

## Board Meeting 14 November 2024

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND  
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING  
HELD AT CAUSEWAY COAST & GLENS COUNCIL OFFICES, COLERAINE  
ON THURSDAY 14 NOVEMBER 2024**

Participating:

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

In attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Mr John West, Strategic Adviser to the Board
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Events (to item)
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Services (from item)
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

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

The Chairman welcomed those present. No apologies were recorded. 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 Meeting**

Minutes of the previous Board Meeting held on 3rd October 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

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

The Board noted the status of action points from previous meetings. Commenting on the update provided in relation to a review of Tourism NI’s legislative and regulatory framework, the Chair of

the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee advised that some actions associated with this piece of work remain to be finalised and the status should remain as 'ongoing'. The Board suggested that draft minutes and progress on action points should be shared early so that these can be confirmed to be complete ahead of the next Board Meeting (**ACTION: EST**).

There was also a discussion of capital expenditure on marketing activity. It had been recommended that the Marketing Sub-Committee should have sight of the associated business cases. The Committee's chair confirmed that details had been received by correspondence but the Committee had not yet had an opportunity to review these.

The Board also commented that the agenda for the current meeting was weighted primarily towards governance matters and suggested that future agendas should feature a greater balance of strategic tourism issues for discussion. Additionally commenting on the level of detail provided in some papers, Members felt that summary reports are sufficient for the Board's purposes.

## **2. Items for Discussion**

### **2 (i) Tourism Events Funding Programme 2025-26**

The Director of Events presented options for an events programme for the coming year. A decision was being sought in the absence of clarity on budgets, and in the context of ongoing discussions with the Department on Tourism NI's vires to provide financial support. While these issues remain to be concluded it was stressed that agreement is needed now on the approach that Tourism NI should take to events.

The recommended option was to maintain the current position and to once again proceed with an International Tourism Events Funding Programme while pausing the National Tourism Events Sponsorship Scheme.

The Board asked when definitive advice on vires from DfE might be expected. Members noted that if an agreed position is not reached then Tourism NI requires a direction from the Department in order to operate an events funding programme. Without this, any scheme would be deemed ultra vires and cannot be implemented.

The Board acknowledged that an immediate decision needed to be taken for the coming year but also stressed the need for a more permanent solution that defines a clear strategic direction for future events support. To this end the Board recommended that Tourism NI should seek to take over development of the NI events framework, work which has to date been led by DfE. Members also stressed the need for clear communications with the events sector about the way forward which should emphasise the need to define a fresh direction for events support. To this end the Board approved Option 2 recommended in the paper and proposed that Tourism NI should write to the Department to outline the Board's recommended course of action (**ACTION: JMcG**).

### **2 (ii) Review of Tourism NI IT and Digital**

The Board was joined by Dave Vincent of Grant Thornton, who had been engaged to produce a report on the way forward for Tourism NI's IT and digital capabilities. It was stressed that Tourism NI's current capacity is not the same as in previous years and is focused primarily on keeping core systems running; however, there is a need to ensure that the skills and capabilities of the existing

staff resource are fully developed and that succession plans are in place for the departure of key staff. In particular, it was emphasised that the team's work requires a different set of skills, having shifted towards contract management and oversight of third party providers. To that end the report proposed the appointment of a G7 Head of IT and Digital, who would report to the Director of Corporate Services and be responsible for developing internal capability as well as oversight of third parties.

The Board commented that the role involved a large number of components and discussed the costs – it was noted that these would be compartmentalised within a number of separate business cases at operational level. The Board noted the report including the proposal to proceed with recruitment of the Head of IT and Digital and the outsourcing of cyber-monitoring, and agreed that the recommendations should be implemented. It was noted that an eventual shift towards a shared service model at the Departmental level may be appropriate.

The Board noted the recommendations of the review.

### **2 (iii) Board Review of Effectiveness Recommendations**

The Director of Corporate Services provided an update on progress against recommendations within the most recent report on the Board's effectiveness. Members indicated that they were broadly content with the progress made and agreed a set of objectives for the Board, including Board Committees functioning in a timely and effective manner; completing the Compliance and Regulatory Framework Review and overseeing successful implementation of its recommendations; undertaking succession planning for CEO and Executive Leadership Team roles; being available to support the work of the ELT; being accessible to staff; identification and effective management of risk; and ensuring robust governance.

Discussing these objectives the Board considered ways in which it could be more accessible to Tourism NI staff and requested contact details for the Executive Leadership Team (**ACTION: EST**). Members asked the objectives should also include better interfacing with Tourism Ireland and Failte Ireland and agendas balanced between governance and tourism matters. (**ACTION: AD**) The Board also agreed that as part of its development it would be useful to undertake further learning journeys and Events was suggested a topical area where this could be beneficial. (**ACTION: AD**)

### **2 (iv) Tourism NI Sponsorship Policy (updated)**

At the last Board Meeting a new sponsorship policy for Tourism NI had been presented. The Board had requested a number of amendments to this and now noted the policy as approved. Members emphasised the need to have clarity as soon as possible on Tourism NI's vires, so that sponsorship requests can be met.

### **2 (v) Scheme of Delegations**

At the last Board meeting members asked for sight of those business cases which had already been submitted directly to the Department for approval and indicate whether any decision may be required on the part of the Board. The Board noted the paper.

## **2 (vi) Board Members' Personal Devices**

A paper was presented setting out options for how Tourism NI could manage secure electronic communications with the Board Members. It was noted that at present members use a mixture of personal mobile devices and email addresses to correspond with TNI, while there is no agreed policy across the Department and its ALBs. The options presented included the provision of Tourism NI-owned laptops and mobile phones; however there was a general consensus that this was not necessary and placed an undue burden on Members. It was felt that a sensible compromise was to provide the Board with individual corporate email addresses, although it was noted that Tourism NI's IT team may require remote access to personal devices in order to erase content in the event of loss or theft. The Board approved this approach. John Hood also requested business cards (**ACTION: EST**).

## **2 (vii) Invest NI – Transfer of Functions**

The Board received an update on work to implement the recommendations of the Lyons review, relating to the transfer of functions from Invest NI back to Tourism NI. The Board was advised that this transfer would require amendments to primary legislation, potentially over a timescale of three to five years. The Board agreed that there was a need to urge the Department to move this forward as quickly as possible, especially since Invest NI is reviewing the portfolio of sectors with which it works and is unlikely to prioritise tourism projects in anticipation of functions transferring. The Board noted that while projects already in hand are progressing no new capital projects are likely to come forward. Members commented that the Department should be made aware that accommodation infrastructure cannot develop unless a way forward is agreed and there is a risk of market failure.

The Board noted the update and suggested that Tourism NI should ask the Department for its plan and timescale arising from the Lyons recommendations (**ACTION: JMcG**)

## **3. Quarter II 2024-25 Performance Reports**

### **3 (i) Operating Plan 2024-25**

A report was presented on progress against Operating Plan objectives at the end of Quarter II. The Board reviewed objectives that remain to be completed and was advised that work had been paused on development of an all-island sustainability mark, in collaboration with Tourism Ireland and Failte Ireland. This was due to the planned introduction of an EU Green Claims Directive. The Board was also advised of the submission of a joint bid with Failte Ireland for Peace Plus funding to support capacity building. Where other work was on hold the Board noted that Tourism NI had progressed matters as far as possible and was awaiting action by partner agencies. The Board was also advised of progress on developing an Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) Framework for Tourism NI, with a focused workshop session being arranged for this purpose. An amber status had also been assigned to City & Growth Deal projects which were not proceeding as quickly as expected.

### **3 (ii) Risk Management**

The Board was provided with an update on the status of the corporate Risk Register at the end of Quarter II. Overall there had been no significant movement on any risks. A useful workshop session had been held, involving members of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and Executive Leadership Team. A further mini-workshop is proposed for spring and the outworkings of this would be brought to the Board in due course.

### **3 (iii) People and Organisational Development**

A report was presented on HR and staffing issues in Quarter II. An update was given on completion rates for mandatory staff training, which had been discussed as part of the cyber security update given at the previous Board meeting. The Board was advised that there had been a reduction in both short-term and long-term sickness absences. Members were advised that the launch of the new corporate values had gone well and reports were given on new initiatives focused on better collaboration and on simplifying work processes.

## **4. Reports**

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

The Board noted the details of engagements undertaken by the Chairman in the period since the last meeting. She welcomed the Permanent Secretary's participation in the last Board Meeting and gave a report on her attendance at a showcase event in Dublin attended by the Minister and centred around a special performance of the play *Agreement* at the Gate Theatre, which was well-received by the audience of media and tour operators. The Chairman also advised that she had given a speech on sustainability at an event in Queen's University.

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

Members noted the content of the Chief Executive's report on current issues. He gave a report on the second meeting of the Minister's Tourism Partnership Board and agreed to share the draft Action Plan with the Board (**ACTION:** JMcG). The Board was advised that while it remains a work in progress, the draft plan does not yet include any cross-government actions and makes no reference to the importance of marketing, or to sub-regional / destination development plans. The Board was also advised of a Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework recently published by the ROI government and it was agreed that a copy of this should be shared with the Board (**ACTION:** JMcG).

A report was also given on a meeting with the CEO of Belfast Harbour. At its last meeting the Board had suggested that VisitBelfast should be asked to undertake an assessment of the value of cruise visitors. Oxford Economics has been engaged to carry out some work on this and the Board was advised that Tourism NI is planning to deliver an industry workshop on how to maximise cruise business. It was noted that some tourism businesses are heavily reliant on income from cruise visitors.

The Board also discussed its visit the previous day to Bushmills Distillery and ways in which it might better position itself as a tourism experience.

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

Reports were given by the Chairs of the Board's Sub-committees as follows:

*Finance & Casework Committee* – The Committee met on 5 November to review a report on Tourism NI's budget position as at the end of Quarter II. While resource budget spend was generally on course at this mid-point in the financial year, there was significant underspend on capital budgets. While assurance had been given that spend will pick up in the remaining two quarters the Committee chair commented that there would be a need to be more realistic about the figures and also, to see plans for surrendering resource should that prove necessary.

*Marketing Sub-Committee* – the Committee had not met in the period since the last Board Meeting. However its Terms of Reference had been revised and circulated by correspondence for approval. The Board was content to note the revisions to the Terms of Reference.

*Audit & Risk Assurance Committee* – a report was given on the Committee's meeting held on 6 November. The Committee had discussed progress on the external review, noting that completion of many of the recommendations would be dependent on the outcome of continuing discussions with the Department on Tourism NI's vires. An update was given on the policy review; a revised fraud policy is expected to come to the Committee's next meeting for approval and this will inform future audits. The audit timetable remains to be confirmed and will be discussed in due course. A mid-year assurance statement was presented and the Board was also advised that a great deal of work had been done on assurance mapping. A revised timescale for approval of the annual report and accounts was set out and an update was also given on the Departmental accounts.

Thanks were extended to all sub-committee members for their work.

### **5. Items for Noting**

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

The Board noted the content of a report on visitor performance and trends and commented that the figures appeared soft.

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

A draft agenda was presented for the next Board meeting, which is due to be held at Tourism NI Headquarters with a visit beforehand to the site of the Belfast Stories project.

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

#### **6 (i) VisitBritain Board Observer**

The Board agreed that Karly Greene should replace Aileen Martin as Tourism NI's observer at VisitBritain Board meetings, as Aileen now had completed her year in the role.

## 6 (ii) Tourism Ireland Funding

At the outset of this discussion the Chief Executive declared a conflict of interest as a Board Member of Tourism Ireland. He advised the Board of correspondence received from DfE's Permanent Secretary in relation to a request to make a payment to Tourism Ireland. The Minister had signalled his intent to provide additional funding of £7m to Tourism Ireland for marketing activity. This would require approval by the North-South Ministerial Council of a revised business case. While the First Minister and Deputy First Minister had indicated that they were content, the decision to call a general election in the ROI meant that the NSMC could not meet to approve the business case in November as had been planned. As a result, if the resource is provided to Tourism Ireland the spend would be deemed irregular until the NSMC can meet to grant retrospective approval. Since Tourism NI is the conduit by which DfE provides resource to Tourism Ireland the irregular payment would therefore appear in Tourism NI's accounts.

The Board discussed whether the Permanent Secretary's correspondence provided sufficient assurance to make the payment, or whether Tourism NI should ask for a Ministerial / Departmental Direction. Members commented that the Board needed to take the decision in order to remove the onus from the Chief Executive. Whilst accepting the rationale for the approach, the Board also expressed disquiet that Tourism NI was being put in this position.

The Board proposed that Tourism NI should reply to the Department indicating that it would comply with the request, on the understanding that provision of the funds to Tourism Ireland is at the express wish of the Minister and taking assurance from the Permanent Secretary's letter (**ACTION: JMcG**).

It was proposed that the ARAC Chair and the Director of Corporate Services should consider the Board's oversight role, including whether the Board's approval of the Tourism NI budget for the year, which includes pass through of Tourism Ireland funding, implicitly includes release of the payments to TI (**ACTION: AD**).

As there were no other items of business the Chair thanked Members and brought the meeting to a close.

## 7. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Thursday 12 December at Tourism NI Headquarters.