

Board Meeting 20 June 2019

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST
ON THURSDAY 20 JUNE 2019**

Present:

- Mr Michael McQuillan (acting Chair)
- Mr Terence Brannigan (from item 4 (iv))
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Mr Colin Neill
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Terry McCartney

In Attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive (to item 4 (iii))
- Ms Aine Robinson, Acting Director of Finance (to item 2 (ii))
- Ms Naomi Waite, Director of Marketing (from item 4 (iv))
- Ms Dorothy Erskine, Insights and Intelligence Manager (item 4 (iv))
- Dr Anne-Marie Montgomery, Insights and Intelligence Officer (item 4 (iv))
- Mr Jim Daly, Corporate Communications

Apologies: None

1. Introduction and Minutes of Last Meeting

1 (i) Minutes of Last Meeting

As the Chairman had given his apologies the Board agreed that Michael McQuillan should chair the meeting. He welcomed those present and reminded attendees that minutes of the Board Meeting would be published. He asked if anyone present wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items. Angelina Fusco advised the Board that a family member was involved in filming an advertisement commissioned for the forthcoming autumn campaign. It was confirmed that as Tourism NI had no involvement in procuring cast or crew, this did not represent a conflict. Colin Neill declared a potential interest relating to an issue highlighted within the Chief Executive's Report, concerning the 148th Open.

The Board noted with sadness news of the recent passing of Ricky O'Rawe and agreed that the Chairman should write to the family offering the Board's sympathies (**ACTION**: JD).

Discussion turned to the previous evening's dinner with the Board of the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance (NITA). Colin Neill declared an interest as a member of the NITA Board, and withdrew from the meeting. Members felt that the engagement had been very positive and constructive. It was observed that, given the resource challenges that will be faced in delivering the Tourism Strategy, synergy between the Strategy and NITA's own manifesto will be critical to ensuring that the ambitions of Tourism NI and the industry dovetail. Members commented that NITA's influence is beginning to be felt in giving the industry a more unified voice and a focus on strategic priorities such as greater digital capability and better selling by tourism businesses. Michele Shirlow remarked that as she had been unable to attend the dinner, a follow up engagement with the NITA chief executive would prove useful.

Colin Neill rejoined the meeting. Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 18 April 2019 in Banbridge were approved as an accurate record.

1 (ii) Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

The Board received updates on actions arising from previous meetings as follows:

Tourism Ireland – The Board had held a dinner with the Board of Tourism Ireland on 12 June. Members remarked that this was a more reciprocal discussion than the previous engagement.

Great Britain Market Review – Members noted that this had been discussed at the dinner with Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI would continue to press the case for greater differentiation for Northern Ireland and for more visibility of the experience brand within TI marketing activity.

Review of Tourism NI structures – The Department for Economy (DfE) had advised Tourism NI that while it could make bids for additional staff resources as part of the June monitoring round, it was unlikely that such resources would be available given other budgetary pressures being experienced throughout Government. In the interim, Tourism NI was moving ahead with making permanent a number of key posts that were currently temporary.

Board Vacancies - It was confirmed that at the last debrief meeting with DfE, the Chairman had raised the issue of ongoing vacancies in Board membership.

NI Open - Further consideration had been given to the Board's suggestion that a Tourism NI observer should be appointed to the Board of the NI Open. The Board was advised that this was not felt to be appropriate.

2. Governance

2 (i) Finance Report

A report was given on the position with budgets and spend at the end of April. The Board was advised that at this stage in the year, the budget allocation had not changed. Expenditure versus budget was outlined and an update was given on progress in clearing funds accrued at the end of the previous financial year.

The Board was also advised of the outcome of a budget profiling exercise undertaken with Tourism NI managers, which had helped to identify a pressure within the administration budget relating to the IT directorate.

Board expenses were detailed. Members were reminded to submit claims as soon as possible and the Board discussed the possibility of sanctions for repeated late claims.

A report was also given on the Strategic Partnership Fund. The Board was advised that Tourism NI was providing support under SPF to bring the Dutch Association of Travel Agents (ANVR) Congress to Belfast. At this point it was agreed to alter the agenda, to bring forward the next item.

2 (ii) Other Reports

Audit and Risk Committee – Angelina Fusco reported on her first meeting as chair of the committee and thanked Colin Neill for his contribution as Chairman over the last few years. She also paid tribute to Brian McClure for his input to the committee as an independent member, and welcomed Dorinnia Carville as the new member. The outcomes of recent audits by Internal Audit Service were detailed. The Board was pleased to note that a satisfactory opinion had been given in respect to the review of business cases and thanked the Acting Director of Finance and her team for their work on this.

A report was given on an Audit Committee discussion regarding the operating costs associated with a project which had been supported with a capital grant from Tourism NI. The Board agreed that Tourism NI should take some legal advice in relation to the issue (**ACTION**: RMcH).

Members were also advised of discussions regarding the realignment of Tourism NI salaries with those of the NICS. A buy-out had been proposed as the preferred option and a paper setting out the proposal will be brought to the next Board Meeting for approval (**ACTION**: AR). In the interim, the issue had been added to the Risk Register.

The Audit Committee had also discussed assurance mapping. While this would have some benefits for Tourism NI, it was noted that this would create significant additional workload pressures on an already stretched management team. The CEO undertook to look at information sources with the Insights Team which could give further assurances or highlight pending risks to the delivery of corporate objectives set out in the Operating Plan (**ACTION**: JMCG).

The committee also discussed how best to manage long-term staff absences and any impact on organisational efficiency.

Aine Robinson left the meeting following this report.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chief Executive's Report

The Board noted the content of the Chief Executive's report and specific updates were given on the following:

2018 Tourism Performance – the Board noted the detail of visitor performance data for 2018 released by NISRA, with particularly good results for visitors from the ROI making up for more

limited growth from other markets. The data also showed positive figures from the USA, indicating that Northern Ireland was seeing a similar increase in spend to that of the ROI from Americans coming to the island of Ireland. Members were advised that some further work was needed to understand why, despite fewer trips being taken by domestic tourists, spend had gone up. The Board also noted that work was being carried out on anonymised data received from Visa, to assist in an understanding of visitor behaviour and spend.

The Chief Executive reported on his participation in a Tourism Ireland trade mission to China and a number of subsequent engagements with the Chinese Consul General and Embassy. It was noted that although knowledge of Ireland is generally limited in the Chinese market, the icons that command recognition almost all are in Northern Ireland – Titanic, the Causeway and *Game of Thrones*. The visit had been useful in gaining a greater understanding of the size of the Chinese market and the scale of opportunity that it represents. It also provided insight into the specific needs of prospective Chinese visitors that the Northern Ireland industry must be capable of meeting in order to benefit, by expanding the ‘China Ready’ programme. One example is more widespread provision of the cashless payment options that Chinese visitors prefer.

The Board also received a report on the Chief Executive’s attendance at the Westminster Media Forum and an evidence session to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in London.

The 148th Open – a report was given on the final preparations, just a few weeks ahead of the tournament. Members were advised that a rota had been drawn up for the Board’s participation in stakeholder engagement at the event.

The Board was pleased to note the extremely positive response to the first NI Golf Week and Tourism NI Golf Convention. Members warmly commended the Golf Manager for the work being done with the sector to promote the golf product.

Discussing the development of Dundarave Estate in Bushmills as a corporate events and meetings centre, Members suggested that it might be a potential venue for a future Board Meeting in the area.

The Board also noted a summary of Freedom of Information requests received by Tourism NI since the last meeting. Members asked if the volume of requests being received created any concerns; however this was not considered currently to present a problem.

The running order of the agenda was altered to allow the Chief Executive to leave the meeting early.

4. Papers for Discussion

4 (i) Board Sub-Committees

A paper was presented setting out the current framework of sub-committees which had been agreed by the Board in November 2018. The intention had been that with two vacancies in Board membership, and in the ongoing absence of a Minister to make new appointments to the Board, a number of external, independent members would be sought to join these committees in order to secure some additional experience and expertise to support the Board’s work. While a new independent member had been secured for the Risk and Audit Committee, recruitment of others

to support the work of the other sub-committees had proved more problematic. As a consequence, with the exception of the Risk and Audit Committee none of the groups had met.

In view of the heavy workload already being borne by the Senior Management Team, the Board now felt that initiating the proposed committees would represent a significant additional burden. Members agreed that the Marketing Committee, Business & Industry Development Committee and Transformation Taskforce should all be paused indefinitely until new appointments can be made to the Board. In addition to the Audit and Risk Committee, for which the work pattern was well established, the Board felt that a Finance and Casework Committee was still needed to support the Board and Executive team. It was agreed that an initial meeting of that Committee should be scheduled around the next Board Meeting, to affirm the terms of reference, appoint a chair and agree a forward work programme (**ACTION**: JD).

4 (ii) Staff Engagement

The Chief Executive presented a paper setting out actions taken by the Senior Management Team in response to key findings of a Staff Engagement Survey undertaken in Spring 2018. While the survey had broadly found high levels of engagement amongst Tourism NI staff with their work, a number of areas were also highlighted which required further analysis and attention including the management of stress, individual workloads, consistency of management and better learning and development. To support this and in the interests of ensuring an engaged workforce committed to delivering the ambitions of the Tourism Strategy, facilitated processes had been put in place for staff and for the Senior Management Team to assist in areas such as faster decision making, better delegation of responsibility, stress management and personal development. The Board expressed its support for the approach taken and asked for regular updates on progress (**ACTION**: LK).

A brief discussion of gender balance in the workforce followed. It was emphasised that while the tourism sector tends to attract a higher proportion of female employees, in all instances the most qualified individual will be recruited.

4 (iii) Board Effectiveness

In spring 2018 the Board engaged Deloitte to undertake a review of its collective effectiveness, producing an action plan which was monitored throughout the following year. Members had previously agreed that the time was right to consider a further review and had requested that time be devoted on the present agenda to discuss this and the likely format. The options were to take the action plan developed following the last review and to use that as the basis for monitoring effectiveness on an ongoing basis, or to initiate a full review. The Board recommended that a full review would be more meaningful and productive. Members agreed to a proposal that the Chairman and Chief Executive should meet with Deloitte to explore this (**ACTION**: JMcG).

John McGrillen left the meeting at this point.

4 (iv) Visitor Attitude Survey

The Board was joined by members of Tourism NI's Research and Insights team and representatives of Cognisense. They delivered a presentation setting out the result of a comprehensive survey of visitors' attitudes undertaken throughout 2018, the first such survey since 2014. Objectives and methodology were outlined and an overview was given of typical visitor profiles, with Northern

Ireland attracting mainly a more mature audience (less than one in every five being under 35 years of age). Some 59% of out-of-state visitors were here for the first time visitors. The majority of leisure visitors (39%) were travelling as a family group. The average size of party was three people.

A breakdown was given of areas visited and stayed in by council with Belfast, the Causeway Coast and Glens and Derry City & Strabane most prominent. There was some discussion of how surveys could better reflect the cruise market given that passengers are ferried in and out very rapidly en masse. An analysis was also made of where visitors travelled onwards and stated following their initial visit, with Belfast overwhelmingly the destination of first choice followed again by the Causeway and Derry-Londonderry.

There was strong evidence of conscious planning of trips and of the importance of businesses having the capacity to take bookings online. Ease of booking for transport, activities and attractions was noted to be somewhat weaker. Throughout the survey, the highest scores were consistently to do with the people from Northern Ireland that visitors encountered, and the sense of arrival and welcome that visitors receive. Accommodation generally scored highly. While food broadly was found to exceed visitors' expectations, feedback indicated that more could be done to provide information on places to eat and to include local food on menus.

Data on attractions highlighted the interest that visitors have in Northern Ireland's past and the need to meet that interest in a way that presents history with nuance and balance. While there was some evidence of improvement in things to do in the evenings, feedback indicated that the lack of options on Sundays remains an issue.

Also highlighted as areas needing improvement were wi-fi coverage and knowledge of the tourism product amongst accommodation and restaurant staff. Safety and cleanliness were also highly rated and Visitor Information Centres scored more highly than anything else. In all, 62% rated their overall visitor experience very highly and the net promoter score sat at 67%, representing excellent results.

Plans were outlined for communicating the results to the industry and other stakeholders such as local authorities. The Board commented that there was a role here for the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance and recommended that feedback relating to transport should be shared with Translink. It was suggested that there was useful work that could be done with the culture and heritage sector on the evening economy and Sundays. The Board also commented on the need for more visitor orientated traffic signage, citing Hillsborough Castle as an example. Members also remarked that more could be done to encourage onward travel from initial destinations into Fermanagh and Tyrone. There was some debate about the value of increasing wi-fi coverage in those regions, or whether visitors might prize them more for the opportunity of 'digital detox'. It was also noted that the third largest cluster of the survey responses had come from Fermanagh and that there had been very positive commentary on staff at Marble Arch Caves.

The Board commented that overall the survey provided evidence that Northern Ireland is maturing as a destination. Noting the improving scores on food and drink, Members suggested it would be useful to have further detail given the importance currently being placed on this aspect of the product. The Board also remarked that while the net promoter score is very positive, at 67% it remains some way behind that for Scotland at 73%. Members suggested that improvements in areas such as digital connectivity, product knowledge, food provenance and

better translation at attractions could represent quick wins to raise this score further, while the score on safety and security represented a rebuttal to negative perceptions.

The Board suggested that it would be useful to have an indication of a net promoter score from 2014, to give an indication of the degree of improvement (**ACTION:** SB / DE).

The Board thanked the Insights Team and Cognisense for the presentation and they left the meeting.

Naomi Waite and Terence Brannigan joined the meeting at this point. As only a few agenda items remained it was agreed that Michael McQuillan should continue to chair the meeting.

5. Papers for Noting

5 (i) Tourism NI Domestic Market Review

The Board received a report on the initial meeting of the steering group for the Northern Ireland Domestic Market Review, setting out its scope and a summary analysis of existing research. Terms of Reference had been agreed and the presentation given to the group was provided to the Board. A key issue needing to be addressed was the domestic market's perception that a holiday at home is not 'different enough'. It was also noted that share of voice has decreased in light of the agreed focus upon growing the market from ROI.

The Board commented on reports of a major slowdown in the booking of overseas holidays by GB residents and asked if the same trend might be observed in Northern Ireland, or if this might represent an opportunity that NI could capitalise on – this would be reliant on Tourism Ireland creating standout for Northern Ireland in GB. The issue is to be further investigated (**ACTION:** NW). Some other European markets were also noted to be showing weakness.

Next steps were outlined, with a draft strategy and recommendations coming back to the Board for further discussion (**ACTION:** NW). The need was emphasised to align messaging to the experience brand with a focus on unearthing 'hidden gems'. The Board suggested there might be scope for an initiative such as The Gathering in ROI, and that NITA might have a role to play in urging the industry to provide incentives to holiday at home.

The Board thanked the Director of Marketing for the update and she left the meeting.

5 (ii) Chairman's Report

The Board noted the content of the report on engagements undertaken by the Chairman since the last Board Meeting.

Members were advised of the outcome of a meeting held with the organisers of the Northern Ireland bid for the Commonwealth Youth Games. It was confirmed that the issue of staff resources, and the impact upon Tourism NI's work, had been raised with DfE at the debrief but while sympathetic, the Department had requested additional detail.

A report was also given on a meeting with Titanic Foundation Limited to discuss clustering and branding of the Titanic Quarter. The Chairman advised that he had hosted the Manager of Royal

Portrush Golf Club to lunch and reported on a separate meeting with the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance to discuss dormant funds. The Chairman also reported that he had agreed to meet with the CEO of Belfast International Airport ahead of the dinner with the Board of Tourism Ireland, but the airport CEO had given his apologies. The Board agreed that the Chairman should continue to pursue this.

5 (iii) Draft Agenda for Next Board Meeting

The Board noted the draft agenda and agreed to add the items proposed during the current meeting.

6. Any Other Business

6 (i) Boardroom Apprentice

The Board was advised that Tourism NI had agreed to participate in the Boardroom Apprentice initiative and that the candidate would be joining Board and Audit Committee meetings for twelve months starting from August. Angelina Fusco had agreed to take on a mentoring role as 'Board Buddy'. It was agreed that the candidate should also be invited to attend pre-Board stakeholder engagements. In that context the Board suggested that the Chairman and CEO should give thought to 'away' venues for the remainder of the year and for next year, once known (**ACTION: JMcG**).

6 (ii) Open Wrap Up

The Board asked if a 'wrap-up' event might be arranged to thank corporate partners involved in The 148th Open. It was confirmed that an event is under consideration.

6 (iii) Game Of Thrones Touring Exhibition

The Board suggested that some time should be allocated on the next Board agenda to discuss the impact of the exhibition.

6 (iv) Future Board Agenda Items

The Board suggested a number of topics for future agendas, including a briefing on visitor access from the Migration Advisory Board and a discussion on environmental sustainability and the likely impact upon air travel and the Tourism Strategy of a drive towards zero carbon emissions (**ACTION: JMcG**).

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to take place on Thursday 29 August, in Fermanagh – venue to be confirmed.