

Board Meeting 15 May 2024

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST
ON WEDNESDAY 15 MAY 2024**

Participating:

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

In attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive (from item 2 (iii) on)
- Mr John West, Strategic Adviser to the Board
- Ms Diane Edgington, Boardroom Apprentice
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman and Board Members held a brief closed session prior to commencing the meeting proper.

The Chairman welcomed those present and advised that the Chief Executive would join the meeting later, to permit him to attend a meeting of the NI Assembly's Economy Committee.

There were no apologies. 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 Monday 21st March were presented for approval. The Board requested that the minute relating to item 2(ii) – Certification should be amended to more fully reflect the Board’s decision to approve Option 2 in principle, but proposing a round sum amount for certain accommodation types and applying a reasonable uplift across all categories rather than setting a fixed percentage change. The Board had asked for an updated paper to be presented. It was confirmed that the Q&S team had received the Board’s feedback and was working on a draft Business Case for submission to DfE on 17 May 2024. The Director of Strategic Development agreed to provide an update to the Board once the Department’s consideration of the Business Case had been progressed. **(ACTION: DR)**.

In respect of item 2 (iv) it was agreed that the minutes should be amended to record that the Board had again stressed the need to monitor cumulative spend on the Data Hub and to reflect the timeline of past decisions by the Board, as this had not featured in the most recent paper.

A further small factual amendment was requested at item 3 (iii) to record that the Audit Committee chair and the Board’s strategic adviser had met with Internal Audit Service .

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.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Tourism NI Carbon Footprint Action Plan

The Board was presented with a paper setting out the findings of a specialist evaluation of Tourism NI’s baseline greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, along with recommendations and an Action Plan arising from this work. The Board was advised that the project formed part of a wider Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) framework being developed for Tourism NI during 2024/25. The Board was advised that the recommended action represented the ‘do maximum’ option, with an estimated cost of circa £5.5m and associated savings of £3.4m over the period to 2050. . The rationale was that in encouraging the industry to act more sustainably, Tourism NI should demonstrate that it is fulfilling its own obligations in respect of reducing its emissions. The plans would be conditional on the budget settlement that Tourism NI receives in coming years.

Discussing the proposals, the Board welcomed the proactive approach of the ELT in developing a baseline assessment of the organisation’s carbon impact. It was recognised too that it was important for Tourism NI to provide leadership in this area to the wider tourism industry.

The Board commented that some of the proposals in the plan would require DfE and/or DoF approval, or would potentially require new or revised NICS policies e.g. relocating from Linum Chambers to an EPC A rated office with a green energy supply. The Board also observed that the proposal to acquire a set of electric vehicles for Q&S advisors undertaking physical inspections should await the outcome of the certification review as Tourism NI’s statutory functions in this area may change. It was noted that staff commuting to the office in a sustainable manner would be encouraged by current car parking provision ceasing on 31 May 2024.

In conclusion, the Board agreed that it supported in principle the ambition of the organisation to accelerate progress towards a net zero position, albeit that further consideration was needed on the proposed options. Board Members recognised that this area of policy was evolving and that it was important that Tourism NI's approach aligned with the broader NICS and cross departmental policy in relevant areas.

In the interim, the Board agreed that the ELT should focus on those actions within its control where progress can be made in further reducing the organisation's carbon footprint in the short to medium term. A summary action plan was requested for consideration by Board Members at a future meeting. (**ACTION: DR**).

2 (ii) Stakeholder Engagement Plan

The Board was presented with a draft stakeholder engagement matrix and plan, arising from recommendations within the recent independent review of Board Effectiveness. The plan seeks to support Board Members in better using their roles and time to promote Tourism NI's strategic aims and delivery of the emerging Corporate Plan. The plan also sets out details of the key audiences that the Board should engage with including Government and industry partners. It was emphasised that the plan will need to take into account the role and activity of the new Tourism Working Group that the Minister proposes to establish. The Board discussed the relationship between Tourism NI and other UK national tourism agencies, as well as Failte Ireland. Members suggested that the list of audiences should be expanded to include the six NI Further Education Colleges and other government departments such as DAERA, the Department for Communities and the Department of Infrastructure. They also suggested that the list of planned engagements should include the 'deep dive' sessions held prior to each Board Meeting. (**ACTION: DR**)

At this point the Chief Executive joined the meeting and provided a brief report on his participation that morning in a briefing on tourism to the NI Executive's Economy Committee.

2 (iii) Republic of Ireland Brands

On taking up post the new Minister for the Economy had set out a number of priorities for tourism, amongst them a proposal to explore ways in which the ROI's experience brands might be extended into the North. The Board was provided with a paper setting out the current status of each brand, ideas for what Tourism NI might do to synergise with these and areas in which close collaboration is already underway. It was suggested that it might be useful for the Minister to meet with all relevant partners north and south to gain a greater understanding of their perspectives on the brands. Members were advised that Tourism Ireland is in the process of carrying out market research to evaluate brand uplift. Tourism NI itself could point to evidence demonstrating the boost in visitor performance achieved since the launch of Embrace A Giant Spirit and Tourism Ireland had been positive about the reaction that EAGS had received in the Great Britain market. It was emphasised that it would be important for Tourism NI to retain the EAGS brand identity, but it was also important to recognise that extending the ROI brands and EAGS are not mutually exclusive.

The Board agreed there was a need to better understand how the brands would link up. The Chief Executive advised Board members that the three agencies were considering projects which could strengthen the product offer in the border regions with a view to making further bids to the Shared Island Fund. The Director of Strategic Development was asked to bring a paper to the

Board setting out how projects supported by the Shared Island Programme, in particular those on the Causeway Coastal Route, would link with the ROI brands (**ACTION: DR**).

2 (iv) Major Events Update

It was agreed to postpone this item until the next meeting.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chair's Report

The Board noted the list of engagements undertaken by the Chairman since the last Board Meeting. She advised that there were a small number of engagements that had been omitted from the list and asked for these to be added. The Board's dinner at Killeavy Castle was noted to have been a very positive and a useful first engagement with the Minister. The Chairman and Board also commended Tourism NI staff for their professional delivery of a number of excellent high-profile events in recent weeks including a leisure business showcase evening in Dublin, the extended Meet the Buyer workshop and the Tourism Conference.

3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

Members noted the content of the Chief Executive's report on current issues and he drew the Board's attention to a number of key items:

Research and Insights - The Central Statistics Office had released the result of its household tourism survey – while the results were noted to be very positive the Board was advised that Tourism NI had undertaken its own research, the results of which suggested that growth reported for 2023 from the Republic of Ireland might not be as high as the CSO figures suggest.

Budget Allocation - The Board was also advised that Tourism NI had just been informed of its likely budget allocation for the 2024-25 financial year, which is likely to be similar to its final budget at the end of FY2023-24, around £22m. Members enquired about the capital resource allocation. They were advised that this is expected to be the same as last year and the Executive Leadership Team is to work on aligning the budget to a revised Operating Plan which will be brought to the next Board Meeting for approval (**ACTION: JMcG**).

Members discussed the potential for reputational damage if resource needs to be surrendered, bearing in mind the impact of budgetary constraints on Tourism NI's events schemes. . The Chief Executive advised that he did not see any likelihood of resource budget being surrendered and advised the Board that part of the discussion at that morning's meeting of the Economy Committee centred on the reasons as to why a number of events had not attracted support from the International Tourism Events Fund.

Political Tourism – The Board had been advised that another of the Minister's priorities was to see a greater level of promotion of 'political tourism' that tells the story of Northern Ireland's recent history. The Chief Executive advised that he was considering the setting up of a steering group to look at how this could be best done whilst also considering issues relating to the quality of the product which have been raised by a number of tour operators.

The Chief Executive also reported on a very positive meeting with the new management team at the *Game of Thrones* Studio Tour and on the engagement of Dave Vincent of Grant Thornton to undertake a review of Tourism NI's IT capabilities.

3 (iii) Sub Committee Reports

The chairs of Board sub-committees reported on recent meetings as follows:

Finance & Casework Committee – a report was given on a meeting of the Committee held on 7 May. The Committee approved revised Terms of Reference, and noted the format of a Contract for Funding for City and Region Growth Deals that defines more clearly the responsibilities of Tourism NI, its funding partners and project promoters.

The Committee also reviewed a report on the final 2023-24 budget outturn, with the final budget spend coming within the tolerances set by the Department. An update was given on the Shared Island Programme and the Committee also ratified its approval by correspondence of the recommendations for events to be supported under the International Tourism Events Funding programme.

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee – The ARAC met on 8 May and reviewed its Terms of Reference, recommending that the Board approve these. A paper was presented to the Committee advising that Tourism NI had sought clarification from the Department of how it would define an 'IT Project' and subsequently, had requested retrospective approval from DfE for a number of business cases for IT projects. The Committee had recommended that in future any concerns of this nature should be brought immediately to the attention of ARAC members as well as to DfE. It was also agreed that the Chief Executive and Director of Corporate Services should consider the timetabling of Oversight and Liaison meetings with DfE to ensure that these align with ARAC meetings and adequate time exist to seek assurance. The Board was advised that the Annual Assurance Statement had been amended to include the issue relating to the retrospective approval of IT related business cases.

The ARAC had also reviewed Tourism NI's performance against its Operating Plan on an 'in principle' basis and had recommended that in developing the next plan, the executive team should seek to make objectives SMARTer as well as being more specific about the objectives / outcomes the plan is seeking to deliver and how the risks associated with these are identified and defined.

The Board was advised that it is proposed to convene a workshop with Board Members to help develop the new risk register and it was agreed that Aine Gallagher should lead this – a date remains to be agreed (**ACTION: AD**).

The Board remarked that there was a need to understand both the Department's and the Minister's appetite for risk and it was agreed that the Chief Executive should request a copy of DfE's risk appetite statement. (**ACTION: JMCG**)

Internal Audit Service had presented five final reports, four of which had "satisfactory" findings. The Co-Operative Marketing Scheme received a Limited Opinion. Internal Audit also presented their Annual Report which was also rated as "satisfactory". The Board was also pleased to note positive feedback from both IAS and the Department on the willingness of Tourism NI staff to engage with audit exercises and also, to proactively raise issues and seek advice.

An update was also given on progress towards completing work to sign off Tourism NI's 2022-23 Annual Report and Accounts, and the Board was advised that it is hoped that a more normal timeframe will be in place to complete the 2023-24 audit exercise. Updates were also given on assurance mapping and the Board was also advised that the Director of Marketing is commencing a phased return to work after sickness absence. An early priority will be to get the Marketing sub-committee up and running as soon as possible – however the ARAC will continue to monitor the reporting on implementation of recommendations arising from the review of fam trips.

The Board noted the updates and approved the Committees Terms of Reference.

4. Quarter IV 2023-24 Reports

4 (i) Operating Plan – Performance Monitoring

The Board noted a report setting out Tourism NI's end-of-year performance against objectives in its 2023-24 Operating Plan. While the majority of objectives were met in full it was clear that some of the outputs defined at the start of the year had not reflected Tourism NI's actual performance in delivery, as the outcomes were being influenced by matters beyond Tourism NI's power to control – for example the need to liaise with the Department on developing new fee structures for inspections. For the new Operating Plan, the Executive team would be giving consideration to how outcomes can better reflect the true activity undertaken by the organisation..

4 (ii) Risk Management

The Board noted the report on risk management in the final quarter.

4 (iii) People and Organisational Development Report

A report was presented on HR and staff development activity in Quarter 4. Reviewing this, the Board proposed that the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee should receive reports on the levels of completion of mandatory staff training (**ACTION:** AD).

An update was given on progress with a review of Tourism NI's corporate values.

The Board also noted a year-on-year comparison of sickness absence and was advised that the current overall absence level was impacted by a small number of long-term absences. It was also emphasised that 71 employees had taken no leave of absence for sickness during the past year. Hybrid working arrangements were discussed and the Board commented that the executive team should put measures in place to assure themselves that the requirement to work two days in the office (or in the field with industry) is adhered to by all staff.

Members were advised of the status of a high-level management review by PA Consulting and asked that when completed, the report should come to the Board for discussion (**ACTION:** JMcG).

5. Papers for Noting

5 (i) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the content of an update on key visitor trends and insights.

5 (ii) Draft Agenda for June Board Meeting

A draft agenda for the next Board meeting was noted. The Chairman advised as the venue originally is unavailable, alternatives are being considered. The Board discussed options for this.

Following the deep dive presentation given prior to the Board Meeting by Maritime Belfast, Members also agreed that Belfast City Council should be invited to present its wider plans for tourism in Belfast – this is in addition to the update that had already been requested specifically on the Belfast Stories project, which is planned for the autumn (**ACTION: JMcG**).

6. Any Other Business

6 (i) Boardroom Apprentice

The Chairman advised that the organisers of the Boardroom Apprentice programme had been in touch to advise that they did not have any confirmed plans to run the programme again later this year.

6 (ii) Tourism Strategy

An update was given on development of the draft Tourism Strategy. Members were advised that the Minister intends to establish a Tourism Partnership Group which will help to put in place an Action Plan, using the feedback to industry consultation carried out earlier in the year.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Thursday 27 June.