

## Board Meeting 28 January 2021

### TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING HELD REMOTELY BY VIDEO CONFERENCING ON THURSDAY 28 JANUARY 2021

Participating:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Mr John West
- Ms Patricia Corbett
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Colin Neill
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Terry McCartney
- Ms Denise McAnena, Boardroom Apprentice
- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Lesley McKeown, Director of Finance
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Business Support and Events (from item 3 (ii))
- Ms Lesley-Ann O'Donnell, Director of Policy and Insights (from
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

#### **1. Introduction / Standing Items**

The Chairman welcomed participants and reminded them that minutes of the meeting will be published. No apologies were recorded.

Participants were asked if they wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items. John West advised that he was a member of the Department for Communities Board and stated that as a number of papers referred to ongoing work with DfC, he would withdraw from relevant discussions if required. The Board did not feel that this was necessary as the references were for information only. Terry McCartney declared an interest in respect of the B&B, Guesthouse and Guest Accommodation Support Scheme. Geoff Wilson declared an interest in respect of discussion of the Tourism Events Fund, relating to his work with the Ulster Grand Prix.

##### **1 (i) Minutes of Board Meeting held on 17 December 2020**

Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 17 December were approved as an accurate record.

## **1 (ii) Note of Extraordinary Board Meeting held on 29 December 2020**

A note of the extraordinary meeting held on 29 December 2020 was approved as an accurate record.

## **1 (iii) Matters Arising – Actions from Minutes of Previous Meetings**

The Board reviewed a schedule of action points from its previous meeting. Actions completed or in hand were noted and updates given as follows:

*Belfast Odyssey* – following a presentation in early 2020 by Belfast Harbour on its future plans, the Board had agreed to invite Belfast Odyssey to do likewise. While this was postponed indefinitely following the Covid outbreak, the Chief Executive advised that it would be useful for the Board to receive a presentation at one of its forthcoming meetings (**ACTION: JMcG**).

*Stakeholder Engagement Plan* – An update was given on work to develop the plan and it is proposed to bring a paper to the next Board Meeting (**ACTION: JMcG**).

*Brexit* – The Board had requested a paper setting out the impacts on Tourism NI's work of the UK's exit from the European Union and this will be brought to the next meeting (**ACTION: DE**).

The Board also agreed that a proposed discussion of succession planning would form a closed 'in camera' session at the end of its next meeting (**ACTION: JD**).

## **2. Discussion Items**

### **2 (i) Tourism NI Budget 2021-22**


The Board's views were sought on possible scenarios for budgets in the coming financial year. Although no confirmation had yet been received from the Department for Economy (DfE) of the allocation for 2021-22, Tourism NI had been advised to assume a flatline budget. The Department had also asked Tourism NI to undertake scenario planning for cuts of 4% and 8%. A paper was presented setting out options for how this might be achieved.

The Board agreed a few core principles, primarily that restructuring of the organisation should be protected as far as possible. Members suggested that resource should mainly be reduced for activity likely to be significantly impacted by Covid restrictions during the first half of the year. The Board also commented that government should be made aware of the impact of reduced budgets on projects that Ministers consider to be priorities. It was further felt that maintaining Tourism NI's capacity and capability are essential and there was a need to protect staff from the significant pressures they already face in trying to fulfil Tourism NI's objectives in the current circumstances.

Reviewing the scenarios in detail the Board was advised that although the restructuring project mostly could be protected in the event of a 4% cut, an 8% cut would mean focusing on posts that are urgent priorities. It was also observed that in coming months the Northern Ireland tourism industry would be almost wholly dependent on the Island of Ireland market for business. As a result there would be consequences in reducing marketing budgets aimed at the same audiences that Failte Ireland will be pursuing. It would also be important to protect the research and

intelligence function to respond with agility to changes in visitor intent and expectations in the fast-evolving market environment.

(This section is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 – Commercial Interests of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)



More generally, the Board agreed that if a flatline position was available or a 4% cut imposed, then the priority should be to protect the organisational restructuring, marketing, and industry development activity and research and insights activity, all of which were felt to be essential to supporting the industry's survival and recovery. It was also agreed that some resource for golf marketing activity could be re-purposed without any major impact.

In the case of cuts Members agreed that there would be a need to further consider priorities and efficiencies at some length. Should this be the case the Board proposed that the Finance and Casework Committee should be convened and that John West should be seconded to join any such meeting (**ACTION**: LMCK).

### 3. Reports

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

The Board noted engagements undertaken since the last meeting and a report was given on the December post-Board debrief meeting with DfE.

The Board spent some time discussing its strategic 'awayday', held in two remote sessions in mid-January. While there was a great deal of useful debate and input some Members expressed a desire to have more definitive outcomes. It was emphasised however that the awayday's purpose as originally agreed was to establish first principles for developing a new tourism strategy.

Members were advised that a presentation at a recent meeting of the Tourism Ireland Board might be relevant and it was agreed that the Board should request sight of this (**ACTION**: JMcG).

Views were sought on the next phase, proposed as a series of workshops with key strategic partners to further define the principles and to agree actions and targets. The Board stressed the importance of identifying best prospects for meaningful sustainable growth, assessing where the pandemic has caused greatest damage to the industry, benchmarking the base from which recovery will start and the likely timeline for that recovery. The work underway with EY to create a vulnerability index and identify sectors especially at risk would be essential to supporting this.

Members also discussed the need for a strong narrative that informs and supports the outcomes framework of the next Programme for Government, and discussed themes that align to ROI and GB, which are likely to remain the key markets for some time. The Board was advised that while DfE 'owns' the two PfG objectives relevant to tourism, there was a sense that tourism has a much

broader contribution to make across the entire Programme. The Chief Executive advised that he had met with the DfE official tasked by the EAG with defining an economic vision for the next decade. The Board was also advised that the Director of Product Development had worked with colleagues in Tourism Ireland and Failte Ireland to ensure that tourism features more prominently in the new Peace Plus Programme.

The Board discussed the need to have a robust framework for facilitating the strategic workshops and suggested that the first meeting should set out key principles, priorities and a timeline for the remaining workshops. It was also agreed to have DfE involved in the process to ensure collective ownership of the process, goals and outcomes. Additionally, it was suggested that other government Departments such as DAERA and DfC should be invited to participate where appropriate.

Having agreed the way forward the Chairman and Chief Executive thanked the Board for their commitment to participate in the process.

Anya O'Connor left the meeting during the course of the discussion.

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

Aine Kearney joined the meeting. The content of the report was noted and the Chief Executive highlighted the following:

*Industry Support* - The Board was advised that the support scheme for bed and breakfasts, guesthouses and guest accommodation had now launched. Discussions were continuing with the Department and Audit Office to seek a means of supporting sectors such as self-catering that so far had been unable to access support. A bid made for resource to support major tourism assets had been withdrawn, as it was understood that these would receive support through a National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Colin Neill declared an interest and withdrew temporarily from the meeting to permit the Board to be updated on a tourism and hospitality fund which is under consideration with DfE. The Chief Executive undertook to keep the Board updated on this and on a programme to assist coach tour operators (**ACTION**: JMcG).

*Central Procurement Directorate* – the Board was advised of ongoing issues with CPD's workload and the timeliness of responses, affecting the ability of Tourism NI-supported projects to complete and draw down funding within the current financial year. The Chairman asked if he should write to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance and the Chief Executive agreed to discuss this option with the Director of Product Development (**ACTION**: JMcG).

*Capital Programme* – The Board approved a proposal to run a £4m capital programme in the next financial year.

*ROI Strategy* – The Board was advised that as part of the work to refresh the ROI strategy, which had proved highly effective, it was proposed to establish a small steering group. It was agreed that Terry McCartney should represent the Board on this group.

Updates were also given on organisational restructuring and on discussions regarding the return to Northern Ireland of The Open Championship. The Board noted that pandemic restrictions in ROI were delaying the fit-out of the new Dublin office. An update was also given on the process adopted by DfE to secure reappointment of the Chief Digital Officer. The Board expressed disappointment that this resulted in the CDO only being available to Tourism NI for part of each week.

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

#### *Marketing Committee*

Terry McCartney gave a report on the Committee's meeting held on 19 January. The Committee had appointed a new independent member, Claire McElligott. A number of areas of activity had been paused in the face of pandemic restrictions including planned campaign activity, the 'Holiday at Home' voucher scheme and the visitor charter. Resource had instead been channelled into developing content for long-term promotional use.

#### *Risk and Audit Committee*

Angelina Fusco advised that the Committee had not met in the period since the last Board Meeting, and is next due to meet in March.

#### *Finance and Casework Committee*

Michele Shirlow reported on the meeting held on 20 January. A detailed report had been given on the budget position to 31 December setting out spend to date and funds surrendered to the Department as a result of work that could not be progressed in the face of restrictions. An update had also been given on the intensive marketing activity taking place within a very tight timeframe ahead of the financial year end. The Board was advised that if restrictions should change in a way that further affects Tourism NI's ability to use its resources, the Committee would meet again to discuss the funds at risk.

The Committee had also considered a paper setting out the proposals for the Bed and Breakfast, Guesthouse and Guest Accommodation Scheme and a summary paper was supplied for the Board's information. While the scheme had been developed by Tourism NI at the request of the NI Executive specifically to assist the sector, the Committee was content that the parameters and controls set in place were well-defined and robust. It was noted that as mentioned in the Chief Executive's report, the proposed 'strategic enablers' scheme was no longer required as support was available from another source, but the Committee had indicated that it was willing to assist scoping such a scheme if necessary.

## **4. Items for Discussion - Continued**

### **4 (i) Tourism Events Funding Programme**

Having declared an interest at the outset of the meeting, Geoff Wilson left the meeting for the duration of the following discussion. Denise McAnena also left the meeting in the course of the following discussion.

A paper was presented setting out proposals for events programmes for 2021-22. The Board was advised that there was continuing uncertainty about if and when events will be permissible once lockdown ends, as well as the size and format of events that can safely take place. It was noted to

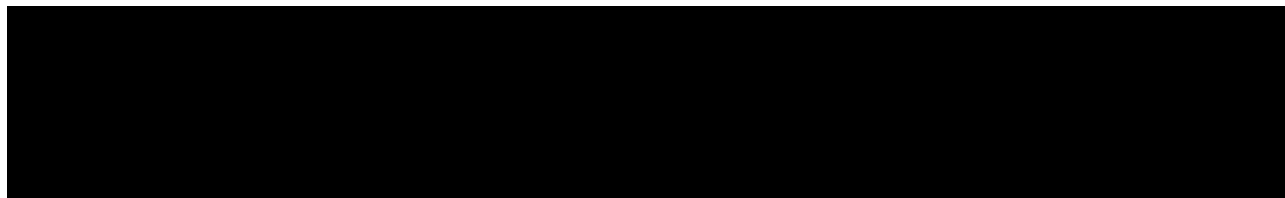
be unlikely that events could take place in any form before summer, and restrictions of some sort are likely to remain in force until the end of the year. There are also likely to be ongoing constraints on travel within Ireland and onto the island. In this context there was felt to be an opportunity to focus on the experience brand and how this might be better used to animate events spaces and engage in storytelling that results in more unique homegrown events. It was proposed that recommendations can be brought forward to the Finance and Casework Committee for discussion and a recommendation to the Board. In the meantime it was proposed that Tourism NI should not open an International Events Support Programme in 2021-22 given the likely level of restrictions and the commitments already in place.

For the National Events Sponsorship Fund it was felt that there is more scope to innovate and deliver events differently, and to examine the options for online only or hybrid events. However, risks still remain in committing resource towards events that may not be able to proceed, so it was proposed to adopt a two-stage approach with initial expressions of interest which would help shape proposals, and offering greater scope than previously to deliver events digitally or in the hybrid online and outdoor format. It was therefore proposed that Tourism NI should continue to operate the National Events Sponsorship Scheme in 2021-22.

The Board was content to approve the proposals and commented that while events in the coming year would be likely to present a different pattern of return on investment, it would be important to retain the profile of return on investment from previous years in order to fully demonstrate the benefits once events can again be delivered in a meaningful way.

**4 (ii)** 

(This section is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 – Commercial Interests of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)





Geoff Wilson rejoined the meeting.

**4 (iii) Strategic Enablers Support Scheme**

As a verbal update had already been given earlier in the meeting the Board was content to note the position. It was noted that DfE had contacted Tourism NI seeking a meeting and the Chief Executive agreed to update the Board in due course.

## 5. Governance

### 5 (i) Quarter III 2020-21 Reports: Operating Plan

The Board noted the content of a report on progress against Operating Plan objectives at the end of the third quarter. The Board noted that in cases where the pandemic had impacted upon the organisation's ability to fulfil its objectives, alternative means of delivery such as online activity had been utilised with partners who are facing similar challenges, including Tourism Ireland and Failte Ireland.

Work was underway to develop the 2021-22 Operating Plan, and it is proposed to bring this for discussion at the March Board Meeting. Consideration will be given to activity from the current Operating Plan that remains relevant, and how this can be merged with the actions set out in the draft Tourism Recovery Action Plan. The Board suggested that consideration should be given to looking more closely at defining outcomes within the new Operating Plan, and in particular how multiple and cross-departmental actions and objectives might contribute to these outcomes (**ACTION**: SMT).

### 5 (ii) Risk Register

The Board noted the updated corporate Risk Register. The Board suggested that the current legislative framework and issues with Central Procurement Directorate workload / backlog represented potential risks.

Also discussed was the ability of Tourism NI to perform effectively as a result of the impact that Covid-19 restrictions are having on its staff in terms of obligations on childcare, homeschooling and caring for other dependents. Although external support had been sought from third parties and specialist agencies in some instances where teams were particularly pressured, those organisations were experiencing the same challenges in respect of their own staff. Work had been de-prioritised in certain areas such as staff appraisals and post-project evaluations in order to permit focus to be applied to more urgent pandemic response work. An extensive health and wellbeing programme had also been put in place to bolster the resilience of staff.

It was recommended that consideration should be given to including these issues on the register. (**ACTION**: JMcG).

## 6. Papers for Noting

### 6 (i) Market Outlook Report

The Board noted the content of a report by the Research and Insights team setting out the current market outlook.

### 6 (ii) Agenda for Next Board Meeting

The Board noted the proposed agenda and agreed to include the additional items proposed earlier in the meeting. The Board also discussed plans for a programme of strategic workshops to follow on from the awayday.

The Board also discussed how candidates from the Boardroom Apprentice programme might be better supported in taking up opportunities as fully-fledged Board Members in due course. The Chairman advised that this issue had been discussed at the Chairs' Forum and that there was still work to be done in ensuring that younger people are afforded the opportunity to take up boardroom roles.

## **7. Any Other Business**

### **7 (i) Finance Reporting**

There was a brief discussion of the mechanism for Finance reports, with detailed reports given to the Finance and Casework Committee and summaries presented to the Board. The Director of Finance undertook to review the process together with the Committee Chair.

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

The next scheduled Board Meeting will be on Thursday 18 March 2021.