Committee had been fully briefed on the rationale for this and was content with the explanations provided. It was noted that the Board's approval of the accounts was being sought subject to completion of the NIAO technical work and the Comptroller & Auditor General's review. While NIAO's technical team had made one minor change to the Audit Certificate, the C&AG review was not yet complete. The NIAO was content however to share the draft RTTCWG with the Board to permit approval of the financial statements.

The Board approved the 2022-23 annual report subject to no significant change arising from completion of the C&AG review and also was advised of the status of the audit of the 2023-24 annual report and accounts. Members proposed that final approval of both reports should be considered side-by-side (**ACTION: AD**).

2 (iv) The 153rd Open Championship Update

The following is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 (“Commercial Interests”) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.



2 (v) Managed Service Framework

The Board was presented with a request to approve a business case to procure a new Managed Service Framework, once the current arrangement expires in July 2025. The Framework would provide Tourism NI with a mechanism to deliver a range of targeted industry development activity and business support. Members were advised that while such a business case would more usually be presented to the Finance & Casework Committee for approval, timing issues meant that the Board’s approval was being sought. It was confirmed that Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) is content with the approach being adopted and the Board was advised that Internal Audit Service had been asked to add the procurement to its audit plan for a future review. Members noted the expected maximum value of the project over a five year period and were advised that any changes to this will come back to the Board for approval.

The Board was content to approve the business case.

2 (vi) Quality & Standards System Migration Update

At its previous meeting the Board had requested that a report be brought back on the migration of the Q&S system from TIDI to Microsoft Dynamics. A report was presented setting out the context of the project, the timelines and delivery of the project to date, the key issues arising and proposals to resolve these.

The Board’s firm view was that all discretionary aspects of the project should be set aside and the sole focus at this time should be to deliver those essential elements required to permit Tourism NI to fulfil its statutory functions. Having noted the update, the Board endorsed the proposed next steps, including the engagement of a solutions architect and ‘scrum manager’ to oversee

completion of the project. It was noted that this would require additional resource of around £180k for which a business case will be required.

The Board again stressed the need to bring the project to a conclusion as soon as possible and to maintain focus on delivering the essential core element of the project within a realistic timeframe. It was agreed that a further update should be brought back to the Board to include key milestones and a completion date for its delivery (**ACTION:** DR / AD).

The order of the following reports was altered.

3. Reports

3 (i) Sub- Committee Updates

Finance and Casework Committee – while the Committee had not held a full meeting in the period since the last Board Meeting, its Chair advised that the Committee had granted approval by correspondence to a number of events seeking support through the International Tourism Events Fund. The Committee had requested some additional information to better understand the process adopted by the scoring panel and had met immediately prior to the Board Meeting for that purpose.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee – the ARAC Chair reported on the Committee's most recent meeting, held on 3 March. A key discussion item was a draft Internal Audit Service report on its review of Tourism NI's procurement and contract management processes. The report had given a limited assurance and made a number of recommendations, which were all accepted by management. The Committee had asked the management team to provide the Board with a short report setting out the context in which issues had arisen and highlighting improvements already made in processes and practice. The Committee had underlined to management the need for an Action Plan with realistic and achievable targets to address the recommendations in the IAS report and had requested a paper for its next meeting. Referring back to the earlier discussion of the Quality & Standards IT project the Board also stressed the need for robust oversight arrangements when procuring major projects of that nature.

Another issue highlighted by the report was the need for a policy setting out parameters for the Board's programme of engagement activity with local tourism stakeholders. While it was noted that a business case was in place for this purpose the Board agreed that it would be useful to have sight of this. The Executive Leadership Team were asked to bring a new draft Engagement Policy for approval at the next Board Meeting with input from the sub-committees if required. (**ACTION:** JMcG),

The Committee had also received an update on the status of the audit of the 2023-24 accounts. The Board was pleased to note that the Department had commended the spirit of co-operation shown by Tourism NI in supporting audit work.

The Committee had also asked for the Board to be provided with details of Direct Award Contracts and consultancy work procured by Tourism NI in the year to date, and members noted the papers on these.

3 (ii) Chairman's Report

Members noted the Chairman's report on activity representing Tourism NI in the period since the last Board meeting. She reported on her attendance at a welcome dinner for UK Inbound and commented that this had been part of a very positive visit and programme of activity by an influential group, creating potential for very valuable business. She commended the Tourism NI Business Solutions Team for its role in supporting the visit.

The Chairman also reported on her speech at a British-Irish Chamber event and her attendance at a dinner organised by Feargal McCormack of AAB, for the hospitality sector. Members also reflected on the previous evening's dinner discussion with stakeholders from the Antrim & Newtownabbey area, commenting that there had been a great deal of positivity and a clear spirit of co-operation between business owners that demonstrated the benefit to the area of partnership working.

3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

Members noted the content of the Chief Executive's report on current issues. He reported on his participation together with the Chairman at a JIGSA event at Queen's University, and on his attendance at MIPIIM in Cannes where he had delivered a joint presentation on hotel development and investment alongside a representative of the Whitbread Group.

A report was also given on a joint meeting with Translink representatives and Tourism Ireland's CEO. One of the topics of discussion had been a proposal for development of an all-island travel pass. The Board suggested that it would be useful to have a deep dive session soon with Translink and proposed that the session scheduled with DfI for the May Board Meeting could be substituted for this (**ACTION**: JMcG).

The Board was also advised that anecdotal evidence is now being received of the impact that the introduction of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETAs) is now having upon travel to Northern Ireland, with Titanic Belfast reporting significant levels of tour group cancellations. The Board commented that educating visitors, especially from Europe, on the required travel documentation would be important in the coming months. Members also stressed the need for further robust evidence about the impact that the ETA is having.

An update was also given with progress on the Shared Island initiative, with resource made available to support three separate cross-border tourism projects. It was noted that as the Department had indicated that Tourism NI does not have the necessary vires to administer the funds, this would most likely be done through the local councils.

The Board asked if there might be a requirement to mobilise a dedicated staff resource to support delivery of the Fleadh Cheol, as with the Open. It was noted that Belfast City Council is leading on this event and there has been very positive collaboration already.

4. Items for Noting

4 (i) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the latest report on visitor trends.

4 (ii) Draft Agenda for May Board Meeting

The Board noted the draft agenda for its next meeting, scheduled for 20 March.

5. Any Other Business

It was noted that the majority of Board Members now have @tourismni.com email addresses for conducting Board business with a few more still to be added. The Board asked for the IT team to be on hand at the next meeting in Headquarters to help complete the process (**ACTION**: AD).

The Board was also advised of the process and timescale for the appointment of a new Chief Executive Officer. A Board Member will be required to participate in the interview panel

As there were no further items of business the Chairman thanked participants and brought the meeting to a close.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Wednesday 14 May 2025 at Tourism NI Headquarters, Linum Chambers.