



Tourist Industry Scheme

Website Improvement Programme 2019-2020

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

Programme Guidelines
For Capital Grants up to £15,000



tourism
northernireland

tourismni.com

Contents

Introduction	2
Programme Aim	2
Programme Objectives	2
How Much Financial Assistance Can I Expect?	3
Eligibility	3
Who Can Apply?	3
Minimum Eligibility Criteria	4
Eligible Costs	4
Ineligible Costs	4
How can I apply?	5
Stage 1 - Expression of Interest and Applicant Selection	5
Stage 2 - Digital Audit and Website Improvement Plan	5
Stage 3 - Application for funding	6
Stage 4 - Project implementation	6
Stage 5 - Project Completion Report	7
Stage 6 - Claiming your grant	7
Other Programme Information	8
Appeals Procedure	8
Procurement	8
State Aid	8
Equality Statement	8
FOI and Data Protection	8
General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)	8

Introduction

Tourism NI 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 Northern Ireland tourism sector has experienced strong growth in recent years and the most recent official figures for 2018 at £968 million fall just short of the £1 billion target set for 2020. Notwithstanding this economic success story, NI tourism is growing from a low base and there is great ambition to deliver growth ahead of the international tourism market.

Tourism NI is keen to support tourism experience providers to compete on the global tourism stage. Digital disruption has transformed travellers' expectations in such a way that they have come to expect seamless journeys, tailored to their habits and preferences. Online booking is now a basic requirement.

We want to support businesses to ensure their tourism experiences are visible to the consumer in the digital market place and that purchases can be made effortlessly online.

Programme Aim

The majority of visitors to Northern Ireland book everything independently. The Tourism NI Visitor Attitude Survey indicates that in 2018, 63% of international visitors used on-line sources for pre-trip planning and researching the areas to which they were travelling. While in Northern Ireland the internet was crucial for travel planning.

The purpose of this programme is to provide guidance to experience providers to enhance their website and provide financial assistance for necessary improvements thereto. This may cover a wide range of support including search engine optimisation, provision of the right content and use of the right tactics to capture sales.

The overall **Programme Aim** is to improve the attractiveness of the Northern Ireland experience by improving the websites of experience providers.



Programme Objectives

- To improve the quality of online content across a range of tourism experience providers in Northern Ireland in line with the new tourism brand for Northern Ireland (launched in November 2019). This will be assessed by the consultant undertaking the Digital Review
- To ensure that individual websites are optimised to create positive first impressions, retain interest, enhance engagement on the site and drive enquiries and revenue
- 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

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 (visitor revenue, international visitors) and need for improvement.

The programme will include the following:

- **Review and Website Improvement Plan** – All eligible applicants (subject to available funding) will undergo a structured review of their website and receive a Website Improvement 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** – You get direct 1 to 1 mentoring and support based on your Website Improvement Plan. Tourism NI will organise this for you **free** of charge
- **Up to 50% funding towards eligible costs for capital investment in your website**

How Much Financial Assistance Can I Expect?

Grant rate: Tourism NI financial assistance will not normally exceed 50% of total eligible project costs.

Grant amount: The maximum amount of funding available under this programme for any one project is £15,000.

Eligibility

Who Can Apply?

To apply, you must be an existing experience provider, operating in Northern Ireland, that has an operating website. 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

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 2)
- Festivals and Events
- Sports Clubs
- Business start-ups
- Local authority or destination management tourism websites
- Visitor Information Centres
- Community / Voluntary information websites
- Shops, restaurants, cafes, etc.

* Applicants from Voluntary / Community sector will be required to have a Charity No. as evidence that they qualify for this status

Minimum Eligibility Criteria

1. **Location:** You must be an experience provider located within Northern Ireland.
2. **Business Type:** Accommodation providers are not eligible to apply, however if you provide an experience in addition to your accommodation, you may be eligible to apply.
3. **Provide a Visitor Experience:** You must currently operate a visitor experience that is ready for market.
4. **Operational thresholds:** You (as a business) should be operational since 01 October 2017 and have an operational website for the business. Tourism NI will seek assurance of these operational thresholds.
5. **Website Ownership:** You must own and be in a position to verify ownership of the website.
6. **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.
7. **State Aid:** You must not be in breach of State Aid rules regarding de Minimis regulations or the general block exemption regulations as appropriate.

Eligible Costs

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

- Replacement of, or upgrade to, current website
- Online Booking functionality, improving conversion rates and improving user experience
- Content development e.g. imagery and video
- Foreign Language provision
- Mobile optimization
- Improvement to Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and website content
- Integrated social media (not standalone)

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



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 4 October 2019.

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. 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.

The closing date for receipt of Expression of Interest is 21 October at 3.00pm

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 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 Improvement Plan

Once the applications have been assessed, those which scored highest within the 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 website. This will assess content, layout, user experience, search engine optimisation, etc. against a checklist provided by Tourism NI.



At this stage, 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 improvements that will be made to your website.

Based on the review, Tourism NI's consultants will prepare a Website Improvement Plan which will detail the improvements that are required to your website. The full cost of the Consultant preparing the Website Improvement 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 Improvement Plan. Tourism NI's consultants will sign off each Website Improvement Plan on its behalf.

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 Improvement Plan.

The closing date for applications is 3pm on 16th December 2019.

Before submitting your application, you must ensure you have uploaded any supporting documentation referenced in the application, your Website Improvement Plan along with a proposal and financial quote for a suitably qualified professional web consultant (third party supplier) who will implement your Website Improvement Plan. In seeking quotes 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 (visitor revenue, international visitors)
- Need for 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 2020** to allow draw down of the grant amount.

Stage 4 Project implementation

Once you have signed the Letter of Offer, you can then begin to implement your Website Improvement Plan through your appointed supplier(s). Expenditure must be incurred by 31 March 2020. 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 Improvement 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 Improvement 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 optimization; 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 31st March 2020.**

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.

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



Other Programme 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

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/articles/general-block-exemption-regulation>

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.



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.

**Capital Funding Unit, Tourism NI
Linum Chambers
Bedford Square, Bedford Street
Belfast, BT2 7ES**

**T: +44 (0) 28 9044 1574
E: tds@tourismni.com**
