

## Board Meeting 26 January 2023

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND  
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING  
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST  
ON THURSDAY 26 JANUARY 2023**

Participating:

- Ms Ellvena Graham OBE (Chair)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Ms Patricia Corbett
- Mr John West
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Terry McCartney
- Mr Stephen Garvin

In attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Louise Fitzsimons, Director of Organisational Development & HR (item 2 (ii))
- Ms Lesley Shannon, Head of Finance (item 2 (iii))
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Mr Colin Neill

### 1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chair welcomed participants and reminded them that minutes of the meeting will be published. Attendees were asked if they wished to declare interests or conflicts in relation to agenda items. The Chair advised that she had an interest in respect of a decision requiring the Board's ratification.

#### 1 (i) Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2022 were approved as an accurate record.

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

The Board noted the status of actions agreed at its last meeting and updates were given as follows:

*Employee Relations* – the Chief Executive provided an update on a grievance case. He advised that as requested by the Board at its last meeting, the Department had been informed of the approach that Tourism NI intends to take to address the matter. Consideration is still being given to how best to progress a separate issue raised by the Board, in relation to subsistence allowances for staff travelling away with work.

*Stakeholder Engagement* - The Board had previously suggested arranging dinners with the Boards of VisitBelfast and Invest NI; Members now agreed that engagements were not necessary at this time. The Board had also recommended engaging with the Cabinet Office regarding levelling up funds and dates are being sought for a possible meeting. The Chief Executive is also to speak with David Boyce regarding options for engagement around the forthcoming UK Inbound Conference.

It was agreed that subjects for future “deep dive” sessions would be discussed later in the meeting.

## **2. Items for Discussion**

### **2 (i) Tourism NI Draft Operating Plan 2023-24**

The Board was presented with a draft Operating Plan for the coming year, supplemented by documents setting out how the Senior Management Team intends to align the Plan’s objectives to delivery of outcomes in DfE’s 10X economic vision. The Board’s discussions focussed on how planned activity might need to be re-evaluated or adjusted in the event that Tourism NI’s budget allocation for 2023-24 is reduced.

Members commended the intensive work that the Senior Management Team had devoted in recent weeks to developing the Operating Plan and were pleased to note that the Department responded positively to the work done to align it with 10X. The Board also noted that work on the Plan had to be completed in tandem with a number of urgent requests for budget scenario planning, both from DfE and the Department of Finance. In responding to these Tourism NI had underlined that the budget provided in previous years had been insufficient to support the activity that it is required to deliver.

In considering activity that might need to be discontinued or adjusted for budgetary constraints, the Board remarked that proper modelling is required to demonstrate to the Department the consequences of reducing the resource available to Tourism NI and the focus should be on discontinuing areas of business that have minimal impact on delivery. The Board asked if the Senior Management Team was content that proportionality of the Plan was right, and also if consideration had been given to how, faced with reduced resources, the same level of activity might be delivered differently. In practice this was felt likely to mean more digital / online delivery, but it was emphasised that post-Covid, the costs of marketing activity had also increased. Discussing events, the Board suggested that local authorities might need to play a greater role in delivery. Other areas were outlined where efficiencies are being sought, for example by engaging Strategic Investment Board support for the Tourism NI data hub. The Board asked the Senior Management Team to consider areas where easements of resource pressure might be found, but it was stressed that there can be no certainty until Tourism NI’s budget allocation is confirmed. It was agreed that when known, the detail of how the budget is to be allocated can be discussed by

the Finance and Casework Committee with an invitation to other Board Members to join the conversation if they wish (**ACTION:** JMcG).

## **2 (ii) Human Resources Report and Staff Engagement Survey Results**

The Board noted the HR report and was presented with the topline results of a new staff engagement survey. There was a high rate of response to the survey with feedback generally positive and scores significantly higher than for similar surveys within the wider NI Civil Service. In the case of the employee index representing how staff feel about the organisation and the discretionary effort that they make, results were in some cases a full 20 percentage points above NICS respondents.

The Board was advised that during Covid lockdowns, regular surveys had monitored staff health and wellbeing. An Investors in People assessment is scheduled for the spring. Members asked if, now that a baseline is available, targets could be set. The Board suggested that a specific comparison with other arms-length bodies could also help to inform a baseline score.

It was noted that there were lower scores in areas such as the communication of organisational change and management of poor performance. It was felt that the transition to a hybrid working model had been handled well and that staff had adjusted to this in a positive way. Additionally, while pay challenges remain the survey assessed how staff viewed the overall package of benefits available to employees. Information packs for new applicants were revised recently, to place emphasis on this full range of benefits. The Board commented that when people enjoy their work, it has a visible positive impact not only on organisational activity but on how people outside the organisation view it and value its work.

Members were advised of plans to share the results with staff in tandem with an Action Plan to address issues raised by the survey. The Board recommended that the Chair should write to staff to comment the very positive result (**ACTION:** Executive Support Team). Members also requested an update on progress with actions in six months' time (**ACTION:** LF).

## **2 (iii) Tourism NI Annual Reports and Accounts 2020-21 and 2021-22**

The Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee reported on an extraordinary meeting of the Committee held immediately prior to the Board Meeting. The Committee now recommended that the Board should approve the signing off of the Annual Report and Accounts for 2020-21 and the Annual Report and Accounts for 2021-22. The Committee also recorded its thanks to Tourism NI's Finance executives and team for their efforts to finalise the accounts and their patience and resilience through what had proved to be a lengthy and difficult process.

The Board's attention was drawn to the commentary relating to payments to Tourism Ireland, and to the Guesthouse, Bed and Breakfast and Guest Accommodation Support Programme. It was noted that for the foreseeable future, Tourism NI's accounts will be required to be qualified as a result of the Tourism Ireland issue, and the possibility needs to be explored of amending legislation to provide the necessary vires to allow payments to be properly administered. It was also noted that for the 2022-23 financial year DfE's accounts would be consolidated with those of its arm's-length bodies, including Tourism NI.

While the Board was content to approve the reports for signing, some minor changes were suggested to the formatting of Operating Plan objectives. The Board also agreed that the forewords to the annual reports, which were originally drafted for the previous Chairman, should be redrafted to reflect the perspective of the new Chair (**ACTION:** JMcG).

## **2 (iv) Approval of Direct Award Contract for ReviewPro**

The Board was presented with a request for approval of a Direct Award Contract (DCA) to ReviewPro for a further year. The purpose of the contract is to provide rich, real-time data on visitor behaviour for use by Tourism NI's data hub, giving valuable insights for use by TNI, its stakeholders and the wider industry. The Board noted that in the face of budget pressures further consideration may need to be given to the data sources that provide the greatest value.

The Board granted approval and asked for a summary of all DACs awarded over the last year (**ACTION:** LS). Members discussed the options for negotiating long-term contracts and also the need for maintaining the highest standards of data security, suggesting that an updated presentation on Tourism NI's cyber security safeguards would be useful (**ACTION:** JMcG). It was stressed that continual awareness training on this subject takes place for staff.

## **2 (v) Ratification of Approval – Direct Award Contract for Concept Development for Titanic Maritime Heritage Visitor Experience**

The Board also ratified for the minutes its approval by correspondence of a Direct Award Contract to allow the resumption of concept development for a visitor experience at Titanic Quarter, celebrating maritime heritage. The Chair declared an interest in respect of her role as chair of Catalyst NI, but the Board agreed that it was not necessary for her to withdraw as the approval had already been granted and the decision was simply being put on record.

## **3. Governance**

### **3 (i) Quarter III 2022-23 Reports – Operating Plan Performance**

The Board noted the content of a report setting out progress against Tourism NI's Operating Plan objectives at the end of Quarter III. Members were pleased to note that the majority of objectives were on track for delivery. Updates focused on objectives showing as amber – some of these are unlikely to be complete by year end but in other areas, such as the backlog of certification cases, good progress is being made. The Board was also advised that Tourism NI had received legal advice on the issue of recovering fees for its classification service, which had permitted the activity to resume.

Members also noted that familiarisation activity had resumed following a drop in the numbers of visits as a result of ongoing Covid restrictions. With regard to major events, Tourism NI had highlighted to DfE the problems arising from a lack of resource and the absence of a policy framework that supports delivery. DfE for its part had now acknowledged that it needs to take the lead on major events until Tourism NI has this capacity in place.

### **3 (ii) Quarter III 2022-23 Reports – Risk Management**

The Board noted the report on Risk Management. A number of new risks had been added to the Register but the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee had not had an opportunity to meet to discuss these. It was agreed that the Chief Executive would pick these matters up with John West (**ACTION:** JMcG).

## **4. Reports**

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

Members noted the detail of engagements undertaken by the Chair in the period since the last Board Meeting. The Chair provided an update on the process to recruit a number of new Board Members, noting that the DfE Permanent Secretary now has authority to sign off on new appointees in the absence of a Minister, subject to a public interest test.

The Chair also reported on a visit to the Galgorm Resort to hear its plans for future development. The Board discussed how best Tourism NI can work to evaluate and fulfil the industry's needs, the approach to destination marketing that will work best for specific businesses and how best to communicate marketing opportunities.

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

The content of the report was noted and updates were given as follows:

*Electronic Travel Authorisations* - The Board received an update on discussions with the UK Government in respect of the requirements for travellers entering Northern Ireland via the ROI. It was noted that the NI Tourism Alliance had made good progress on the issue, with proposals for a derogation valid for up to five days. The Board asked if the issue was one likely to affect cruise ship business and the CEO is to look into this (**ACTION:** JMcG).

*Independent Review of Invest NI* – the Board noted that the review had made a number of recommendations in respect of Invest NI functions that might transfer to Tourism NI. It was emphasised that not only would these require legislation to be enacted, but they would need to be supported by appropriate levels of financial resource. The findings presented a number of other areas that Tourism NI might need to consider ahead of any review of arms-length bodies, and it was agreed that a fuller report will be presented at the next Board Meeting (**ACTION:** DR).

The Board also noted proposals to develop a partnership agreement with DfE following a self-assessment exercise. It was agreed that any such agreement will need to come to the Board for consideration and approval and the Board asked for the issue to be raised at the next debrief meeting with the Department (**ACTION:** JMcG).

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

Reports were given by the sub-committee chairs as follows:

*Audit and Risk Assurance Committee* – The Board had already received an update on the Committee’s meeting held earlier that day in order to approve the Annual Reports and Accounts for 2020-21 and 2021-22. There was no further Committee business to be reported.

*Finance and Casework Committee* – there were no updates to report as the Committee had not been required to meet in the period since the last Board Meeting.

## **5. Papers for Noting**

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

The Board noted the content of a report on current visitor trends and the market outlook for coming months.

### **5 (ii) Terms of Reference for DfE Review of Arms-Length Bodies**

The Board was previously notified of DfE’s intention to review its family of arms-length bodies in line with an agreement in the NI Assembly’s New Decade, New Approach document. Proposed terms of reference for such a review were noted. The Board discussed whether there would be benefits in participating in a review, acknowledging that the comprehensive Hunter Review of tourism delivery structures had taken place relatively recently.

### **5 (iii) Draft Agenda for Next Board Meeting**

The Board noted the draft agenda for its next meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> March. Members discussed the venue and suggested an itinerary taking in some attractions in Mid and East Antrim to include a visit to the Gobbins and the Magheramorne and Glenarm Estates. Suggestions for future venues and itineraries included Florencecourt and Ballycastle with a possible visit to Rathlin Island.

## **6. Any Other Business**

### **6 (i) Marketing Sub-Committee**

The Board was advised that a new draft Terms of Reference document is currently with Committee Members for review.

### **6 (ii) Belfast Lieutenancy**

Members were asked to expect invitations to a forthcoming engagement with the Belfast Lieutenancy, due to take place at Titanic Belfast on 6<sup>th</sup> March.

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

The next Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023.