

Board Meeting 3 October 2024

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT THE LOUGH ERNE RESORT, ENNISKILLEN
ON THURSDAY 3 OCTOBER 2024**

Participating:

- Ms Ellvena Graham OBE (Chairman)
- Ms Aileen Martin
- Ms Áine Gallagher
- 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
- Mr Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, DfE
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Services (items)
- Mr Brian Gillanders, IT Services Manager (item)
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

- Ms Karly Greene

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed those present. 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 in the course of the meeting.

The Board agreed to defer approval of the previous meeting's minutes until later in the meeting, to permit a discussion with DfE's Permanent Secretary at the outset.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Discussion with Permanent Secretary of the Department for the Economy (DfE)

The Board was joined by Mr Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary of DfE, for a discussion of the current strategic and budgetary landscape. The NI Executive recently published its draft Programme for Government; at the same time DfE produced a Three-Year Look Forward and Action Plan, aligned to the PfG and the Minister's economic priorities. DfE's focus would be on delivering against these objectives during the remainder of the Assembly's mandate. Progress on achieving the outcomes would help to define future strategic targets. Members raised the status of the draft Tourism Strategy and were advised that the Minister's immediate focus is on developing an Action Plan for tourism, which represents an outworking of the process to develop the strategy.

A draft sub-regional action plan had also been published, central to which is the establishment of a series of regional partnerships, devolving some strategic decision making. Members asked if this might mean a reallocation of resources and were advised that any funding requirement must be met from within the existing Departmental budget and may require some reliance on existing organisations and structures. Discussing how delivery will be achieved on the ground, the Board remarked that some council areas are better geared up to do this than others, and that collaborative models may differ from region to region.

Members also discussed best use of collective resources, recommending a focus on product and destination development rather than sub-regional marketing activity. The Board commented that its visit the previous day to Cuilcagh and the Marble Arch Caves underlined a need for some council-led amenities and attractions to be more commercialised and to update the experiences that they offer, perhaps by considering revenue-raising measures. It was noted that a solid evidence base of consumer sentiment analysis exists to support local authorities in identifying how best to focus their efforts, an approach which had helped to refine City & Growth Deal projects. The Board discussed the impact of the UK government's decision to pause some of the projects.

Discussions moved on to the proposal to transfer some Invest NI functions to Tourism NI and the likely timeline for this. The Board asked the Chief Executive to bring an update paper to the next meeting (**ACTION:** JMcG). Members suggested a multi-year capital expenditure programme is needed to support the upgrading of older visitor attractions. While much of the Executive's capex budget is already committed to priorities such as housing, it was observed that not all projects require major construction work and much could be done to refresh facilities for a small outlay.

The Board also raised Tourism NI's dependence on monitoring rounds for additional resource and suggested that more could be achieved if appropriate resource is allocated at the outset of the financial year; however it was acknowledged that the budget picture is likely to be challenging for some time to come.

The recent review of Tourism NI's regulatory and legislative framework was touched on and it was noted that Tourism NI is awaiting advice from the Department in order to progress a number of matters, including payments to clients. DfE was acknowledged for its role in supporting the resolution of these issues.

The Board also raised the need for an agreed Northern Ireland events framework to give clarity on the process and criteria for securing major events, in particular to prevent lobbying. Members also discussed what Northern Ireland's role might be as one of the host nations for the 2028 European Championships, now that no matches will be played here.

The Permanent Secretary also stated that the Department is establishing a foresight group to help meet its obligations under the Climate Change Act, as the delivery timeframe for actions is narrowing.

Drawing the discussion to a close the Chairman thanked the Permanent Secretary for his time and invited him to observe the remainder of the meeting.

2 (ii) Tourism NI Sponsorship Policy

The Director of Corporate Services joined the meeting for the next three items and presented a new draft sponsorship policy. This proposed a number of changes to achieve greater consistency of approach in the evaluation and approval of requests for sponsorship, to improve the quality of applications received by Tourism NI and to strengthen the process of post project evaluation. The new policy was also noted to require applications to align with priorities identified by the Minister.

The Board noted the distinction between events supported by this scheme, which are corporate in nature, and those events which, until its suspension, were supported under the National Tourism Events Sponsorship Scheme, which are aimed at attracting visitors. Members asked if there was any risk that sponsorship might be provided to events that do not align with Tourism NI's corporate values. They suggested that this should be reflected in the application and in any conditions attached to an offer of sponsorship. The Board was advised that Karly Greene had suggested consideration be given to including an appeals mechanism.

Members also asked if there should be an upper limit on sponsorship and were advised that in the case of larger requests for support, approval would be sought from the relevant sub-committee of the Board. The Board asked for the scheme to be presented again at its next meeting, with amendments reflecting Members' comments (**ACTION: AD**).

2 (iii) Cyber Security Update

Tourism NI's IT services Manager joined the meeting for this item. The Board noted a report on the findings of an independent review of Tourism NI's cyber security measures. Broadly these were found to be robust. Some instances were highlighted in which multi-factor authentication of accounts could not be completed, for example in relation to room bookings and shared mailboxes. There were noted to be mitigating factors but while the assessors accepted these, they had not been reflected in the assessment score. It was stressed that the risk of unauthorised access remains limited. However in other respects the security posture is strong and in many instances, in advance of measures in place elsewhere within NICS. The Board was advised that the report had made a series of recommendations, a number of which are things that Tourism NI already does as a matter of course. It was noted that Tourism NI's Cyber Security Centre accreditation is reviewed on an annual basis. The Board was also assured that the infrastructure in place to support secure remote working is robust.

The Board noted details of the results of phishing exercises to test staff awareness and vigilance, and Members asked if there was any sanction for staff members who repeatedly failed such tests, or if these are reflected in performance reviews. The Board suggested there was a need to update the IT policy to make such measures explicit and recommended benchmarking this against practice elsewhere within the public sector (**ACTION: AD**).

2 (iv) Scheme of Delegations

The Board was asked to approve an amendment to Tourism NI's scheme of delegations, arising from the recent review of Tourism NI's legislative and regulatory framework. This recommended that a delegated limit should be set for resource expenditure business cases. It was proposed that for business cases of £1m or more, endorsement should be required from the relevant Board sub-committee (either Finance & Casework or Marketing) and approval sought from the Board.

The Board approved the amendment and suggested that the Committees should be given a forward indication of the cases likely to come before them for this purpose. Members noted that there may have been instances in the past of business cases submitted directly to the Department for approval and asked the Executive Team to provide details of these, and indicate whether any decision may be required on the part of the Board (**ACTION: AD**).

2 (v) Shared Island Programme Update

The Board received an update on work in partnership with Tourism Ireland and Failte Ireland to deliver collaborative programmes of activity through the Shared Island Initiative. This included further discussions to explore the best means of delivering the Minister's objective of extending Failte Ireland experience brands into NI, and how these might be collectively promoted with resource from the Shared Island Fund. The Board was advised of Failte Ireland's stance in respect of each brand. It was noted that the best prospect for a pilot brand extension is the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand, which already has strong linkages with Fermanagh and the Cuilcagh Geopark. As an assurance is needed of community buy-in, Tourism NI was organising a series of workshops. It was emphasised however that this did not represent an uncoupling of Fermanagh from the NI experience brand, but rather an additional opportunity.

The Board asked if there was industry support for the proposals; broadly, the trade appears positive with some businesses believing their products would be better aligned to the Wild Atlantic Way brand than to Ireland's Hidden Heartlands due to their proximity to the Donegal Coast. Members also discussed the likely budget requirements and the need to balance this with the demands of other regions. It was emphasised that as much of the Shared Island Fund represents capital resource there may be opportunities from some projects to benefit from this. It was also stressed that the Northern Ireland Embrace A Giant Spirit brand has met with a strong positive response from ROI visitors, a success which must continue to be built upon. It will be critical to develop an evidence base giving a clear picture of the performance of each of the brands.

An overview was given of the cross-border activity currently taking place and the three bids in development for Shared Island funding. The Board was advised that Tourism Ireland would be responsible for the relevant budgets with Tourism NI acting in an advisory role.

Noting the update, the Board asked if there might be potential also to extend the Hidden Heartlands brand into mid-Ulster and the Sperrins, with Derry positioned as an access point / gateway to this as well as to the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway Coastal Route.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chair's Report

The Board noted a list of engagements undertaken by the Chairman since the last Board Meeting. She reported on a visit to the Belfast Cruise Terminal and advised that support might be sought from Tourism NI when the terminal relocates. The Board were informed of the Harbour's plans to bid for Shared Island Funds with Cork Harbour. It was noted that any such application must be considered in the context of other projects that may come forward. There was also a need to establish a clear picture of the value of cruise visitors to the economy and the Board recommended that VisitBelfast should be approached to undertake a survey for this purpose (**ACTION:** JMcG).

The Chairman also reported on a recent dinner with prospective US investors at the Ballyedmond Estate. She advised that she had met with Heather McLachlan of the National Trust. One of the issues they had discussed was cruise tour visits. The Board noted that the Causeway Visitor Centre had been taking a 'just in time' approach to coach tours recently, turning away groups that arrived early or late. The Board discussed the impact of this approach and in particular expressed concern at the message this would send to tour operators. There is anecdotal evidence operators were already de-programming the Giants Causeway creating a reluctance to programme other Northern Ireland destinations. They suggested the issue should be raised when the Executive Team next meets the Trust.

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:

Tourism Strategic Partnership Board – A report was given on the first meeting of the group established by the Minister to develop a draft Action Plan for Tourism. It is envisaged that there will be three workshops in total, with the draft plan completed by the end of November.

Sub-Regional Action Plan – The Board was advised that DfE had recently sought Tourism NI's input to the draft sub-regional action plan which the Permanent Secretary had mentioned earlier in the course of the meeting.

Electronic Travel Authorisations (ETAs) – the Board was advised that discussions were continuing at all levels with the UK Home Office in relation to its proposal to require visitors to Ireland to complete ETAs for cross-border travel. Indications are that the new UK government intends to proceed with implementation. It was noted that any visitors to Northern Ireland who have not completed an ETA will be uninsured, representing a further complication for tour operators. The Board discussed comments from Belleek Pottery at the previous evening's dinner, indicating the impact that this would have on the coach tour business upon which the Pottery is reliant. The Chief Executive agreed to relay this feedback to the relevant officials in the Department.

Visit Derry – The Chief Executive reported on a recent meeting with Visit Derry, which had made a bid to DfE for funding of £391k. Derry City and Strabane District Council had reduced its financial contribution to Visit Derry and had indicated that it has no plans to reinstate the resource. The Board agreed with the Executive Team that there was no mechanism by which Tourism NI could provide any additional funding and was advised that Tourism NI's Head of Regions has been considering how to proceed.

Irish Open – the Board commended the Director of Events and her team for their work on Tourism NI's contribution to the hugely successful and well-received event. It was noted that the Minister had also been impressed with the work Tourism NI had done and the scale of the event.

Effie Awards – The Board was pleased to note that Tourism NI had been nominated together with BBDO for three prestigious Effie Awards for marketing. The ceremony is due to be held in Dublin later in the month.

Tourism Hub – A report was given on the opening of Tourism NI's new hub in Dublin. It was noted that the office is a well-located and cost-effective meeting space that will provide an excellent soft power resource in ROI, with good opportunities for collaboration and for building relationships with other agencies.

3 (iii) Sub Committee Reports

While there was no new sub-committee business to report, the Board noted a written report from the chair of the Marketing Committee on its meeting held on 7 August. It was noted that a verbal report on the proceedings had already been given at the last Board meeting, and the Board had approved separate business cases endorsed by the Committee, for website and agency procurement.

4. Items for Noting

4 (i) Market Outlook Update

The Board noted the content of a report on visitor performance and trends.

4 (ii) Draft Agenda for November Board Meeting

A draft agenda was noted for the next Board meeting, which is due to be held in the Causeway Coast area. The Board was advised that the itinerary will include a visit to see the Dunluce Lodge project and Members asked for arrangements to be confirmed as soon as possible (**ACTION: EST**).

5. Any Other Business

5 (i) Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

The Board approved the minutes of its previous meeting held on 14 August.

5 (ii) Matters Arising

The Board noted updates on action points from previous meetings. A query was raised in relation to an action arising from the deep dive presentation on a learning journey to Slovenia in March 2023, suggesting that Tourism NI should undertake benchmarking exercises against other sustainable tourism destinations, and it was confirmed that this activity is taking place.

5 (iii) Certification and Grading Fees for Visitor Accommodation

The Chief Executive advised that draft Business Cases were submitted to the Department for consideration in May. The Business Cases set out three options, with a preferred option of 50% cost recovery for each scheme as endorsed by the Board at its March meeting.

Detailed feedback was received from the Department in August which has now been considered by the Executive Team. The Board was advised that the preferred option of Departmental officials is for the full recovery of costs. Ultimately, the revised fee structure will be subject to Ministerial approval, following a public consultation exercise.

The Chief Executive advised that the Executive Team now proposed that the revised fees for the Certification Scheme would be on a full cost recovery basis. The Business Case for the Grading Scheme would be amended to set out three options for revised fees (full cost recovery, 75% cost recovery and 50% cost recovery).

The Board endorsed the amended proposals for submission to the Department and agreed that if further amendments prove necessary they can be presented for its consideration.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to be held on Thursday 14 November at the offices of Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council in Coleraine.