# Board Meeting 26 June 2025

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND**
**MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING**
**HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST**
**ON THURSDAY 26 JUNE 2025**

Participating:

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

In attendance:

- Ms Aine Kearney, Interim Chief Executive
- Ms Siobhan McGuigan, Head of Events
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development
- Ms Alison Leslie, Quality Assurance Manager
- Mr Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, DfE
- Ms Michelle Scott, Head of Economic Partnership and Delivery Division, DfE
- Mr John West, Strategic Adviser to the Board
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

- Mr John McGrillen

## 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 14th May 2025 were approved as an accurate record.

### 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) Visitor Experience Assurance Scheme

Tourism NI's Director of Strategic Development and Quality Assurance Manager joined the meeting to set out proposals for a revised assurance scheme for visitor experiences and attractions. The previous scheme was put on pause in March 2023 when a review of Tourism NI's legislative powers suggested that it did not have vires to operate such a scheme. The new proposals would represent a move away from grading to a broader assurance scheme, aligned to the tourism sector's evolving needs and which considers the whole visitor journey. The Board commented that the proposed scheme appeared to be of greater value to providers than consumers, who rely on platforms such as TripAdvisor to fulfil the same purpose. Whilst recognising the growth in the use of online review platforms, Members were advised that recent consumer sentiment research highlighted the value of an independent and objective assurance scheme.

The Board asked if there was a way to collate feedback from other online platforms and was advised that the Review Pro software package enables ratings and feedback to be monitored whilst discovernorthernireland.com can pull through TripAdvisor ratings. Members were advised Tourism NI will pick up any issues identified via review with experience providers, who also have access to advisers in return for their fee. It was emphasised however that Tourism NI's ability to influence change in the attraction's infrastructure and facilities may be limited, where such weaknesses have an adverse impact on the visitor's opinion on value for money. The revised scheme criteria will align more with the EAGS brand promise. Where there are more fundamental issues with the quality of the visitor experience, these may be able to be addressed through future support for investment by the operator.

The Board stressed the need to achieve full cost recovery and discussed the likely fee structure and the frequency of assessments. It was suggested that gathering market intelligence on the impact of increased fees would be useful. In response, it was confirmed that the fees for the new scheme will be set to achieve full cost recovery, with further analysis to be carried out on the specific fee structure as part of the operational establishment of the new scheme.

In conclusion, while it was felt that awarding a specific grading was unnecessary, the Board considered that a system of assurance would be welcome and of value to the industry and the wider destination. The Board highlighted the importance of ensuring that the new scheme was as simple as possible and approved the proposals in principle, subject to appropriate legislation being put in place by DfE and the scheme achieving full cost recovery. The Board also requested that an update be provided in due course (**ACTION**: **DR**).

## 2 (ii) Board Review of Effectiveness

Members were presented with a final update on the status of recommendations within a report on an external review of the Board's effectiveness completed by Deloitte in March 2024. All the recommendations had either been implemented in full or represented regular ongoing activity. The Board noted the content of the report and agreed that no further updates were required.

## 2 (iii) Six Month Review of Board Objectives

An update was given on the status of Board-specific objectives that Members had agreed at the Board meeting in November 2024, in line with a recommendation made in the review of effectiveness. The objectives had all been achieved except for one, relating to the identification and effective management of risk – this remained work in progress as a further workshop meeting to develop the new corporate risk register has yet to take place. The Board was advised that dates for the workshop had been proposed and would be considered later in the meeting. The Board noted the content of the report.

## 2 (iv) Hybrid Working Survey

The Head of People and Organisational Development presented the findings of a survey of Tourism NI staff in relation to hybrid working. It was noted that under the current arrangements staff are required to be present in the office for at least two days per week.

The discussion focussed on staff engagement, in particular how corporate culture can be maintained and how new staff are inducted and integrated into the organisation. It was pointed out that Tourism NI enjoys a very strong culture of staff engagement, with a number of 'all staff together days' arranged throughout the year to bring the organisation together as a cohesive whole. The Board was also advised that the current desk space available at Linum Chambers can no longer accommodate all staff at once.

The Board stressed that while hybrid working is now a generally accepted practice, it was important that it is not seen as an entitlement, that its use is supported by evidence that productivity is unaffected and that Tourism NI continues to fulfil all its obligations. The Board was advised however that the flexibility of hybrid working now represents an important factor for applicants in choosing workplaces. Members asked how adherence to the attendance requirement is monitored and were advised that this is done at manager level, as scrutiny of staff performance remains a matter for individual managers. The position within the wider NI Civil Service was set out. The Board acknowledged that there was a need to maintain flexibility and it was noted that the approach taken so far has generated goodwill and support from staff.

Members also discussed proposals by Tourism NI management to operate a non-serviced office on Fridays, giving staff access to the building while the reception desk is closed and calls are answered off-site. The Board remarked that while this was an operational matter and as such, did not require its approval, there was a need to understand how reception staff would be redeployed. It was also stressed that staff should not expect that the hybrid arrangements are permanent and there was a need for assurance that such measures do not create negative perceptions of the organisation.

Noting the content of the report the Board suggested that it would be useful to undertake a regular review of the hybrid working arrangements (**ACTION**: AD / LF).

## 3. Reports

### 3 (i) Chairman's Report

The Board noted the Chairman's report on engagements in the period since the last Board Meeting. Members reflected on the Board's recent learning journey to Scotland and discussed the different approaches to the development and promotion of tourism by the NI Executive and the Scottish Assembly, and their respective views of the sector's contribution to economic growth. The journey also helped to highlight the merits or drawbacks of a tourism tax or room tax, and whether the income generated from that could be targeted towards tourism specifically. The Board commented that the UK's high VAT rate has a bearing on whether such a tax is workable, given that VAT rates are more variable throughout Europe. Overall, the Board agreed that the visit had been very useful and worthwhile, and suggested undertaking a similar such journey next year (**ACTION**: AK / CEO).

The Board also discussed recent engagement with the Board of Failte Ireland, which was felt to reflect positively on continuing positive collaboration currently taking place between the two organisations. Members noted that domestic tourism in the ROI is down, driven by strong competition from European destinations for short break visitors, as well as value-for-money concerns. The Board also remarked that the level of investment in Failte Ireland by the ROI government continues to represent a challenge for tourism in Northern Ireland. In addition to tourism's impact on economic growth, the Board also observed that there is a social value to tourism and a holistic approach needs to be considered that reflects tourism's contribution to delivering other programme for government objectives. The Board felt that there would be opportunities to send strong messages on these less tangible benefits following the Open, noting that a business survey is also planned. Members commented that there is a need to measure the long-term impacts of major events, but also to consider how to better engage those people not interested in golf.

### 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. The Board's attention was drawn to messaging received from the Department of Finance setting out the current financial position across government. Members were advised that in light of this, some desk research was being conducted to evaluate Tourism NI's capacity within budgetary constraints to meet its strategic targets.

The Board was also advised of work to scope out potential new tourism projects in Northern Ireland that might be supported through the Shared Island Programme. It was stressed that people resources would be required to support delivery.

The Board also noted a report on continuing support provided by Tourism NI to DfE in terms of Ministerial correspondence, invitations, Assembly questions, briefing requests and other Departmental enquiries. Members were interested in exploring if there were new ways of working that could streamline the time taken to support these important but timely tasks.

An update was also given on work to migrate the Quality & Standards system from its former platform into Microsoft Dynamics. Good progress is being made and Tourism NI recently appointed a new Head of IT and Digital who will support the transition. It was agreed that a further update would be given at the September Board Meeting (**ACTION**: DR).

Members also received an update on the continuing preparations to host the Open at Royal Portrush. The update focused on key risk associated with the event and the measures being put in place to mitigate these.

The Board was also advised that Karly Greene had supplied some input to the Executive Leadership Team on identifying key outcomes and metrics of success that could be applied to the new Corporate and Operating Plans. It is hoped that these metrics could help to inform future bids for resource. Consideration is to be given to the suggestions by the Head of Strategy and Policy (**ACTION**: AD).

**3 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports**

Reports were given by the Chairs of the Board's sub-committees on their recent meetings:

*Marketing Committee* – The Committee met on 19th June and received an update on work to extend the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand into Northern Ireland and resources to support this. An industry toolkit is in development for this purpose.

The Committee also discussed the reductions in marketing budgets and shared with the Board a paper setting out the likely impacts on Tourism NI's ability to meet its targets and fulfil strategic priorities. The Committee recommended that a submission be made to DfE presenting the evidence and setting out a strong case for additional marketing resource. In this context, the Board also discussed promotion of the Fleadh Cheoil and stressed the need for all partners including Belfast City Council to collaborate in using marketing resources to best effect. It was noted that a marketing communications group will be convened to that end and responsibilities will be clearly defined.

As part of the ongoing policy review, the Committee also considered Tourism NI's policies on equality, diversity and inclusion; on leaving Tourism NI; and on unacceptable behaviour by customers. The Committee endorsed these policies and the Board was content to approve them.

There was also a discussion of how the industry is supported with marketing opportunities and of spend across local authority areas. The Committee also discussed plans for Tourism NI's summer marketing campaign, progress on developing a travel trade strategy and an annual performance review, as well as the impact of recent civil disorder including threats on social media directed at some tour operators. The Board also discussed how procurement activity might be expedited.

*Finance & Casework Committee* – A report was given on the Committee's meeting held on 30th May. Amongst the key discussion items was the Derry-Londonderry on the North Atlantic (DNA) project, including a presentation from Derry City & Strabane District Council representatives. The discussions centred on assumptions around staffing and on project lifecycle costs as well as the retail / café offering. In conclusion, the Committee was content to recommend that the project could proceed to the next stage of consideration. This endorsement was confirmed by the Board.

The Committee also received updates on the status of all City and Region Growth Deal projects at the end of Q4 of the 2024-25 reporting period, noting in particular that the Mournes Gateway project would not be proceeding in the proposed location in Newcastle.

**The following extract is exempt from disclosure under Section 35 ("Formulation of Government Policy" and Section 43 ("Commercial Interests") of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.**

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

## 4. Items for Noting

### 4 (i) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the latest report on visitor trends.

### 4 (ii) Draft Agenda for August Board Meeting

The Board noted the draft agenda for its next meeting.

## 5. Any Other Business

The Board discussed dates and options for a workshop to discuss the new draft corporate risk register. It was agreed that this should take place on 22 September from 2.00 – 4.00. The Board agreed that those Members unable to attend this meeting in person could join remotely.

Karly Greene advised that she would arrange to upload a report on the most recent Visit Britain board meeting for Members' information.

## 7. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Wednesday 13 August 2025 at Tourism NI Headquarters, Linum Chambers.