

Board Meeting 19 March 2020

**TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT TOURISM NI HEADQUARTERS, LINUM CHAMBERS, BELFAST
ON THURSDAY 19 MARCH 2020**

Present:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Mr Colin Neill
- Ms Michele Shirlow (by conference call)
- Mr Michael McQuillan (by conference call)
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Terry McCartney

In Attendance:

- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Jill McKee, Director of Finance
- Ms Jill O'Reilly, Acting Director of Organisational Development and HR
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Business Support and Events
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

Apologies: Ms Colette Brown

1. Introduction

1 Minutes of Last Meeting

The Chairman welcomed attendees and thanked them for taking the time to join the meeting in the present extraordinary circumstances. He advised that the agenda of the Board Meeting had been revised to focus upon Tourism NI's response to the Covid-19 outbreak, with updates on action to support the industry as well as measures to protect Tourism NI staff and support flexible home working during the emergency.

At this point the Chairman also reminded those present that minutes of the Board Meeting would be published and asked if anyone wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items. It was agreed that Geoff Wilson should withdraw from discussion of events casework submissions, as part of a report on the Finance and Casework Committee meeting held on 12 March.

2. Discussion Items

2 (i) Covid-19 (Coronavirus) Response

The Chief Executive gave an overview of known impacts to date on the tourism industry. The collapse of FlyBE had been an early significant casualty but in general, business closures and job losses were on an unprecedented scale. Tourism NI in common with other tourism agencies on the island had agreed there was no value in attempting to continue with paid-for promotional activity overseas, given the losses in bookings. Initially it was hoped that PR activity and industry sales platforms such as Meet the Buyer would continue, while Tourism NI and other agencies gathered intelligence on the true implications – however as these became more apparent, those events had been cancelled. Although the domestic and Republic of Ireland spring campaigns had continued up to this point, recent announcements by both the UK and ROI governments were expected to have far-reaching consequences for the foreseeable future.

Turning to action by Tourism NI to support businesses, the Chief Executive advised that Tourism NI was reviewing its financial resources for the rest of this financial year, to see how these might best be used. Tourism NI's web platforms were being updated with answers to frequently asked questions, for visitors and tourism businesses alike. Noting similar activity by other agencies, the Board emphasised that such messaging must be consistent and complementary. SMEs forming a large proportion of the tourism sector could not avail of the advice available to Invest NI's client base; the Board was advised that Tourism NI was engaging financial and legal specialists who could supply the relevant detail on business, contractual and employment matters. The Chief Executive also commended the speedy and robust reaction to the situation by the industry's representative bodies including Hospitality Ulster and NITA.

Tourism NI was also establishing a hotline service to support business with advice. The Board asked that Members should be notified as soon as this service goes live and provided with the number, to share with industry contacts (**ACTION: JMcG**). The Board emphasised that advice to businesses must be continually updated to align with other official channels.

Members asked if Tourism NI was actively promoting businesses that remained open; it was noted that while at this stage decisions on closure remained a matter for individual businesses, Tourism NI promotion and social media encouraged only the use of visitor assets that would permit safe social distancing, such as outdoor walks. Consideration had been given to bolstering the industry with a scheme permitting the purchase of vouchers against future trips, but many businesses had expressed reluctance given continuing financial uncertainty.

The Board commented that the Northern Ireland experience brand would have an important part to play in helping to maintain public spirit.

The Chief Digital Officer gave a report on measures in place to protect Tourism NI staff, and the arrangements being made to prepare them for working from home. This would help to ensure business continuity with a core of ongoing work and where workloads were reduced, staff would be redeployed to engage in new activity to support the industry.

Michele Shirlow gave an update on actions in place within the food sector, particularly in respect of safe supply of produce.

It was agreed that Colin Neill should leave the meeting to permit a discussion of communications with the industry. The Chief Executive set out issues relating to a survey developed by Tourism NI and disseminated with assistance from sectoral representative bodies. Acknowledging the part being played by Hospitality Ulster and the NI Tourism Alliance, the Board agreed that in the current extraordinary situation it was important not just for the industry but for public confidence that Tourism NI was visibly active in helping co-ordinate the response. Members agreed to issue a social media communication highlighting that the Board had met, and signposting the advice and support available (**ACTION: JMcG / OF**).

The Board discussed other potential actions such as a 'holiday' on certification fees. Members suggested that the Tourism NI survey might include questions specific to pubs and restaurants. It was also noted that work is underway to look at support for events sector. It was agreed that an update on this should be brought to the Finance and Casework committee when it next meets (**ACTION: AK**).

Summing up the discussions the Chairman commented that the Board will need to review and recalibrate the Tourism Strategy once the emergency has passed and to consider what operational activity will be needed to assist the industry as it moves into a recovery phase.

2 (ii) Finance and Casework Committee

As Chair of the Finance and Casework Committee, Michele Shirlow introduced a report on the Committee's meeting held on Thursday 12 March.

The Board received an update on Tourism NI's budgets from the Director of Finance. Discussions had been held with DfE regarding Tourism NI's ability to spend its full budget in the current extraordinary circumstances. Initially the Department was insistent that year-end budget spend must be within the previously set 1% tolerance. Efforts had been made to accrue as much spend as possible and to establish the extent to which profiled activity had been either cancelled or was deemed at risk. The Chairman remarked that Tourism NI should not find itself penalised for an inability to spend money on activity which was questionable to continue in any event, given the present emergency.

The Board considered what options existed to use resources available to Tourism NI in the best way possible. An initial suggestion was that these might bolster marketing activity already underway, such as the spring campaign; however it had become clear that such activity would now prove of no benefit. It was proposed instead to surrender resources that could not be used by Tourism NI to support more immediate priorities elsewhere within government. The Board asked the Executive Team to confirm the amount that could be returned while permitting Tourism NI to continue its essential functions and newly agreed activity to mitigate the impacts upon the industry. It was agreed that a sum of £400k could be surrendered. The Board approved this course of action and recommended that a communication to this effect should be made to the Department from the Board (**ACTION: JMcG**).

The Board also agreed that Tourism NI should seek to work again with VisitBritain to hold the Explore GB event in Northern Ireland next year.

Michael McQuillan joined the meeting at this point by conference call. Having declared a potential conflict, Geoff Wilson left the meeting for the next part of the discussion.

The Board was next presented with a summary paper and supporting documentation setting out two casework submissions and the Committee's recommendations on these. It was emphasised that the discussions had taken place ahead of the full implications of the Covid-19 outbreak becoming clear.

(This section is exempt from disclosure under Section 43 – Commercial Interests of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]


[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]



The Committee also discussed a proposal to nominate Catherine Doran of Deloitte as an independent member to join the Finance and Casework Committee, acknowledging the need for specialist expertise to support the committee's work. The Board approved the nomination on the basis that the nominee would act in the same advisory capacity as the independent member of the Risk and Audit Committee. It was also agreed that consideration should be given to releasing Geoff Wilson from his membership of the Committee and appointing a different member. The Chief Executive advised that he had been due to meet the Department to discuss options for recruiting and reappointing Board Members in order to deal with a number of vacancies and expiring appointments on the Board. The Chairman advised that he had also been communicating with DfE on this issue.

2 (iii) Audit and Risk Committee

Angelina Fusco gave a report on the meeting of the Audit and Risk Committee held on 10 March. The Committee had reviewed progress on the Internal Audit Service workplan. The events audit was noted to be in its final stages. Audits of the familiarisation trips programme and payroll were underway. An audit of network security had been deferred to quarter 1 of 2020-21. The Board was also advised that IAS's draft audit strategy for the next year proposed a reduction in the number of audit days allocated by IAS to Tourism NI from 120 to 50, in line with its reduced risk profile. The NI Audit Office also set out priorities in its draft audit strategy. It was not anticipated that this would present any significant risk factors.

The Committee also reviewed the risk register for Tourism NI and agreed to add new risks relating to the Covid-19 outbreak and the collapse of FlyBE. It was agreed that the Board should review the register when appropriate.

The Committee had also received an update on progress with proposals for restructuring of Tourism NI. The Department had approved an option that would create nine new posts, to be funded by efficiencies within Tourism NI's budget. An update was given on the HMS Caroline project. Issues relating to historic liability had been resolved, but a mechanism for future payment still needs to be agreed. The Committee had also received updates on issues relating to a review of expenses for field-based Tourism NI staff, and dilapidations in respect of Tourism NI's former premises in North Street. Terms of Reference for the Committee had been revised.

Commenting on the report, the Chairman remarked that the significant reduction in the number of days allocated to audits was a reflection upon the efforts that the Senior Management Team and Tourism NI staff alike had made to improve governance.

3. Minutes of Last Meeting

3 (i) Minutes of Board Meeting held on 30 January 2020

Minutes of the previous Board Meeting, which was held at the offices of Belfast Harbour Commissioners on Thursday 31 January, were approved as an accurate record and signed.

3 (ii) Matters Arising – Actions from Previous Meeting

The Board noted a summary of outcome of actions agreed at its last meeting, with updates as follows:

China Market – it had been proposed to present a report on the China Market at a forthcoming Board Meeting. This will be postponed but it was observed that once the immediate emergency has passed, a key element in the tourism sector’s recovery will be the identification of opportunities in key markets.

Operating Plan – It was agreed to defer consideration of the Operating Plan and to review the document for future consideration by the Board.

Northern Ireland Domestic Market Review – Work on the review was noted to be complete and the report would be rescheduled for presentation to the Board when appropriate.

Sustainable Tourism Presentation by Anna Pollock – In view of recent events the Board agreed that it was more important than ever to ensure that sustainability is made central to future strategic thinking on tourism, and proposed that a presentation to Members and relevant government officials should be delivered at the earliest possible opportunity once the current situation ends, with a view to informing discussions about the shape of a revised Tourism Strategy.

The Board was advised of a number of reappointments and extensions of appointments to the board of Tourism Ireland. Members then turned to further discuss timelines for a likely return to normal business and activity to promote the swiftest possible recovery of the industry. The Board commented that Tourism NI staff manning the helpline are likely to be required to deal with the needs of business owners and other customers who will be angry and upset, and stressed that staff should be supported and prepared to deal with such cases, and to have scripts available that supply clear messages.

Michael McQuillan advised the Board of the scale of enquiries received by Enterprise NI and stated that at present, industry’s greatest need was for a small number of sources of clear advice on the support available and the practical things that businesses can do to help themselves. The Board also commented upon the tone of social media posts by other tourism bodies and remarked that there was a need for messaging to be helpful, authoritative and above all, consistent. Members also remarked that the experience brand Northern Ireland – Embrace A Giant Spirit would have a central role to play both in messaging now, and in coming months to support a return to more normal ways of working. The Board was advised that Tourism NI proposed to provide information via frequently asked questions on its consumer and industry web platforms, and by providing a telephone helpline that would “triage” initial queries and where Tourism NI cannot help, refer these onwards to specialists who can support with expert advice (**ACTION**: RMCh / AK to discuss).

4. Any Other Business

4 (i) Northern Ireland Tourism Awards

The Board approved a proposal to postpone the Northern Ireland Tourism Awards until further notice and to issue a communication to the industry to that effect (**ACTION:** AK).

5. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next Board Meeting is due to take place on Thursday 7 May 2020. It was agreed that if necessary the meeting will be held by video conferencing. In closing the meeting, on behalf of the Board the Chairman thanked the Senior Management Team and Tourism NI staff for their efforts to support the industry and to keep business moving forward in as normal a manner as possible for the duration of the emergency.