

## Board Meeting 18 December 2023

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND  
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING  
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST  
ON MONDAY 18 DECEMBER 2023**

Participating:

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

In attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Diane Edgington, Boardroom Apprentice
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Events (item 2 (i))
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Services (item 2 (ii) on)
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development (item 2(v))
- Mr Brian Gillanders, Computer Services Manager (item 2 (ii))
- Ms Stacy Bonar, Deloitte (item 2 (iii))
- Ms Lynsey Sloan, Digital Programmes Officer (item 2 (iv))
- Mr John West, Strategic Adviser to the Board
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

- Mr Ciaran O'Neill

### 1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chair welcomed those present and extended a particular welcome to the three newly appointed Board Members, Karly Greene, Michael Counahan and John Hood. 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 Board Meeting**

Minutes of the last Board Meeting held on Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> November 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

### **1 (ii) Matters Arising – Actions from Previous Meeting**

The Board noted updates on the status of actions agreed at its last meeting and those ongoing from previous meetings.

It was previously agreed that the Chair should write to DfE with the Board's comments on the draft Partnership Agreement between Tourism NI and the Department. A key query was how the concept of 'proportionate autonomy' would be defined and should operate in practice. The Department's response to the letter had indicated that while DfE accepted the Board's comments in general, implementing some of the matters raised would require legislation to be amended.

## **2. Items for Discussion**

### **2 (i) Irish Open Update**

**(The following extract of minutes is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 (2)– Commercial Interests – of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)**

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

## **2 (ii) Cyber Security Presentation**

The Board had previously requested an update on Tourism NI's cyber security infrastructure, following high profile data breaches elsewhere in the public sector. A presentation was given with details of the current online risk landscape and the measures in place to secure data and deal with persistent and increasingly sophisticated attacks. The Board was advised that given the nature of its work, Tourism NI had developed its own infrastructure outside of the IT Assist shared services framework used throughout the NICS, drawing upon the resources offered by the National Cyber Security Centre. While artificial intelligence represented a significant and developing new risk, AI had also been employed as part of Tourism NI's own digital defences.

It was stressed that the system's biggest vulnerability (as well as a potential strength) remains people and the need to guard against complacency. Safeguards in place at Tourism NI included awareness training as part of induction and regular refreshers. The IT team also operates regular 'dummy' phishing exercises to underline the risks, with staff who fail these exercises pointed to awareness training. The Board noted that the numbers of staff caught in such exercises are generally low by comparison with elsewhere in the NICS. The issue of 'training fatigue' was discussed and Members suggested Tourism NI should look at mini-courses in use by the Department for Communities.

The Board asked for an independent external audit to be carried out of IT security, to provide assurance (**ACTION: AD**). In discussing business continuity and succession planning, the Board suggested that a review should be undertaken of salaries in IT management and Tourism NI's ability to pay what the market demands, for further consideration and discussion by the Board (**ACTION: AD**).

The Board asked if there was merit in pursuing an ISO mark – it was noted that this would require several years' work but Tourism NI is Cyber Essentials verified.

## **2 (iii) Review of Board's Effectiveness**

A presentation was given setting out the methodology and key findings of a review of the Board's effectiveness. Having undertaken previous reviews, for consistency Deloitte was again engaged to complete the work however it was emphasised that the review was carried out in unusual circumstances. As fieldwork was underway the previous Board Members were all stood down, with five departing at the end of March 2023 and a further three at the end of May 2023. The work had included a desk review of Board papers and key governance documents; an anonymised survey of all the Board Members; and interviews with the Tourism NI Chairman and the chairs of the 3 sub-committees.

Broadly the findings of the review were noted to be very positive, and the Board was found to be operating effectively. Particular strengths were highlighted as the Chair's leadership style, the Board's understanding of its role, the running of meetings generally and culture of encouraging challenge in particular. Areas for improvement had been identified as a lack of diversity in Board Membership at that time; the new intake of Board Members was felt to go some way to addressing that. While the need to develop a skills matrix for future Board appointments was identified, the Chair advised that this had not been factored into the recent recruitment exercise, nor did comments by the previous Chairman on the Board's skills needs appear to have been considered. Results of the survey of Board Members had all been positive in particular the scores

for Board dynamics and the Chair's leadership. Lower scores relating to the Board's relationship with the Department appeared to have been influenced by the circumstances of the Board Members' terms ending.

With regard to commentary on Board engagement activity, Members suggested it would be useful for the stakeholder engagement plan to be shared on Decision Time (**ACTION:** Executive Support Team) and an engagement matrix developed for its implementation (**ACTION: DR & OF**) Members also noted a suggestion that management receive training in preparation of Board reports and discussed the balance of providing succinct reports with relevant detail to inform decision-making.

It was noted that Deloitte would make further adjustments to the draft report to reflect actions undertaken since the review was commissioned, and the final version will be shared with the Board in due course.

## **2 (iv) Tourism NI Data Hub**

At its October meeting the Board had considered approval of further work to develop the Tourism NI Data Hub and requested additional information setting out the total costs to date, the projected future costs and an indication of the benefits. An update was now presented setting out a range of cost options for future development of the hub. Discussion focussed on how best to maximise the hub's benefits, and how use of the facility by industry can be best assessed. Members noted the historical reliance on statistics from NISRA, the release of which is generally not sufficiently timely to be fully useful to Tourism NI. The Board felt that the hub requires a robust sample group that is sufficiently committed and representative to contribute rich, meaningful data from across the industry. It was noted that different sectors are at very different levels of capability in doing this.

Looking at the funding options presented the Board remarked that there is still a need to more clearly define what success would look like, the audiences for which the data is being developed, how and what it would be used for and the value that Tourism NI expects to derive from the investment. The Board asked the team to provide a cost break down of the do minimum option. (**ACTION:** AD).

## **2 (v) Role of Tourism NI as Investment Decision Maker for City and Growth Deals**

The Board was presented with a paper setting out a review of the proposed accountability and associated roles for Tourism NI in relation to the tourism projects within the four City and Growth Deals across Northern Ireland. Suggestions were put forward in the paper for ways in which Tourism NI's roles and responsibilities as Investment Decision Maker (IDM) could be more clearly defined.

Members agreed that it was important to have certainty in relation to these governance and accountability responsibilities, given the scale and complexity of the projects involved. It was highlighted that Tourism NI's roles and responsibilities should not duplicate or be inconsistent with those of the Accountable Department, the Accountable Body and the promoters of the respective projects.

The Board asked if the IDM role continued during the operational phase of each project. It was confirmed that the tenure of the position is specified currently by the Department as when the

managed closure of the C&GD Programme is achieved or, by agreement, linked to a specific milestone or gateway. It was highlighted that the benefits realisation period for individual projects will be lengthy. In light of this position, the Board noted that the nature and tenure of the IDM role should be kept under review as projects proceed.

The Board also queried whether the proposed roles for Tourism NI could be dealt with via a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department. It was confirmed that the IDM requirements are set out in a Letter of Appointment from the Department and are also incorporated into the template Contract for Funding for individual projects.

In conclusion, the Board approved the recommendations in the paper and tasked the Director of Strategic Development and the CEO to prepare correspondence to issue to the Department on this matter. The Board thanked the Director of Strategic Development and Board Member, Linda MacHugh, for their input to the review process.

## **2 (vi) Economic Recovery Action Plan (ERAP) Evaluation**

The Board noted the content of a report setting out the outputs achieved by a range of initiatives within the Tourism Recovery Action Plan that had been developed as part of the broader Economic Recovery Action Plan, to support the tourism industry in weathering and recovering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the support delivered, Northern Ireland as a region had recovered from the economic effects of Covid much more successfully than many other destinations, including the RoI. The Board was advised that some of the initiatives developed with local authorities as a short-term measure had proved so successful that they had evolved into ongoing programmes of activity. While Tourism NI had been able to deliver a huge amount of support to the industry through these programmes it was noted that this also demonstrated the immense challenges involved in getting a huge amount of resource, particularly capital resource, spent and vouched within the span of a single financial year.

## **2 (vii) Agenda for Board Strategic Awayday**

The Board was presented with a proposed agenda for a strategic awayday scheduled for January. The programme would include a report summarising feedback from the recent industry consultation on the draft Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy, and a barometer survey of tourism businesses. These would provide the basis for a comprehensive discussion of the objectives for the 2024-27 Tourism NI Corporate Plan, which would be aligned to the five themes identified within the Strategy.

## **2 (viii) Board Sub-Committees**

Now that a full complement of Members is available, the Board agreed its sub-committee structures going forward, as follows:

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee -

Aine Gallagher (chair), John Hood, Colin Johnston, John West

Finance and Casework Committee -

Linda MacHugh (chair), Ciaran O'Neill, Michael Counahan, John West

Marketing Committee -  
Aileen Martin (chair), Karly Greene, Colin Johnston

It was agreed that each committee should review and approve its terms of reference at its first meeting, and give thought to whether additional expertise should be sought in the form of independent members, noting that the ARAC has a nominated independent member.

The Board was also asked to nominate an observer to attend Board Meetings of VisitBritain on Tourism NI's behalf. It was suggested that this should be rotated between Members on an annual basis and Aileen Martin agreed to take this up for the coming year.

### **3. Reports**

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

The Board noted the detail of engagements undertaken by the Chair in the period since the last Board Meeting. Members were also advised of the appointment of a new interim Permanent Secretary of DfE.

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

The Board noted the content of a report by the Chief Executive on current issues and he highlighted an emerging issue in relation to the Co-Operative Marketing Fund. The Chief Executive advised that the matter had been brought to the attention of the Department who had been in contact with the Chairman to discuss how the issue should be addressed. The CEO advised the Board that the fund would not operate in the current financial year and a full review would be undertaken as to how the scheme should operate in the future.

### **4. Papers for Noting**

#### **5 (i) Market Outlook**

The Board noted the content of a Market Outlook update highlighting key visitor trends.

#### **5 (ii) Draft Agenda for February Board Meeting**

The Board noted the draft agenda for its next meeting. An update was given on preparation of the Tourism NI draft annual report and accounts for 2022-23.

### **6. Any Other Business**

#### **6 (i) Ratification of Approval – Events Programme**

The Board ratified for the minutes its decision taken by correspondence to approve a number of amendments to the Events Funding Programme.

## **6 (ii) Board Dinner**

The Board was asked to note the date of a forthcoming dinner with the Board of Tourism Ireland.

As there was no other business, the Chair then thanked Members and drew the meeting to a close.

## **7. Date of Next Meeting**

The next Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 8 February 2024 at Tourism NI headquarters.