

Tourist Industry Scheme



tourism  
northernireland



Department of  
Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

# Website Development Programme 2020/2021

An investment programme designed to help providers sell their experiences through development of their websites.

**PROGRAMME GUIDELINES  
FOR CAPITAL GRANTS UP TO £40,000**

**Northern  
Ireland  
Embrace  
a Giant  
Spirit**



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# Introduction

In 2019, tourism in Northern Ireland was a successful £1bn industry, employing 65,000 people. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect right across Northern Ireland. Its economic impact has been felt most acutely by the tourism and hospitality sectors.

The competitive nature of the tourism marketplace over the next few years cannot be underestimated. It will be vitally important that the Northern Ireland tourism offer is promoted through an appealing and compelling presentation of the offer across digital platforms. The recent pandemic has resulted in transformed demand, a desire to visit differently and book differently. While online promotion and bookability was increasingly becoming a prerequisite prior to the pandemic, it is now almost a core requirement of doing business. For many, optimising their online marketing and sales capability to present new and rejuvenated experiences will be a competitive differentiator.

This programme is operated on a Northern Ireland wide basis with funding from the Department for Economy (DfE) and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). See 'About Us' for further information on Tourism Northern Ireland and DAERA. The programme is being administered and managed by Tourism NI.



The Guildhall

## Programme Aim

The majority of visitors to Northern Ireland book everything independently and while in Northern Ireland the internet is crucial for travel planning.

The purpose of this programme is to provide guidance to experience providers to develop or enhance websites and provide financial assistance to do so. This may cover a wide range of support including search engine optimisation, booking engine development, provision of the right content and use of the right tactics to capture sales.

The overall **Programme Aim** is to improve the attractiveness and bookability of the Northern Ireland experience through investment (advice and financial assistance) in the online presence of experience providers.

# Programme Objectives

- To ensure that individual websites are optimised, in line with recommendations from the Digital Audit, to create positive first impressions, retain interest, enhance engagement on the site and drive enquiries and revenue
- To improve the quality of online content across a range of tourism experience providers in Northern Ireland in line with the new Embrace A Giant Spirit experience brand  
See <https://tourismni.com/Grow-Your-Business/northern-ireland---embrace-a-giant-spirit/>
- To increase the Northern Ireland experience offering online by developing sites for those operators who have little or no digital presence
- To support tourism experience providers to market and sell their experiences in a post-COVID 19 environment recognising transformed demand, visitor desire to visit differently and book differently and the need for timely and clear communication of changes and updates
- To ensure mobile optimisation
- To improve conversion rates
- To provide structured support and guidance to experience providers to enhance their online analytical capabilities and ongoing website optimisation

## What Assistance Can I Expect?

The programme is limited in terms of budget to support mentoring costs and necessary capital enhancements. Applicants will be selected through a simple application process and, where demand exceeds available budget, will be prioritised in line with potential return on investment and need for development.

The programme will include the following:

- **Review and Website Development Plan** – All eligible applicants (subject to available funding) will undergo a structured review of their website or suggestions for development of their website (if they don't have a digital presence) and receive a Website Development Plan. This review will cover a range of areas including Design and Content. Tourism NI will organise this for you free of charge
- **1 to 1 mentoring support** – All eligible applicants (subject to available funding) will get direct 1 to 1 mentoring and support based on their Website Development Plan. Tourism NI will organise this for you free of charge
- **Some applicants may receive funding towards eligible costs for capital investment in their website (see next section)**



# How Much Financial Assistance Can I Expect?

**Grant rate:** Financial assistance will not exceed 80% of total eligible project costs.

**Grant amount:** The maximum amount of grant funding available under this programme for any one project is £40,000.

## Eligibility

### Who Can Apply?

To apply, you must be an existing experience provider, operating in Northern Ireland. The programme is open to the following sectors:

- **Private Sector:** Companies and other legal entities and individuals
- **Public Sector:** Commercial and non-commercial semi state organisations and local authorities
- **Voluntary / Community Sector:** Community and not for profit bodies including companies limited by guarantee. Applicants from this sector will be required to have a Charity No. as evidence that they qualify for this status

The programme is focused on tourism experience providers and the following businesses and websites are **ineligible** under this programme:

- Accommodation businesses, with the possible exceptions outlined at Minimum Eligibility Criteria (point 1)
- Festivals and Events
- Sports Clubs
- Business start-ups, with the possible exceptions outlined at Minimum Eligibility Criteria (point 3)
- Local authority or destination management tourism websites
- Visitor Information Centres
- Community / Voluntary information websites
- Shops, restaurants, cafes, etc.

## Minimum Eligibility Criteria

1. **Business Type:** You must be an experience provider located within Northern Ireland. Accommodation providers are not eligible to apply, however if you provide an experience in addition to your accommodation, you may be eligible to apply. Anyone in the list outlined above is not eligible to apply.
2. **Provide a Visitor Experience:** You must currently operate a visitor experience that is ready for market (and likely to be open within the next 12 months).
3. **Operational thresholds:** You (as a business) should have been operational on or before 01 July 2018. However, in limited circumstances, if you haven't been operational on or before 01 July 2018 where point 2 is satisfied and Tourism NI can get sufficient independent evidence that there is a strong future pipeline of business, this requirement may be relaxed. Tourism NI will seek evidence of these operational thresholds.

4. **Website Ownership:** If you currently have an operational website you must own and be in a position to verify this if required. For new websites funded under this programme, ownership by the applicant business will be verified as a grant prepayment condition.
5. **Match Funding:** You must be in a position to confirm the required match funding. You will be asked to provide evidence that you have this level of match funding when you apply for the grant.
6. **Business viability:** You must be able to confirm that the business was a viable business prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and has taken all reasonable steps to safeguard the future of the business. Tourism NI reserves the right to seek independent evidence of this requirement where deemed necessary.
7. **State Aid:** You must not be in breach of State Aid rules with regard to De Minimis Regulations or the General Block Exemption Regulations as appropriate. A declaration of this will be requested should your application be successful.

## Eligible Costs

The following are examples of the type of work/ costs that are eligible for financial assistance:

- Development of website (if there is no existing digital presence)
- Replacement of, or upgrade to, current website
- Booking engines, online booking functionality, improving conversion rates and improving user experience
- Content development e.g. imagery and video
- Mobile optimisation
- Improvement to Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and website content
- Integrated social media (not standalone)
- Foreign Language provision

## Ineligible Costs

The following costs and areas of activity are not eligible for financial assistance:

- Website hosting fees
- Any ongoing website management costs, maintenance costs, administrative running costs
- Online advertising
- Stand-alone apps
- Employee salaries
- Recoverable VAT
- Corporate branding, merchandise or printed materials



# How Can I Apply?

Outlined below are the stages that apply to the implementation of this programme.

## STAGE 1 - EXPRESSION OF INTEREST AND APPLICANT SELECTION

**The programme will open on 20 July 2020.**

You must first check your eligibility for the programme by reading these guidelines and by checking with the Tourism NI team at [tds@tourismni.com](mailto:tds@tourismni.com). If you are not at this stage deemed ineligible, you will be provided with access to an online Expression of Interest form. A final decision on your eligibility will be made by Tourism NI following submission of the form. Expression of Interest forms received after the closing date will not be accepted.

When completing your Expression of Interest form, you will be required to give your consent to provide Tourism NI with read only access to your website and its analytics if you have an existing website.

**The closing date for receipt of Expression of Interest forms is 21 August 2020 at 3pm.**

Eligible completed Expression of Interest forms will be assessed on a competitive basis, taking into account the aim and objectives of the programme. Where demand exceeds available budget, Tourism NI will prioritise in line with potential return on investment and the greatest need for development of or improvement to websites.

All applicants to the programme will be notified of the outcome by Tourism NI. Based on the assessment process, not all applicants will necessarily proceed to stage 2 (and subsequent stages) of the programme.

## STAGE 2 - DIGITAL AUDIT AND WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Once the Expression of Interest forms have been assessed, those which scored highest within budget availability will proceed to this stage of the process.

Consultants engaged directly by Tourism NI will undertake a digital audit and review of your existing website. This will encompass content, layout, user experience, search engine optimisation, etc. against a checklist provided by Tourism NI. Where there is no existing website a standard pro forma website development plan will be tailored for your business following consultation.

At this stage, if appropriate, you must provide Tourism NI and its consultants with read-only access to your Google Analytics / Google Search Console or similar. These can be installed if not already available. This is necessary to measure the impact of the developments / improvements that will be made to your website.

Based on the above, Tourism NI's consultants will prepare a Website Development Plan which will detail the developments/improvements that are required for your website. The full cost of the Consultant preparing the Website Development Plan will be covered by Tourism NI.

One-to-one support will also be provided to you by Tourism NI's consultants to help finalise your Website Development Plan. Tourism NI's consultants will sign off each Website Development Plan on its behalf.



Hillsborough Castle and Gardens



## STAGE 3 - APPLICATION FOR FUNDING

Following the successful completion of Stage 2, you will be required to submit an online application, in order to apply for funding to implement your Website Development Plan.

**The closing date for applications is 3pm on 25 September 2020.**

Before submitting your application, you must ensure you have uploaded any supporting documentation referenced in the application, your Development Plan along with a proposal and a financial quote, or tender documentation (if applicable) for a suitably qualified professional web consultant (third party supplier) who will implement your Website Development Plan. In seeking quotes/tenders for this work you must adhere to Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy.

The programme is limited in terms of budget to support mentoring costs and necessary capital enhancements. Once your application has been received, it will be scored in line with the following:

- Potential return on investment
- Need for development of / improvement to website.

Following the evaluation process, a Letter of Offer outlining the grant award and conditions of grant will be issued to all successful applicants. The Letter of Offer should be signed within 14 days of receipt. Financial assistance will be subject to budget availability and sufficient expenditure must be incurred by **31 March 2021** to allow draw down of the full grant amount.

## STAGE 4 - PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Once you have signed the Letter of Offer, you can then begin to implement your Website Development Plan through your appointed supplier(s).

**Expenditure must be incurred by 31 March 2021.**

It is expected that you and your appointed suppliers will liaise closely with Tourism NI and their consultants during implementation.

Following implementation of the Website Development Plan, Tourism NI will review the work undertaken prior to payment being made. If Tourism NI is not satisfied with the nature or level of implementation, changes will have to be made to the satisfaction of Tourism NI prior to sign off and payment.

## STAGE 5 - PROJECT COMPLETION REPORT

Following the implementation of the Website Development Plan, Tourism NI's consultants will review the analytics of your website and will contact you to get feedback on the impact that the project has had on your business. A final survey will also be undertaken to gather qualitative feedback across such areas as new knowledge acquired in online/digital presence and optimisation; understanding of SEO in general; your ability to make direct changes to your website; and future plans for the development, management and use of your website to promote your business.

## STAGE 6 - CLAIMING YOUR GRANT

Grant payments can only be made retrospectively to the applicant specified in the Letter of Offer, and will be based on eligible expenditure actually incurred and paid by the applicant. All expenditure, to allow draw down of grant, must be incurred by 31 March 2021.

You will be required, at the time of the grant claim, to certify that the project has not applied for, nor is it in receipt of, additional grant aid from any other source. Supporting documentation will be required in the form of invoices, bank statements etc.

Details of the grant claiming process will be provided within the Letter of Offer that successful applicants will receive.

# Additional Information

## Appeals Procedure

An appeals procedure is in place for those applicants who deem the process of assessing their project has been conducted unsatisfactorily. Further detail on the appeals procedure will be available on request.

## Procurement

Applicants will be required to adhere to Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy. Failure to adhere can result in expenditure being considered ineligible for financial assistance. Detailed information on the public procurement process and the procurement thresholds can be found on the CPD website [www.finance-ni.gov.uk/topics/procurement](http://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/topics/procurement)

## State Aid

This programme falls under the Tourist Industry Scheme which has been registered with the European Commission under the General Block Exemption Regulation which means that specific projects do not need to be notified to the European Commission. Further detail can be found at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/economic-policy/state-aid>  
Applicants must also not be in breach of State Aid rules with regard to De Minimis regulations. Verification of this will be requested should your application be successful.

## Equality Statement

Tourism NI is committed to the fulfilment of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) in both the promotion of equality and of good relations through our overall thinking and decision-making processes. Obligations under this Act will be included in any Letter of Offer issued.

## FOI and Data Protection

We are committed to being open about the way we will use information that you give us as part of your application. By submitting the declaration form to validate the application form, applicants are confirming that they understand our obligation to comply with the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998.

## General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

By applying for funding, Tourism NI takes care that it respects the rights and freedoms of all those involved. How we handle any personal information we receive in respect to those rights and freedoms is described in our privacy policy.

New applicants will be asked to accept the policy before proceeding to the online application form.



# About Us

## **Tourism Northern Ireland**

Tourism Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of tourism and marketing of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination on the island of Ireland and works closely with Tourism Ireland to sell the destination overseas.

Under the Tourism (Northern Ireland) Order 1992, Tourism NI is empowered to provide selective financial assistance to the tourism sector in Northern Ireland for projects that seek to achieve economic growth in Northern Ireland.

## **The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)**

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has responsibility for food, farming, environmental, fisheries, forestry and sustainability policy and the development of the rural sector in Northern Ireland.

DAERA commenced work in 2019 on the development of a Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. The aim of the Rural Policy Framework is to provide the strategic direction for support and interventions for rural businesses, villages and communities, and rural tourism. DAERA will go out to full public consultation on the Rural Policy Framework later this year. In the meantime the Department will implement a range of programmes that will 'bridge the gap' between 2014-2020 EU support and finalisation of the Rural Policy Framework. This programme, working in partnership with Tourism NI, is one such measure.





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It is the responsibility of the Board of Tourism NI to ensure that these guidelines are adhered to. Tourism NI may amend the programme and its guidelines at any time during the period of the programme.

These programme guidelines can be made available on request in Braille, audio and large print.

Every care has been taken to ensure accuracy in compilation of these guidelines. Tourism NI cannot accept responsibility for omissions or errors but these will be rectified in future publications when brought to our attention.