

Board Meeting 16 December 2021

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD BY REMOTE CALL
ON THURSDAY 16 DECEMBER 2021**

Participating:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Mr John West
- Ms Patricia Corbett
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Colin Neill
- Mr Terry McCartney
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Ms Sarah Jayne Smith, Boardroom Apprentice
- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development
- Ms Jill O'Reilly, Director of Organisational Development and HR
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies: None

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed participants and prefaced the meeting with a reminder that minutes of the meeting will be published.

Participants were asked if they wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items. Michele Shirlow advised of a potential interest in relation to an update on the Experience Development Programme, as part of a report on the recent Finance and Casework Committee meeting.

1 (i) Minutes of Previous Board Meeting

Minutes of the Board Meeting held on 4th November 2021 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 on a number of actions. The Chief Executive advised that he would give an update on Tourism NI's bids to the Comprehensive Spending Review in the course of the meeting. Following a discussion at

the last Board Meeting, he advised conversations are ongoing with the Department as to how major events should be funded and delivered in future years. The Department for Economy (DfE) is developing a policy paper on the issue which is currently the subject of a discussion with the Department for Communities (DfC). The Board stressed the need for progress on the issue as soon as possible and the Chairman undertook to raise the issue at the debrief meeting with the Department. John West offered to participate in the discussions with DfC if this were deemed to be helpful.

The Board was also advised that the Minister had again indicated his willingness to join the Board's forthcoming strategic awayday, depending upon diary commitments. The Chief Executive also indicated that he wished to discuss arrangements for forthcoming Board Meetings generally, as an item of any other business.

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Staff Wellbeing and the Future of Work

At its last meeting the Board requested a briefing on measures put in place by Tourism NI to protect the wellbeing of its staff in response to COVID and in a remote working environment. The Director of Organisational Development and HR delivered a presentation setting out the range of initiatives to support staff, as well as the work being done to assess how staff could be assisted to perform effectively within a future hybrid environment of remote work and hotdesking.

The efficacy of these measures had been tested in a series of staff surveys. Key features of the Health and Wellbeing Programme for 2021 were outlined along with staff's responses indicating which features of the programme had been most helpful. The survey of working arrangements highlighted what staff see as the key challenges to be addressed including the maintenance of a work-life balance and especially, mental health.

The Board was impressed by the high level of engagement with the programmes and the level of response from staff members to the surveys, by comparison with similar exercises in the NI Civil Service. It was emphasised that Tourism NI senior management had been careful to focus on refining the programme in a measured way, developing those measures which had proved most impactful. The internal communications element had been particularly important in ensuring that staff remained connected and motivated. The Board remarked that the success of the programme was evident as the organisation continued to function as a cohesive whole and a series of clearly defined teams, from senior management down.

The results of the survey on future working arrangements were similar to those coming from studies by the CBI, IOD and other major employers. The Board was also advised of positive feedback from the remote induction process for new staff who had joined the organisation during this period. The survey sought to identify investment that might be required ahead of the end of the financial year.

The Board also discussed costs associated with facilitating home working in terms of equipment and energy use. It was emphasised that there was a need to consider how sustainable long-term remote working might be and whether the more usual office environment creates greater efficiencies leading to a lower carbon footprint. In terms of first principles, the Board felt more consideration should be given to how effectively Tourism NI can connect with and support the

industry in the remote environment and how in the longer term, the physical and mental resilience of staff and general organisational morale might be affected. Members felt these issues all needed to be weighed up to arrive at a balanced approach. It was also observed that positive changes in organisational culture had been taking place ahead of the pandemic – these were informing matters such as recruitment and selection and the move towards a sustainable, regenerative approach to strategy. The Board commended the management team for the work done in these areas and thanked the Director of HR for the update.

Michele Shirlow left the meeting to permit the next item to be discussed.

2 (ii) Food NI Sponsorship Request

It was previously agreed that the Board should consider sponsorship requests received from organisations with which Board Members are involved. Accordingly, the Board was now presented with a request for sponsorship received from Food NI. This proposed a new sustainable food programme aligned to both the Northern Ireland Embrace a Giant Spirit and the Our Food – Power of Good brands. Central to the plans is a sustainable Month of Food and Drink, suggested for March 2022 and details of the programme were outlined. The submission also included proposals for a sustainability charter and for new food and drink experiences. The Senior Management Team had already agreed that the proposals represented value for money in line with previous similar initiatives of this nature. Additionally the submission presented a positive initiative for the sector which Tourism NI alone would not currently have the capacity to deliver.

Discussing the submission the Board considered the risk associated with delivery on the part of Food NI, given the current pandemic situation. Members agreed that it appeared to demonstrate good alignment with Tourism NI's strategic objectives, but emphasised the need for evidence of how current risks associated with Covid-19 can be mitigated. It was suggested that sponsorship should be conditional on delivery of a detailed project plan with clear objectives that must be fulfilled in order to draw down support. The Board also agreed that proposals for a toolkit to support the positioning and viability of businesses were essential. Noting that a recent sustainability workshop had attracted a huge industry response, Members remarked that Tourism NI had an important role to play in providing guidance and leadership in this area. They also commented that a level of risk had to be accepted in order to show commitment to the industry, but there was a need to be realistic about what can be delivered within the constraints imposed by the current situation. The Board approved the sponsorship and recommended the need to carefully evaluate return on investment and proposed that the Finance and Casework Committee could review the project plan for this purpose, with Michele Shirlow recusing herself from any relevant discussions. The Board also recommended that an evaluation grid should be drawn up to allow the benefits of such projects to be assessed in a consistent fashion (**ACTION: DR / AK**).

The Board discussed more generally how the emergence of further Covid variants might impact upon Tourism NI's ability to deliver on all its activities and use all the resources allocated to it. It was noted that at this stage in the financial year it would not be possible to surrender further unspent funds.

2 (iii) Belfast City Council Ten Year Tourism Plan

The Board was joined by Eimear Henry of Belfast City Council, who delivered a presentation on the Council's draft Tourism Plan, titled *Make Yourself At Home*, which is currently out for public

consultation. The plan was developed out of work on a cultural strategy for the city which had commenced prior to the pandemic, and covers planning for the future of tourism in the city in the period up to 2030. Central to the plan were four ambitious themes – growth (doubling the value of tourism to the city’s economy); positioning, from marketing to enabling; experience, creating a city of stories from new and existing experiences; and sustainability, ensuring tourism development that is socially engaged. On this latter point the Board was advised that in 2020 Belfast had joined the Global Development Sustainability Index and had already moved up from the lower ranking destinations to the top 20.

The Board was also briefed on three catalyst projects that will be at the heart of the tourism plan, including the Belfast Stories project being announced that same week which will provide another major anchor attraction in the city centre by 2028.

Discussion focussed on the governance, investment and skills infrastructure required to ensure that the plan can be delivered. Also raised was the need for alignment between Tourism NI’s strategic objectives and those of local authorities, to identify synergies and make the most effective use of resources. It was agreed that a link to the full plan should be shared with Board Members so that they could give further consideration to this (**ACTION: JD**).

The Board observed there was a need to secure accreditation on sustainability across the whole of Northern Ireland. Members also remarked that the ambitious goals set out in the plan underlined the need for urgent progress on a Northern Ireland tourism strategy that will ensure that Tourism NI and local authorities can direct resources and effort to achieve shared goals; in addition the organisations needed to share a consistent narrative that clearly defines these agreed goals.

Discussions also touched on the role of VisitBelfast in supporting delivery of the Business Tourism Strategy, and how strategic tourism plans might support the promotion of the skills agenda and employability in the tourism sector.

Noting the content of the presentation the Board thanked Eimear Henry for the presentation and she advised that the Council would look forward to Tourism NI’s formal response to the consultation.

3. Reports

3 (i) Chairman’s Report

Members noted engagements undertaken since the last Board meeting and the Chairman reported on the most recent debrief meeting with DfE. The Board discussed changes in the senior management at the Department.

3 (ii) Chief Executive’s Report

The content of the report was noted and the Chief Executive gave updates on a number of issues:

Budgetary Constraints – the Board received an update on recent discussions with DfE officials regarding inescapable budgetary commitments into next year. Members were advised that it was unlikely that any further resource would be made available under the Economic Recovery Action

Plan (ERAP). In addition, the Department of Finance had published its proposed budget and indications were that most government departments would be required to identify savings of at least 2%. In the interim DfE had asked Tourism NI not to make any further commitments for next year. The Board was advised of the likelihood that this could also affect work to implement the new organisational structure.

Discussing in-year spend, the Board was advised that there was a need also to consider the appropriateness of carrying out marketing now, given the likelihood that the emerging surge in infections might result in new restrictions. It was noted that Tourism Ireland is pausing international activity. Indications are that consumers are booking at short notice, mindful of the potential for restrictions on travel – as a result it was felt that promotional efforts should best be focussed on online activity to keep Northern Ireland front of mind, without making any calls to action in the current circumstances.

The Board was also advised that consideration is being given to reallocating resource originally earmarked to support the Holiday at Home scheme, which is no longer proceeding, to develop new marketing assets and content for use in the longer term. Members suggested that to this end thought should be given to commissioning testimonials from high profile Northern Ireland personalities; it was noted that Tourism Ireland has established relationships with some individuals that would help serve this purpose, and resources to deliver. The Board was advised that the Finance and Casework Committee would continue to be updated on any such changes in budget allocation.

Geoff Wilson declared an interest and left the meeting for the duration of the following discussion.

Events – The Board received an update on negotiations to bring the World Rally Championship to Northern Ireland. Following lobbying to the Minister, Tourism NI had also engaged consultants to develop a business case for the NW200 and the Ulster Grand Prix, to establish the likely cost of delivering these events in 2022. The Board expressed some concern that there was an increasingly common pattern of direct approaches to the Minister by events organisers, thereby undermining the established processes for events support. Members felt strongly that this was an issue requiring further discussion with Departmental officials at the next post-Board debrief.

(Action: TB and JMcG)

3 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports

Chairs of the Board's sub-committees reported on recent meetings as follows:

Audit and Risk Assurance Committee – a report was given on the meeting held on 6 December. Audit work was continuing to certify Tourism NI's annual report and accounts for the 2020-21 financial year. The Board received an update on the timetable for completion of this work, and on a number of issues that might result in a qualified opinion. Progress on DfE's Internal Audit Service work programme was also outlined. The Board was pleased to note that a report on Tourism NI's payments and procurement processes had given a satisfactory opinion; work to follow up on the recommendations of a report on familiarisation trips had been delayed as a result of work and resource pressures on both the IAS and Tourism NI's Finance Team. An update was also given on work to review Tourism NI's risk management processes, following a recent workshop. Guidance on acceptance of gifts and hospitality had also been circulated and discussed. To make the reporting process more robust it was agreed that returns on gifts and

hospitality should be requested from Board Members on a quarterly basis (**ACTION:** Executive Support Team).

Marketing Sub-Committee – the Committee had last met on 16 November, in part to consider the Holiday at Home voucher scheme. The Committee also received a presentation on digital marketing. The Board discussed constraints on developing assets and it was agreed the presentation should be uploaded to Decision Time (**ACTION:** JD).

Finance and Casework Committee – a report was given on the Committee’s meeting held on 13 December. A key discussion item had been a review of projects receiving support under the Experience Development Programme – a small number of these had been identified as ‘at risk’, having experienced delays in development or increased costs as a result of substantial rises in the cost of construction materials in the period since the projects were first appraised, meaning that they could not be completed by 31 March 2022. As a result the Committee agreed that Letters of Offer for the projects in question could be extended to permit them to be delivered as early as possible in the 2022-23 financial year, subject to the availability of financial resource. The Committee also approved a Direct Award Contract for delivery of the St Patrick Visitor Centre project, a course of action which had already received approval from CPD.

The Committee had also approved a specific recommendation on the Glenshane Country Farm Project, to issue an updated Letter of Offer for a revised project merging Phase 1 and 2 of the development.

The other key item of business discussed by the Committee was a submission seeking support to bring the One Young World Forum to Northern Ireland in 2023. The benefits of hosting the event were outlined and the Board was advised that its legacy would help fulfil Programme for Government outcomes and align with the Belfast Cultural Strategy, as well as driving repeat visits to Northern Ireland. The funding profile was detailed, with support from the NI Executive to be delivered via Tourism NI.

The Board was advised of the findings of a sensitivity analysis, that highlighted concerns around the continuing impact of the pandemic on international travel into 2023. However it was emphasised that the event would still break even if it only achieved 80% of the expected numbers. A key aspect of the event’s delivery would be the appointment of a suitably experienced conference organiser. The Committee was also emphatic that no underwrite of the event should be required of Tourism NI or the NI Executive. Resource to support the event would need to be secured through in-year monitoring, with the balance due in the 2022-23 financial year.

On the basis of the Committee’s recommendation the Board approved the proposal to support the One Young World event, on condition that the caveats set out would be reflected in the offer of support.

4. Papers for Noting

4 (i) Value of Tourism to the NI Economy

The Board noted the content of a short paper setting out the status of a number of pieces of ongoing work to evaluate the true picture of the full contribution that tourism makes to the Northern Ireland economy, both in direct and indirect terms. Further updates would be provided to the Board once these strands of work are complete.

4 (ii) Draft Agenda for Next Board Meeting

The Board noted the proposed agenda for its next meeting.

5. Any Other Business

5 (i) Arrangements for Forthcoming Meetings

The Chief Executive set out proposed arrangements for a number of forthcoming meetings of the Board, in view of the current rising numbers of COVID cases. The Board was advised that its next meeting on 27 January is likely to be virtual. While it was still hoped that the strategic awayday scheduled for 10-11 February could be a physical gathering, the option of holding it as a virtual event would also be explored; it was not felt that a hybrid event would work. The Board stressed the need to ensure in future that venues can fulfil the requirements for such meetings.

The agenda and guest speakers for the awayday were outlined, and it was noted that the Minister had been invited to join the event as discussed at his recent meeting with the Board.

As there was no other business the Chairman thanked Members for their participation and invited them to join him in a virtual gathering immediately following the Board Meeting, to acknowledge the efforts of Tourism NI staff during the year.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 27 January 2022.