

## Board Meeting 20 August 2020

### TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING HELD AT CULTRA MANOR ON THURSDAY 20 AUGUST 2020

Present / participating:

- Mr Terence Brannigan (Chairman)
- Ms Angelina Fusco
- Ms Anya O'Connor
- Mr John West
- Ms Patricia Corbett
- Mr Colin Neill
- Ms Michele Shirlow
- Mr Geoff Wilson
- Mr Terry McCartney (by video link)
- Ms Colette Brown, Board Apprentice (by video link)
- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Lesley McKeown, Acting Director of Finance
- Ms Naomi Waite, Director of Marketing
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

## 1. Introduction

### 1 (i) Minutes of Last Meeting

The Chairman welcomed those present and reminded participants that minutes of the meeting will be published. No apologies were noted. He also asked if anyone wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items and Geoff Wilson indicated that he would withdraw during any discussion of events applications during the update on the Finance and Casework Committee.

Minutes of the Board Meeting held remotely on Thursday 18 June were approved. Minutes of the extraordinary Board Meeting held remotely on 7 July 2020 were approved in principle, subject to the Chief Executive confirming that he was content with a minor detail (**ACTION**: JMcG).

### 1 (i) Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

The Board reviewed a schedule of action points from its previous meeting. The majority of these were noted to be complete or in hand. The Chief Executive advised that work on a stakeholder engagement strategy had resumed and that he would be seeking input from Angelina Fusco on behalf of the Board.

A report was given on the Tourism Recovery Working Group, which recently met to discuss a draft Recovery Action Plan ahead of consideration by the Minister's Steering Group. The Chief Executive advised that despite evidence that reopened tourism businesses were performing well, many remained unable to open or to function at full capacity and the autumn and winter months are expected to represent another extremely difficult trading period. This is anticipated to be the case across the UK with the devolved administrations all making representations to seek ongoing government support. The impact of the pandemic on London, given its dominant position in the UK's tourism economy, was likely to influence any decisions on what might happen at a national level.

Members remarked that it seemed inconsistent that guidance prevents the reopening of theatres and other entertainment venues, particularly those exploring innovative ways of staging performances, while permitting weddings and other large gatherings to proceed. A related issue was ensuring that businesses have sufficient resource to be able to open and operate safely; a complication is presented by some reopened venues reportedly not adhering to guidance. It was agreed to devote some time at the end of the meeting for the Chief Executive to set out the current situation as he saw it, to permit a fuller discussion.

## 2. Discussion Items

### 2 (i) Game Of Thrones Legacy Project

(Exempt from disclosure under 'Section 43 – Commercial Interests' of the Freedom of Information Act 2000)

Discussion of a paper on the events programme was deferred until later in the meeting.

## 3. Reports

### 3 (i) Chairman's Report

Members noted the content of a report on the Chairman's engagements since the last Board Meeting. The Chairman reported that he and the Chief Executive had taken part in a call with the Minister. The wide ranging discussion had touched upon the place of tourism within the Department for the Economy's agenda, and the need for Tourism NI's work to be supported both strategically, and with appropriate financial and people resources to fulfil its objectives. Also

raised were the continuing challenges presented to the tourism sector by the Covid-19 outbreak and the UK's exit from the EU as well as the recent report by EY on the economic impact of the pandemic, which had highlighted tourism's role as the one sector of the economy which contributes towards almost every objective set out in the Programme for Government.

The Chairman also reflected upon the recent Regenerative Tourism Workshop delivered by Conscious Travel to a cross-section group of stakeholders from across industry and government. This had highlighted the need for a cross-government approach to the formation of a tourism strategy. The Chairman remarked that the session had been a timely one and had opened a conversation about how best to grow both tourism and the wider economy, the potential to deliver environmental as well as economic benefits and how Tourism NI might evolve its operational activity to better address the challenges being presented. In parallel with changing the way Tourism NI works there was a need to consider the implications for the industry locally – Northern Ireland might have some advantage in focusing on sustainable tourism product and considering how 'host communities' can grow their capacity to create sustainable livelihoods. The Board agreed that tourism has already demonstrated its potential as a catalyst for greater social cohesion and has a significant role to play in future strategic planning across government.

In this context the Board discussed the urgent need to revive and complete work on a new Tourism Strategy. The Chief Executive advised that Tourism NI had begun work on developing a strategy, which had then been passed to the Department to progress; however the Covid-19 outbreak meant that the assumptions on which that work was based had changed entirely. Members asked if Tourism NI could proceed with developing its own strategy. The Chairman stated that he had sought to clarify this issue at the time of his appointment and was advised that Tourism NI would be responsible for developing strategy, the Department for policy and the Senior Management Team for delivery; however the need remained for a clear demarcation of roles. The Chairman remarked that the Board is best placed to lead the process of developing a new Tourism Strategy with support and sign-off from DfE.

The Board agreed that it should take responsibility for developing a new long-term tourism strategy and resolved to support the Chief Executive in initiating that process, and in securing whatever resources may be required. Members also highlighted the need for meaningful public consultation, taking advantage of any cross-cutting government initiatives where possible (**ACTION:** JMcG).

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

The content of the report was noted and the Chief Executive highlighted the following points:

*Research and Insights* – visitor accommodation was noted to be performing well, although less so in cities. The outlook for non-accommodation businesses such as tour-coach companies does not appear good. The next couple of weeks will be critical for the industry as the Government's Job Retention Scheme begins to come to an end. Addressing the emerging challenges would require agility in campaign planning and other activity to create consumer confidence, generate demand and maintain business as far as possible.

The Board was pleased to note that the Website Improvement Scheme had proved extremely successful and was advised of the imminent launch of a new Experience Development Scheme. A report was given on the online Meet the Buyer workshop, which had received an enthusiastic

response from participants. Members asked how the online event compared with the physical one and were advised that although overall numbers were slightly down, and there was a need to balance the number of buyers with operators, the industry's appetite was very strong and there had been a great deal of successful engagement. The Board congratulated all involved.

An update was also given on Tourism Ireland's Great Britain campaign. The Board was advised that the campaign budget is being targeted primarily at PR activity and influencers, using digital content produced by Tourism NI. The Chief Executive also stated that given the ROI government's approach to promotion in GB, the campaign presented a significant opportunity to promote Northern Ireland as a separate destination from the rest of the Island of Ireland. It was agreed that a paper setting out the detail of the campaign would be shared with the Board (**ACTION: JMcG**).

Commenting favourably on the activity being undertaken by Tourism NI in response to the impact of the Covid outbreak, Members agreed there was a need to manage staff wellbeing and the risk of burnout. The Board also agreed that it was more important than ever to celebrate success and proposed that the Chairman should write to all staff to acknowledge their efforts over recent weeks (**ACTION: TB**).

Noting the report, the Board agreed a number of further actions:

The Board requested a comparison of the numbers of NI residents intending to take a break on the island vs those specifically taking breaks in NI (**ACTION: NW**);

Detail of the origins of visitors from ROI and in particular, identifying those visiting NI for the first time (**ACTION: NW**);

Detail of the process for giving visibility to the 'collection' of experiences on Tourism NI platforms (**ACTION: NW/RMcH**)

A report on the status of City Region Deals for a future Board Meeting (**ACTION: RMcH**);

An update on the Digital Transformation Programme (**ACTION: DV**).

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

Angelina Fusco advised that the Audit and Risk Committee had not met in the period since the last meeting.

Michele Shirlow gave a report on the Finance and Casework Committee meeting on Thursday 13 April. The Committee received an update on Tourism NI's budget allocation and spend at the end of the first quarter of the 2020-21 financial year, and discussed revised proposals for supporting events as well as a number of events casework papers. The Board had previously approved support for events in line with categories of eligible costs previously agreed by the Board. The revised submission proposed extending the range of eligible costs to align with those agreed with the Department of Finance when the scheme was originally approved thus providing Tourism NI with a greater degree of flexibility as to what it could support.

It was also proposed that applicants should be issued with letters of offer covering the two-year period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2022, permitting support to be provided for events that had been postponed and replicating the approach adopted by other public bodies. All the revised proposals were within the scope of the approval previously granted by the Department of Finance. In drawing up the new proposals guidance had been provided by Internal Audit Service as part of

the consultancy service outlined in its revised work programme. Offers of support would be made 'in principle', emphasising that they would be subject to budget availability and further scrutiny to vouch and validate expenditure. Members asked if support would still be provided should an event prove to be manifestly unviable; it was stated that a rational approach would be adopted and support would be considered where event organisers have incurred costs in the reasonable expectation that an event was likely to proceed and with auditors' statements and similar forms of assurance in place as evidence.

The Chairman asked if Members were content and the Board approved the revised proposals.

The Board also agreed to a proposal from Geoff Wilson that he should step down from the Committee in view of potential conflicts of interest relating to casework, and approved the appointment of Patricia Corbett as his replacement.

The Board next received a report on the finance update for Quarter 1 which had been presented to the Committee. The revised budget allocation was outlined, including resources from the June Monitoring and the Covid Recovery Response bids. Further Covid bids are now with the NI Executive for consideration. Budget spend had been outlined and there were no issues of concern at this stage in the year.

Colin Neill left the meeting at this point.

The Board next received a report on the events casework submissions considered by the Committee. It was emphasised that the Committee's decisions on each event had been made in line with the changes to the eligible cost categories outlined in the paper on Events Support, and based on the best information available at the time.

*Feile an Phobail* - The Board was advised that the Committee had deferred discussion of this paper in order to seek additional information, as the event had changed to adopt a virtual format. A revised paper is due to be discussed at a further meeting of the Committee next week.

*Foyle Maritime Festival 2020* – The Committee had approved support of £135,000 for the event.

*Derry International Halloween Festival 2020* – The Board was advised that the committee approved support of £120,000 for the event on the basis that the organisers should also seek private sponsorship for the event.

Having declared a potential conflict, Geoff Wilson left the meeting to permit the next two casework submissions to be discussed.

*Supercup* – the Committee had approved support of £45,000 for the event.

*North West 200* – The Committee had approved support of £75,000, subject to Tourism NI receiving a letter of comfort from the organisers.

The Board was also advised of the detail of a whistleblowing complaint made regarding an event.

The Chairman advised that now that the Board had its full membership complement again, he wished to reconstitute the Marketing Sub-Committee, with a focus on discussing and approving

marketing strategy. It was agreed that the membership of the Committee should be Terry McCartney, Anya O'Connor and Geoff Wilson and that the Committee should appoint its chair at its first meeting, once a date is agreed (**ACTION: NW**).

## **4. Governance**

### **4 (i) Quarter 1 2020-21 Reports – Operating Plan**

The Board noted the content of a report on performance against Operating Plan objectives at the end of the first quarter. These were broadly on target for delivery, with the exception being activity that normally involves overseas travel such as familiarisation visits – options were being examined to deliver this activity online where possible.

### **4 (ii) Quarter 1 2020-21 Reports – Risk Management**

The Board was advised that the Corporate Risk Register had been reviewed in detail at a facilitated workshop on 4 August, with input from the Senior Management Team, members of the Audit and Risk Committee and representatives of DfE's Internal Audit Service. A revised Risk Register is being developed as a result of that session and will be brought to the Board following consideration by the Audit and Risk Committee.

Anya O'Connor left the meeting at this point.

The Board noted that in the current circumstances Tourism NI's ability to deliver on the industry's expectations represents a reputational risk. Tourism NI had previously agreed with the Department that it would identify savings through efficiencies in order to free resource for changes in the top structure of the organisation, in the understanding that DfE would match this. The availability of resource and other support from the Department to fulfil this commitment is now a critical issue and the Board resolved to write to the Permanent Secretary in these terms, reflecting Tourism NI's current resource position as opposed to where it should be in order to meet the current challenges (**ACTION: JMcG**).

## **5. Papers for Noting**

### **5 (i) Safely Supporting the Tourism Industry During Covid-19**

The Board noted the content of a paper setting out the measures put in place to enable Tourism NI staff to work safely both at home and with the industry in the field, and the measures being put in place to permit an eventual return to safe office working. The Board asked whether generic guidance would be sufficient for this purpose and was advised that the key issue had been to secure specialist support to ensure that Quality and Standards staff were able to operate within the new environment, in order to support the reopening of the industry.

## **6. Any Other Business**

### **6 (i) Boardroom Apprentice**

The Chairman advised that this represented Colette Brown's last meeting as Boardroom Apprentice. He thanked her warmly for her contribution to meetings over the last year and

wished her well for the future. In reply Colette thanked the Board and reflected on the valuable opportunity and working experience that the initiative had offered. The Chairman advised that a new Boardroom Apprentice would join meetings from September. Angelina Fusco had again agreed to act as mentor and had held a briefing meeting with Colette Brown and the new Apprentice.

#### **6 (ii) Bank Mandates**

The Board approved a request for the Chairman to sign new bank mandates permitting the addition of new designated cheque signatories within the Finance Team, to replace staff members who had left the organisation.

#### **6 (iii) Industry Outlook Discussion**

As agreed earlier in the meeting the Chief Executive provided an overview of the current operating environment as a prelude to a wider discussion about the catastrophic consequences the COVID-19 pandemic had presented for the industry. The Board considered how Tourism NI can respond meaningfully to the industry given such dire circumstances and provide truly effective support. The Chairman felt there was a need to take a critical look at how resources are used; the Conscious Travel workshop was felt to supply some of the groundwork for a strategic map to take these issues forward.

There was no further business and the meeting concluded with a short talk with representatives of National Museums NI about their activity in getting the museum facilities open to the public again.

### **7. Date of Next Meeting**

The next scheduled Board Meeting will be on Thursday 20 September 2020.