

## Board Meeting 7 June 2018

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND  
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING  
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST  
ON THURSDAY 7 JUNE 2018**

Present:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Mr Colin Neill
- Mr Michael McQuillan
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Terry McCartney

In Attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Jill McKee, Director of Finance
- Ms Naomi Waite, Director of Marketing
- Ms Rosemarie McHugh, Director of Product Development
- Ms Louise Kearney, Director of Organisational Development & HR
- Ms Katy Best, Belfast City Airport (Item 1 (ii))
- Mr Colin Mounstephen, Deloitte (Item 5 (i))
- Mr Michael Counahan, CHL Consulting (Item 5 (i))
- Mr Jim Daly, Corporate Communications

Apologies:

None

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1 (i) Introduction**

The Chairman welcomed those present and reminded attendees that minutes of the meeting would be published. He asked if anyone present wished to declare interests in respect of agenda items. Colin Neill advised that Tourism NI had sponsored Hospitality Ulster in running a number of industry workshops to raise awareness of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

## **1 (ii) VisitBritain Memorandum of Understanding**

The Board was joined by Katy Best, who continues to act as an observer at VisitBritain board meetings, for a report on progress against its Memorandum of Understanding with Tourism NI. From VisitBritain's side, implementation is overseen by an official familiar with Northern Ireland's visitor product. VisitBritain's new Chairman had taken an interest in key issues and was noted to be keen to ensure recognition of tourism's economic importance within the UK government's industrial strategy.

A number of key workstreams were detailed including promotion of the importance of hospitality skills, fostering closer working relationships between VisitBritain and Tourism NI on business tourism and commercial partnerships. The Board was also advised of work being carried out with visitors to establish what it is that excites and interests them – the things that people travel for - and matching this up with what Britain has to offer them, thereby aiding better conversion.

Significant investment had also been made in the development of a new digital platform with the aim of providing all tourism businesses with the potential to be bookable online. Whilst this was in the first instance funded under the Discover England Fund and being piloted in England there was the potential to roll this out across the devolved regions helping to address market failure. VisitBritain's advocacy role was discussed and arguments for regional dispersal were noted to have found a sympathetic audience in MPs representing specific areas. There was a discussion of the role that the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance should play in arguing the case for skills support.

The Board was also advised Katy Best had been working closely with Tourism NI's Chief Executive and Director of Marketing in her role as vice Chair of Tourism Ireland's GB Market Review. The Board thanked Katy for attending and she left the meeting.

## **1 (iii) Minutes of Last Meeting**

Minutes of the Board's meeting held on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> April at Belfast Metropolitan College were approved as an accurate record and signed.

## **1 (iv) Matters Arising from Previous Meeting**

An update was given on actions arising from the previous meeting with updates given as follows:

*Corporate Plan* – the Board was advised that the Head of the Civil Service had produced an NICS Work Programme for 2018/19 setting out the key areas of work for Northern Ireland government agencies in the coming year in the absence of a Programme for Government. Those objectives relevant to Tourism NI included in the Plan were Consultation on a draft Tourism Strategy; delivery of a new AR and VR Digital Capital Programme, tactical marketing campaigns in the ROI and domestic markets, and preparations for the delivery of the 148<sup>th</sup> Open Championship.

*Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)* – The Chief Executive reported that while a meeting continues to be sought between NILGA and Tourism NI's Strategic Partnerships Committee, the Board had agreed as part of its recent review of effectiveness to reconsider its existing sub-committee structures. A paper on this is to be brought to the August Board (**ACTION: JMCG**).

*PR Activity* – the Board noted that the £1bn visitor spend target remains to be achieved, but it was agreed that a review of 2017 performance figures should be shared with the Board (**ACTION: SB**)

*Events* – the Director of Business Support and Events was noted to be preparing a summary of successful applications which would be shared with the Board Members (except Geoff Wilson, who had previously declared an interest) (**ACTION: AK**).

The Board was advised that DfE officials were invited to attend PA Consulting's forthcoming presentation on corporate structures, but had suggested that this was a matter for the Board to consider and DfE would meet Tourism NI following completion of the report.

*Council Tourism Strategies* – it was agreed that where available, copies of local authority tourism strategies should be added to MinutePad, for Board Members' reference (**ACTION: JD**).

## **2. Governance**

### **2 (i) Finance Report**

The Director of Finance delivered a report on the budget position as at the end of April.

The Board was pleased to note that over half of the £6m remaining accrued at the end of the 2017/18 financial year had already been cleared.

A summary of budget allocations by business unit was presented to the Board for approval. Members asked if the budget would be profiled in the same way as in the previous year and were advised that work on this is being finalised. The Board discussed funds to activate the experience brand. The Chief Executive advised that while resource was available to conduct a launch in the current year, he wished to have a fuller discussion of the brand later in the meeting, in the context of risks that had been discussed by the Audit Committee.

Funding to support a number of other projects was discussed, including augmented and virtual reality proposals as part of the digital programme. Members asked if the work programme outlined by the Head of the Civil Service had omitted any key areas of work that Tourism NI wishes to undertake. The Chief Executive reported that whilst a small number of actions were identified the programme encompasses the main outward facing areas for delivery.

The Board also noted the proposed allocation against destination PR activity, supporting media visits and co-operative marketing.

The Board granted its approval of the budget allocation subject to a number of minor amendments.

## **3. Reports**

### **3 (i) Chairman's Report**

The Board noted the content of the Chairman's report on engagements since the last meeting. The Chairman drew Members' attention to a listing recording his attendance at a meeting with a

potential developer for the Sprucefield site. He clarified that although the meeting request had been directed to him via Tourism NI, it related to his chairmanship of the Maze-Long Kesh Development Corporation.

### **3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report**

The report was noted and issues highlighted as follows:

*National Trust* – The Chief Executive outlined concerns raised by the Trust regarding capacity issues at key visitor sites on the North Coast and suggesting a need for a forum to agree actions. Tourism NI had urged the Trust to engage with Cliffs of Moher on strategies to mitigate these issues, for example variable pricing and better use of other assets around Northern Ireland. Noting the potential impact on the visitor experience at these sites, the Board stressed the need for creative solutions to be found quickly.

*Invest NI* – discussions were continuing about how collaboration and information sharing between the two agencies could be improved. The Board suggested this should also be picked up in the regular debrief meeting with DfE.

*Maritime Heritage* – The Board discussed better use of assets within Titanic Quarter to create a more joined up experience. Members were advised that Tourism NI's Experience Development Manager had undertaken a learning journey focused on Copenhagen's maritime heritage product, with many useful learnings relevant both to Belfast and in the development of the maritime museum proposal in Derry-Londonderry.

*City Deals* – Tourism NI had provided strategic advice as to how the tourism element of the Belfast City Deal could be framed. The Chief Executive pointed out that it was important that this was seen as a coherent integrated bid as opposed to a collection of disparate capital projects. Some useful work had been done with the island of Ireland's three largest tour operators to test the market demand for the capital projects put forward. It was suggested the projects identified might not be those best placed to attract "Out of State" tourists and others such Carrickfergus Castle might be more worthy of inclusion.

*Corporate Events* – The recent *Game of Thrones* screen tourism insight event was commended as an excellent engagement with the industry. The Board commended all staff involved with Meet the Buyer, which had received excellent feedback from attendees both for the event in itself and the prior industry training sessions.

*Golf* – Exploratory meetings had taken place with the European Tour in relation to a possible return of the Irish Open to Northern Ireland in 2021 and 2023.

### **3 (iii) Sub-Committees and Other Reports**

*Strategic Partnerships Committee* – the Committee Chair had been due to meet with the Chief Executive to discuss the committee's role and structure but following the Board's recent review of effectiveness it was agreed that this would form part of a broader review of sub-committees.

*Skills* – a report was given on a meeting of the Skills Sub-group, held at the end of April. This had identified five urgent priorities within the Action Plan. A copy of the Action Plan was requested to

be circulated to all Members (**ACTION:** JD) and it was proposed that the Board should receive a full update at its August meeting (**ACTION:** AK).

*Audit and Risk Committee* – the Audit Committee Chairman gave a report to the Board on the meeting held on 1<sup>st</sup> June. Progress had been made in relation to resolving a longstanding pay and pensions issue, which represented a positive result for Tourism NI staff.

The Board was advised that two new high-level risks were reported to the Committee. The first was in respect of the organisational structure and the skills required within Tourism NI to deliver on the tourism strategy in the future. The second related to the availability of financial and people resources to fully deliver the new experience brand. It was emphasised that, given its significance to everything that Tourism NI will do in the coming years and its role in supporting the tourism strategy, the brand must be sufficiently strong and impactful to secure support and commitment from the entire industry. Getting this right would require time and care, and appropriate levels of funding and staff resource to properly activate the brand with both the industry and consumers.

The Board was advised that a recent tri-partite meeting of the Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland and Failte Ireland executive teams featured a discussion around the launch of the experience brands, particularly the new Ireland's Hidden Heartland Brand and the Northern Ireland experience brand. This had highlighted the disparity between the resources available to support the Northern Ireland experience brand and those in the ROI, where the Wild Atlantic Way for example is supported by a budget of €9m and a team of fifteen people. The Chief Executive also pointed to the fact that based on their previous experience Failte Ireland intended to launch its new brand in the marketplace in late 2019 at the earliest, which Tourism NI had been planning to do with much lesser resource at the World Travel Market in 2018. He believed that without proper planning and a resource budget to follow through on execution there was a high risk that the brand would fail and do damage to Northern Ireland's reputation as a destination and to Tourism NI as an organisation.

DfE had indicated that no guarantees could be given on funding support for future years and emphasised its need for assurance that the brand can secure buy-in across the political spectrum as they rightly believed that there would be little chance of securing future resource without broad political support.

It was suggested that the timescales for brand development previously agreed with the Board needed to be reconsidered in that light and options were discussed. Members remarked that a sense of expectation had already been created in the industry. It was agreed that a soft launch to the local industry in late autumn might be preferable, with a consumer launch following in 2019/20. The industry's support and commitment was felt to be essential in selling the destination and a comprehensive business case needed to be developed to bid for the necessary resources from the Department.

The Board agreed to the proposal to revise timescales and asked the Executive team to develop a plan for a soft launch to industry and a consumer launch at a later date, together with a more detailed picture of the likely needs in terms of financial and people resources and an indication of what the successful outcome should look like. It was suggested that a visual manifestation of the brand concept should be developed to assist in making the case with the Department (**ACTION:** SMT).

## 5. Discussion Items

### 5 (i) Belfast Destination Hub Presentation

**Part of the following minute is non-disclosable under the Section '36 – prejudice to effective conduct of public affairs' exemption of the Freedom of Information Act (2000). This exemption is subject to a public interest test.**

The Board was joined by Colin Mounstephen of Deloitte and Michael Counahan of CHL Consulting, who delivered a presentation on proposals being developed on behalf of Belfast City Council for a new tourism destination hub project. The Council's regeneration plan had identified a need for a second flagship attraction located within the core of Belfast city. The presentation set out the background and scope to the project, giving an overview of the emerging creative concepts for content and the hub's architecture, the likely governance and operating arrangements and next steps.

The Board thanked Colin Mounstephen and Michael Counahan for the presentation and they left the meeting.

### 5 (ii) Tourism NI Disability Action Plan

The Board was presented with a draft Disability Action Plan, following a period of consultation. Two responses had been received and where appropriate the recommendations had been incorporated into a final draft which was now presented for the Board's approval.

Discussion focused on how Tourism NI might seek to encourage and facilitate more persons with disabilities to apply for employment, to address under-representation in the workforce. The Board suggested that Tourism NI might also wish to consider the provision of guides specifically highlighting accessible accommodation, and that it should take a more active role in influencing accessible public transport. Members suggested that Ulster Supported Employment and Learning (Usel) might represent a useful contact in helping to address the issues of representation in the workforce. **(Action: LK)**

The Board was content to approve the Disability Action Plan subject to the suggested amendments.

## 6. Items for Noting

### 6 (i) The Open Update

The Board noted a report on preparations for The 148<sup>th</sup> Open at Royal Portrush in 2019. Good progress was being made on all workstreams. The Board agreed that future updates could be incorporated into the Chief Executive's report to the Board, with fuller updates given each quarter **(ACTION: AK)**.

## **7. Any Other Business**

### **7 (i) Sport NI**

A report was given on a meeting with the Chief Executive of Sport NI, following up on a previous meeting with the Board's Strategic Partnerships Committee. Discussions had touched on support for events that have sporting and tourism elements, and how better use might be made of Sport NI assets.

### **7 (ii) Linum Chambers Office Dressing**

Members commended work undertaken on a programme of office dressing for Tourism NI headquarters, depicting key Northern Ireland visitor attractions and natural assets.

### **7 (iii) Visitor Feedback**

The Board discussed recent comment on social media regarding Sunday and Easter opening hours in Northern Ireland. Members also raised comments following a recent high profile conference regarding the cost of visitor accommodation in Belfast, as well as perceptions of unavailability and expense of taxis.

### **7 (iv) Hosts Global Forum**

The Board discussed opportunities for stakeholder engagement at the forthcoming Hosts Global Forum in Belfast. An outline programme was circulated and Members were asked to indicate their availability to support Tourism NI activity around the event.

## **8. Date of Next Meeting**

The next Board Meeting is due to take place on Thursday 9 August – venue TBC.