

Board Meeting 24 September 2020

TOURISM NORTHERN IRELAND MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING HELD REMOTELY BY VIDEO CONFERENCING ON THURSDAY 24 SEPTEMBER 2020

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
- Ms Denise McAnena, Boardroom Apprentice
- Mr John McGrillen, Chief Executive
- Ms Lesley McKeown, Acting Director of Finance
- Ms Rosemarie McHugh, Director of Product Development
- Mr Dave Vincent, Chief Digital Officer
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Business Support and Events
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team

1. Introduction

1 (i) Minutes of Last Meeting

The Chairman welcomed participants and reminded them that minutes of the meeting will be published. He extended a particular welcome to Denise McAnena, who was joining her first meeting as the new Boardroom Apprentice. No apologies were noted. The Chairman asked if anyone wished to declare interests in relation to agenda items. No declarations were made.

The minutes of the Board Meeting held remotely on Thursday 20 August were approved.

1 (i) Matters Arising from Previous Meeting

The Board reviewed a schedule of action points from its previous meeting. A number of actions were noted as complete and updates were given on ongoing matters as follows:

Events – the Board was advised that although guidance is still awaited from the NI Executive on the format and scale of events that will be permissible, the latest announcements by Westminster suggested that it is likely to be at least six months before large gatherings are permitted.

Stakeholder Engagement – an update was given on work to develop a new stakeholder engagement plan. As this was paused owing to the absence of Tourism NI’s Communications Manager as a result of a family bereavement, the Chairman and Board extended their sympathies.

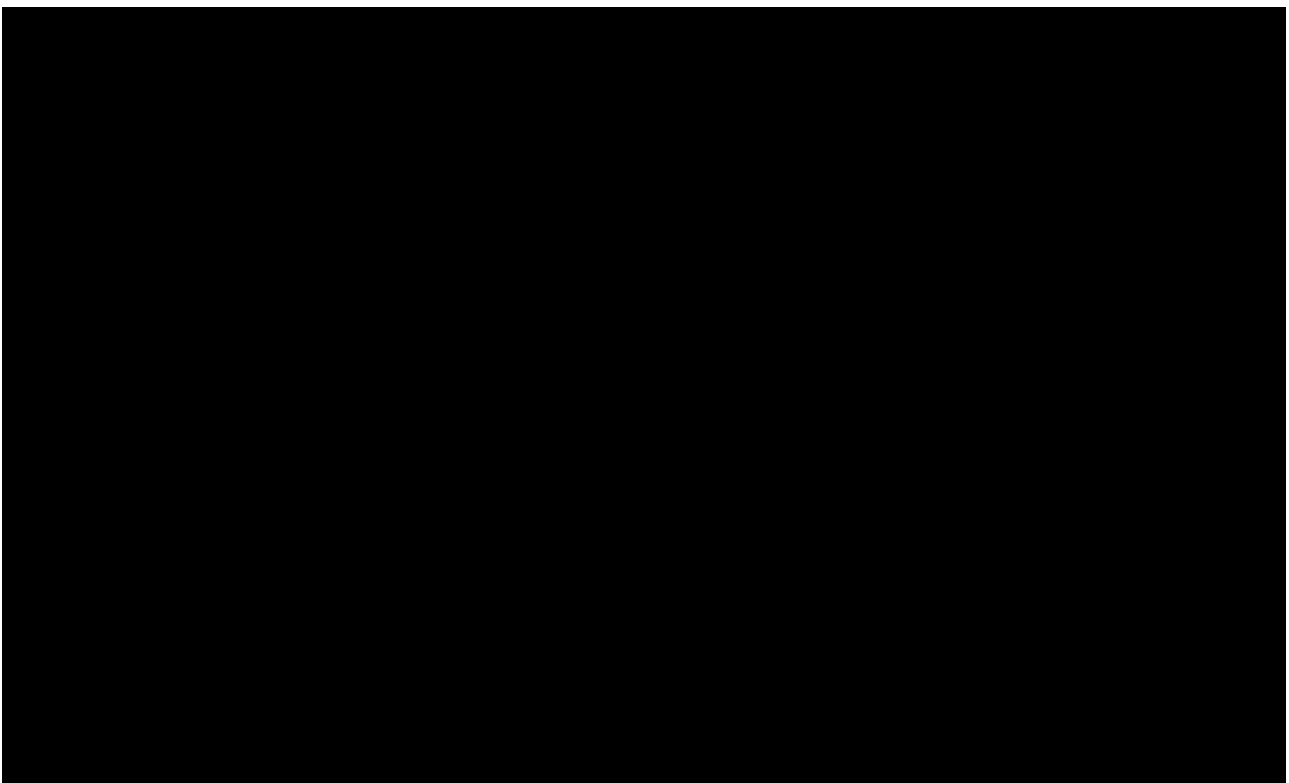
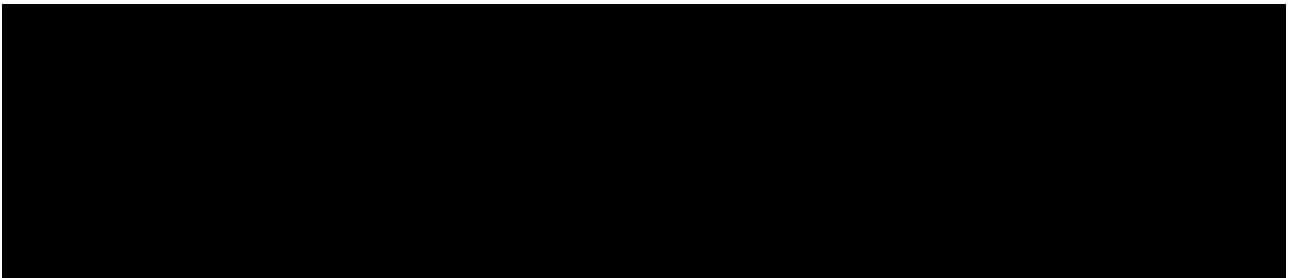
Linen Mill Studios – it was noted that recently both the Board and the Minister had separately visited the project, which was on the agenda for discussion later in the meeting. Members had asked the Chief Executive to confirm the period of liability for the project and this was set out within the casework papers.

GB Campaign – the Board was advised that in view of new restrictions imposed by the UK government since the last meeting, Tourism NI had paused a number of areas of activity in its major GB campaign. However, metrics for the campaign to date had been very positive.

2. Discussion Items

2 (i) Linen Mill Studios - *Game of Thrones* Studio Tour Project

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







2 (ii) Business and Financial Planning Support Programme

The Board was presented with a paper setting out proposals for a £1m Tourism NI Business and Financial Planning Support Programme. The broad aim of the programme is to assist the industry with advice and guidance enabling businesses to survive and remain sustainable through the pandemic, with support in both one-to-one and one-to-many elements. The Board was advised that it is hoped that the Minister will launch the programme on 6 October alongside an Invest NI programme with which the Tourism NI programme has been aligned. It was emphasised that as the level of demand had yet to be fully established the application and assessment process will need to be carefully managed.

While broadly content to support the programme the Board discussed how success and performance should be measured and discussed the use of templates for this purpose. It was agreed that a benefit statement should be provided at the next Board meeting (**ACTION:** RMcH).

2 (iii) Northern Ireland Accommodation Certification Scheme Review

A paper was presented setting out findings of a review of Tourism NI's accommodation certification scheme. The Chief Executive advised that although Tourism NI has a statutory duty to certify accommodation, legislation underpinning this duty is no longer fit for purpose and needs to reflect developments in the visitor accommodation market driven by consumer demand. The review examined the current legislative landscape, best practice elsewhere and likely future trends to propose what Tourism NI's future role should be. A separate issue was the resource capacity within the Department for Economy to develop revised legislation.

The review established that the certification scheme had tangible value in providing a common playing field for businesses and could help to drive the quality of the visitor experience. There were high levels of satisfaction within the industry for the support provided by Tourism NI's

accommodation advisers, but opportunities exist to engage with businesses in a more meaningful way. A further constraint was the requirement that the existing scheme must be cost-neutral.

Timeframes for progressing the review's recommendations on refining the certification process were set out. The Board welcomed the review as a positive step and agreed there was a need to maintain progress to allow businesses to move forward. Members also discussed sustainability and licensing issues and agreed that the Board should continue to have oversight of how the scheme develops. It was also suggested that Tourism NI should stress the need to treat this as a priority issue at the post-Board debrief (**ACTION**: TB & JMcG).

3. Reports

3 (i) Chairman's Report

Members noted the list of the Chairman's engagements since the last Board Meeting. The Chairman reported on the most recent debrief meeting with DfE; the Department had been receptive to the Board's proposal at its last meeting in June that it should take the lead in developing a new Tourism Strategy, with support from DfE. Also discussed had been bids for resource for industry recovery from the Covid outbreak and bids to the October Monitoring Round. The Board was advised that the total call on resources across all Government Departments was £350m, well in excess of the £150m available.

3 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

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

Research and Insights – the NI Hotels Federation had released statistics indicating an uplift in bookings in August both from ROI visitors and the NI domestic market. The staycations campaign had received an extremely good response and research commissioned by Tourism NI on ROI residents' perceptions showed higher numbers taking trips to or staying in Northern Ireland than ever before.

The Chief Executive reported on a visit to Fermanagh advising that while businesses there stated that they had a good summer, Belfast was clearly struggling and the introduction of further restrictions would have a further detrimental impact. Businesses also faced additional costs in supplying staff with PPE and installing new layouts in premises to support social distancing. Uncertainty continues about what autumn may bring in terms of restrictions and consumers' confidence in travelling. The Board was advised that while the current television campaign is due to run to Halloween, Tourism NI's approach will continue to be driven by sentiment analysis and the flexibility provided by digital promotion.

Resource bids - the Board was advised that Tourism NI awaits the outcome of a bid to the NI Executive for additional marketing resource amounting to £4m. Other bids had been made for industry stimulus packages, research and intelligence. It was understood that a decision is due to be taken shortly on these. The Board emphasised that given the volatile nature of the current situation there must be a measure of flexibility in how approved resources can be used effectively, given that the imposition of further restrictions may affect this.

A report was given on recent activity on the industry development programme and Michele Shirlow was thanked for her participation in the recent food webinar. The Board was also advised that the Website Development Programme had received a huge amount of interest and was heavily subscribed.

Organisational Structure – the Board was advised of a resource bid to the Department. The Senior Management Team had met recently to discuss proposals for Tourism NI’s future organisational structure in the post-Covid environment and it was agreed that a report on this should be brought to the next Board Meeting (**ACTION:** JMcG). The Board was also advised that while preparations had been ongoing for Tourism NI staff to return to their offices, there was a likelihood that this would be affected by new regulations just announced.

The Board also received a report on the *We’re Good To Go* initiative, with almost 1,000 businesses now signed up to the scheme.

It was noted that there had been an extremely positive response from both consumers and the industry to the new Discover Northern Ireland television adverts. The Board was also advised of the response of the ROI media to the campaign, which had resulted in a great deal of hugely positive engagement including a half-hour special programme focusing on the increase in ROI visitors to Northern Ireland, presented by Tommie Gorman.

3 (iii) Sub-Committee Reports

Risk and Audit Committee

Angelina Fusco reported on the meeting of the Risk and Audit Committee held on 15 September. Internal Audit Service had presented its final annual report on Tourism NI for 2019-20, giving an overall satisfactory opinion. Some elements of the 2019-20 audit work programme remained to be completed and final reports were awaited on the events programme, familiarisation trips and payroll. A draft report on IT security was expected to be available soon. A number of audits were scheduled for the 2020-21 programme and it was noted that there were only five ongoing recommendations to be addressed.

The Board was also advised of progress on the external audit, which was running behind schedule as a result of the Covid outbreak which had created difficulties in gaining access to records at Tourism NI’s offices. The Board was advised of the revised timetable for completion of the draft Annual Report and Accounts which are expected to be available for approval by the Board following review by the Committee at its next meeting on 8 December. The Committee is also due to review and approve the new corporate Risk Register at its December meeting. An update was given on progress in implementing audit recommendations and the Board was advised that approval had been granted to revert to applying HMRC guidance on mileage. The Committee had also received a verbal update on a whistleblowing complaint.

Marketing Committee

Terry McCartney advised that following the Board’s decision at its last meeting to re-constitute the Marketing Committee, new Terms of Reference were being drafted ahead of an initial meeting on 12 October. The Board discussed whether the Committee should review the marketing plan for the Linen Mill Studios project, but it was agreed that the Finance and Casework Committee should continue to review the project given its familiarity with the background.

Finance and Casework Committee

Michele Shirlow gave a report on the Finance and Casework Committee meeting on Friday 18 September. In addition to the Linen Mill Studios project discussed by the Board earlier, the Committee had also approved support for the staging of the Dubai Duty Free Irish Open to be held as a closed event from 21-25 September at Galgorm Golf Club. The Board noted that the level of support approved was within the Committee's delegated authority limit. The Board recorded its thanks to the Director of Business Support and Events and the golf team for their work on delivery of the event within an extremely tight timeframe.

4. Papers for Noting

5 (i) Digital Work Programme Update

The Chief Digital Officer provided the Board with an update on key workstreams within the digital programme including Tourism NI's new web platforms, the Tourism Data Hub and digital innovation initiatives such as the new Visitor Information Centre in Derry-Londonderry. The Board discussed digital collaboration with the local authorities and an outline was given of work to encourage use of Tourism NI's platforms and move the focus of promotion away from council areas towards destinations and visitor experiences. The Board was also advised of how the digital work programme is supporting the industry's recovery from the pandemic, building better online capability and resilience. It was emphasised that the programme still represents an ongoing process and also represents a shift in Tourism NI's working culture, led by the Senior Management Team.

5 (ii) Draft Agenda for Next Board Meeting

The Board noted a draft agenda for its next meeting and agreed to add the additional papers requested earlier in the meeting. The Board also asked the Chief Executive to provide an update on bids to the October Monitoring Round once the outcome is known (**ACTION**: JMcG). It was agreed that fulfilment of the assurances requested in relation to the Linen Mill Studios project should continue to be monitored by the Finance and Casework Committee.

6. Any Other Business

6 (i) Licensing

At the request of the Board, Colin Neill set out the broad proposals within the NI Assembly's new liquor licensing bill which is proceeding to committee stage.

There was no further business and drawing the meeting to a close, on behalf of the Board the Chairman thanked the Chief Executive and the Senior Management Team for their ongoing efforts to support the industry throughout the current extraordinary circumstances.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next scheduled Board Meeting will be on Thursday 5 November 2020.