

Board Meeting 24 June 2021

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT THE CLAYTON HOTEL, BELFAST
ON THURSDAY 24 JUNE 2021**

Present:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Mr John West
- Ms Patricia Corbett
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Colin Neill (by remote call)
- Mr Terry McCartney
- Ms Denise McAnena, Boardroom Apprentice

In Attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Mr Dave Vincent, Chief Digital Officer
- Ms Dorothy Erskine, Director of Strategy & Policy (by remote call, item 2(ii))
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Business Support and Events
- Ms Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Director of Strategy and Policy
- Ms Rosemarie McHugh, Director of Product Development
- Mr David Roberts, Director Designate of Strategic Development
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

Mr Geoff Wilson

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed participants and reminded them that minutes of the meeting will be published. He advised that the agenda would be reordered to permit the presentations to be delivered at the start of the meeting.

Participants were asked if they wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items. No declarations were made at this stage.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Belfast City Region Deal – Belfast Destination Hub

The Board was joined by senior officials from Belfast City Council, for a presentation giving an update on proposals for a new flagship attraction as part of the Belfast City Region Deal. This set out the strategic context for the development, the project concept, timelines for delivery and expected benefits for the city and Northern Ireland as a whole. The vision is to deliver by 2027 a project that will reinvigorate the city's core, providing a vehicle to tell Belfast's unique stories and representing a major contributor to economic growth. The Board was advised that the Council is expected to decide on an optimal location for the attraction in the next few weeks. Work was underway to develop content with a strong sense of local identity and 'belonging' that will be compelling, authentic to Belfast and that can evolve and be refreshed.

The Board was advised that Tourism NI had undertaken market testing of City Deal tourism projects with parties such as tour operators, who have an understanding both of visitors' needs and what a project on this scale must deliver. Responses highlighted the potential to create a world-class, epic attraction which could significantly change how the island of Ireland is programmed in operators' itineraries. Further insight was derived from work with consumer focus groups, highlighting the importance of local provenance, accessibility and connectivity. The Board was advised that more research would follow as proposals for all City Deal tourism assets are further developed and refined.

The Board was also advised of progress on development of the business case and an appropriate operating model for the new attraction. The economic case was noted to be well established and to stack up in terms of return on investment, jobs created and visitor numbers. The operating model remains to be agreed.

Members moved on to discuss the process for approval by Tourism NI, with proposals initially to be reviewed by the Finance and Casework Committee which will then make a recommendation to the full Board. Members commented that on the basis of the presentation the project appeared to have a strong alignment with the goals that Tourism NI is seeking to achieve. Stressing the importance of the gateway element they also observed that a greater sense of the Northern Ireland story would be welcome, as well as the Belfast element. The Board also discussed other planned developments elsewhere in the city. It was felt that these will complement the proposal rather than present a challenge to it. Also discussed was the sensitivity of some of the content dealing with recent history. The Board was advised that this will be dealt with by focusing on first person narratives, with people telling their 'own' stories rather than presenting a single perspective. It was also emphasised that the project will present a much wider sweep of narrative rather than focusing on a single period in history, and that principles will be agreed so that an understanding is reached at the outset of how stories should be presented.

The Board thanked the Belfast City Council representatives for the presentation, and they left the meeting.

2 (ii) Tourism NI Data Hub

At its previous meeting the Board requested a briefing on how Tourism NI makes use of data derived from the Tourism Data Hub developed by its Digital Services Team. The Chief Digital

Officer and Research and Insights Manager joined the meeting for a presentation that detailed the multiple data sources available through the Hub, drawing information from across the tourism sector to provide real-time insights into visitors' behaviour. Data derived from ReviewPro, aggregating detail from 175 different sources, had provided a valuable picture of visitor sentiment pre- and post the Covid outbreak, highlighting issues such as poor service as a result of untrained staff. An increase in the number of reviews from Republic of Ireland visitors was of particular value. While work continues to improve the quality of data derived from reviews, the service had already provided real-time information to supplement existing research activity, which involves time-consuming fieldwork.

It was emphasised that this represents just one element of a wider programme that layers research to give a much fuller and more detailed picture. The Board asked if it was possible to derive monetary value from the data, or perhaps to 'net' the value of data against budgets; it was emphasised that the ownership of data is shared, but Tourism NI owns the insights derived from it; however any proposal to sell insights would still need careful consideration.

The Board was also advised of how data on visitor spend is being used. Recently this showed an increase in spend on all aspects of visits except attractions, which had declined. Members were also given an overview of how location data could be used to map visitor's movements, point of origin and footfall at places of interest.

In conclusion the Board commented that layering of these sources of data represented a significant and impressive advance in Tourism NI's ability to evaluate visitors' behaviour and preferences. Work is ongoing to deliver regular reports and insights of use to Tourism NI, the Department and industry stakeholders. Members stressed the need for continued investment in these resources, to understand how data can be used in a more strategic way, and also the role wider government and agencies such as NISRA play in future in relation to tourism data. Activity such as EY's assessment of the impact of COVID on the tourism industry was noted to further augments Tourism NI's work in areas such as the City Region Deals.

Members also discussed how social media listening tools might represent a further useful resource; the Board was advised that further thought needs to be given to whether a dedicated tool should be created for this purpose or if a generic solution can meet Tourism NI's needs. The Board was advised that the Senior Management Team was in the process of considering the next set of digital priorities, which would take into account the issues discussed. The Board thanked the Chief Digital Officer and the Research and Insights Manager for the presentation.

Patricia Corbett and Anne-Marie Montgomery left the meeting at this point.

2 (iii) Belfast Region City Deal – Mourne Gateway Project

The Director of Product Development presented the Board with an update on proposals for a new visitor development in the Mourne as part of the wider Belfast Region City Deal. The Finance and Casework Committee had considered the project at separate meetings on 26 May and 1 June. A positive value for money statement had now been received from DfE economists and a state aid declaration indicated that while subsidy is present, it is acceptable. A report had also been received from Central Procurement Directorate (CPD).

The Board was advised of the expected project costs and projected visitor numbers. The appraisal had given positive indications on the three key questions of value for money, viability and

affordability. In its initial meeting the Finance & Casework Committee identified issues requiring further clarification or assurance including lease agreements, commercial and management arrangements and potential for the inflation of construction costs. Other issues the Committee asked to be considered were a trail masterplan and an assessment of risks / impacts associated with the recent fires in the Mournes.

To ensure these matters are reflected in the business case and addressed in a systematic way, they were collated in an issues log which was reviewed at a follow-up meeting of the Finance & Casework Committee on 1 June. The Committee agreed to make a positive recommendation for endorsement of the project by the full Board, to permit paperwork to be submitted to DfE Casework on 17 June. However following submission, the Department advised Tourism NI of a new limitation on submissions that would require substantial revisions to be made to the papers. As a result it had been decided to defer papers to the next Casework meeting on 1 July,

The Board was also advised that as a result of discussions at the Finance and Casework Committee papers relating to the Gobbins Phase II project had been withdrawn and Mid and East Antrim Council was likely to review the project alongside a number of other capital projects to take account of potential inflationary cost increases.

The Board noted that CPD's report had only just been received but that its findings bore out the Finance and Casework Committee's view on inflation of construction costs, additionally highlighting further potential for inflation associated with construction on mountain terrain. The Committee had recommended seeking an undertaking from Newry Mourne and Down District Council on funding these. The Board was advised that the issues raised by the Finance and Casework Committee could be dealt with by preconditions in the Letter of Offer and did not present an obstacle to a positive recommendation to DfE Casework.

The Board also discussed if the visitor projections were achievable given the likely need to rely on an all-Ireland market, at least in the next few years. It was noted that the approach taken on projections had been cautious and the Council was confident the figures can be achieved. Members also raised the need for an Environmental Impact Assessment given the sensitive nature of the site and were advised that the Council had commissioned an environmental, ecological and visitor management study. Also discussed was the possibility that the National Trust might seek to impose a cap on visitor numbers in line with its site management elsewhere. The Board was advised that the Council is to provide formal commitments in relation to these key dependencies. On that basis, the Board agreed to recommend approval on the basis of the Committee's discussions and subject to the conditions outlined being satisfied.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chairman's Report

The Board noted the engagements undertaken since the last meeting. The Chairman reported on the last debrief meeting with DfE and advised that the Department had been invited to participate in the Board Meeting, to discuss the role that Tourism NI should play in developing the Tourism Strategy. DfE had indicated that its representative was unavailable but a meeting had been arranged with the Chairman and Chief Executive and is due to take place next week. The Board was advised that the Department had also appointed a new senior official, ostensibly to oversee development of the new Tourism Strategy. The Board commented that DfE should be held to its

commitment to co-produce the strategy with Tourism NI, and that TNI is best placed to develop content while allowing the Department to manage the process. It was agreed that the Board will be kept updated on discussions.

3 (ii) Minutes of Board Meeting held on 6 May 2021

The Board returned to review the minutes of its previous meeting held on 6 May. The minutes were approved as an accurate record.

3 (iii) Matters Arising – Actions from Minutes of Previous Meetings

The Board noted the status action points completed or in hand following its previous meeting, with updates given as follows:

Odyssey Trust – it was confirmed that the Board Meeting on 18 August will be held at Belfast Odyssey, with dinner on the prior evening, possibly with the Board of ITOA (**ACTION:** JMcG).

Finance and Casework Committee – the Board was advised that while consideration had been given to expanding the Committee, this was no longer felt to be necessary.

Risk Register – discussion of a review of the Risk Register has been deferred to the next Board Meeting to permit some further benchmarking to be undertaken (**ACTION:** JMcG).

Charity Commission Ruling – the Board was advised that legal advice was awaited on Tourism NI's statutory activity and the issue had been deferred to the next Board meeting.

3 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports

Chairs of the Board's sub-committees reported on recent meetings as follows:

Audit Committee – Angelina Fusco reported on the Committee's meeting held on 15 June. Internal Audit Service had presented its draft annual report, which gave a satisfactory opinion. The Board was pleased to note very positive comments on the support that IAS had received from Tourism NI staff to support its work

The Committee had also discussed cyber security and had requested a briefing on the issue from the Chief Digital Officer (**ACTION:** DV).

The Committee had also received an update on long-standing issues relating to Tourism NI's paycales, which still need to be resolved between DfE and the Department of Finance. The Chief Executive stated that the delay in reaching a conclusion in the matter presented a potential liability and is impacting upon Tourism NI's ability to retain staff. It was agreed to raise these with the Department at the debrief and Oversight & Liaison meetings.

Marketing Sub-Committee – Terry McCartney advised that the Committee had received an update on recent marketing activity, with campaigns now live in-market. The Board was advised that recent STR data showed Belfast to have the highest hotel occupancy of any city in Europe and the industry was responding with enthusiasm to the campaigns. It was agreed that an update provided to the Committee would be uploaded to Decision Time for the Board (**ACTION:** JD).

Finance and Casework Committee – the Board noted the minutes of the Committee’s meetings held on 26 May and 1 June, which had been discussed as part of the Mourne Gateway Project item.

3 (iv) Chief Executive’s Report

The content of the report was noted and the Chief Executive highlighted the following issues:

COVID Recovery Bids – The Board was advised that, factoring in the resource received under the Economic Recovery Action Plan (ERAP) for COVID recovery activity, Tourism NI would be administering a programme budget of £34.5m in the current year. This would present significant resource challenges in designing and delivering programmes within that timescale. Various options are being considered for how this can be achieved and specialist support secured. The Board was advised that a resource and delivery plan will be presented at the Board’s next meeting (**ACTION:** JMcG).

Certification / Classification Schemes – Additional staff have previously been employed on a temporary basis to ensure that Tourism NI could fulfil its obligations in relation to its statutory inspection duties. The staff were recruited on a temporary basis as it had been anticipated that a review of the legislation relating to certification was to be undertaken. This has not yet happened however in the meantime a significant backlog has once again built up as a result of COVID restrictions and the We’re Good To Go initiative has created a need for additional inspection activity. A proposal on how this is to be addressed will also be brought back to the Board (**ACTION:** JMcG).

Tourism Conference – The Board joined the Chief Executive in paying tribute to all Tourism NI staff involved in organising the recent Tourism Conference, which had been very well received. In particular the Chief Executive recorded his thanks to Patricia Kingston for her efforts in organising the event.

Economy Committee - the Chief Executive reported on his participation together with senior Tourism Ireland and Departmental officials in a recent presentation to the Assembly’s Economy Committee. It was felt that this had been useful and that the Committee could represent a powerful forum for advocating tourism’s worth to the economy.

World Rally Championship – the Board was advised that a further bid is expected from organisers for this event. This was adding to a growing workload and it was felt that there was a need to bid to the Department for an additional full-time resource to support major events.

ISPS Handa – the Board was advised that Members will be contacted to seek their support in hosting corporate guests at the event (**ACTION:** JD).

4. Papers for Noting

4 (i) Tourism 360

The Board noted the content of the spring / summer edition of Tourism 360, setting out the latest tourism industry trends, insights and performance both globally and locally.

4 (ii) Agenda for Next Board Meeting

The Board noted the proposed agenda for its next meeting.

5. Any Other Business

5 (i) Closed Session – Structures Discussion

The Chief Executive gave a report on the work to date to introduce the new organisational structure. A discussion on the next steps on filling the remaining G5/G6 posts took place. It was agreed that the next post to be recruited at this level should be the Director of Corporate Services. It was felt that the post should take account of activity not envisaged when the role was previously evaluated, alongside the line management responsibilities which will now have to include those of the Chief Digital Officer who is no longer available on a fulltime basis.

The Chief Executive agreed to progress this with the support of the Director of HR (**ACTION:** JMcG / JO'R).

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next scheduled Board Meeting will be on Thursday 19 August 2021.