

Northern
Ireland
Embrace
a Giant
Spirit



Guidelines to developing

tourism cluster groups

tourismni.com



tourism
northernireland



Dunluce Castle, Causeway Coastal Route

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SS Nomadic, Belfast

Welcome

Collaboration as a way of working is not a new concept for businesses, but with the emerging opportunities to align with the new experience brand, 'Northern Ireland – Embrace a Giant Spirit', there is a real momentum gathering. A spirit of collaboration is emerging in the tourism sector to jointly create visitor experiences that are accessible, bookable and compelling, offering long-term sustainability and growth to tourism in Northern Ireland.

Tourism Northern Ireland for the past four years has been working closely with local authorities and tourism businesses in developing collaborative working in the form of 'cluster' groups cumulating in many requests for feedback on how they are working as a vehicle for enabling businesses to work together.

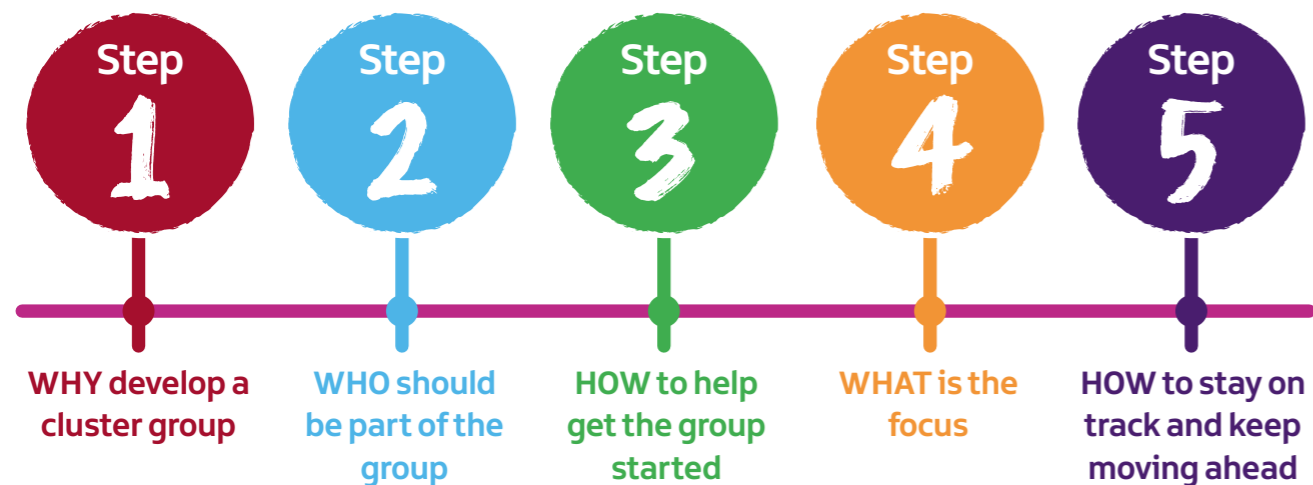
We therefore thought it would be timely to review progress to date and these guidelines have been developed so that we can share our experiences of setting up and developing cluster groups. The hope is that you can benefit from the lessons learned and experience gone before to successfully set up collaborative groups in your own area.

How to use these guidelines

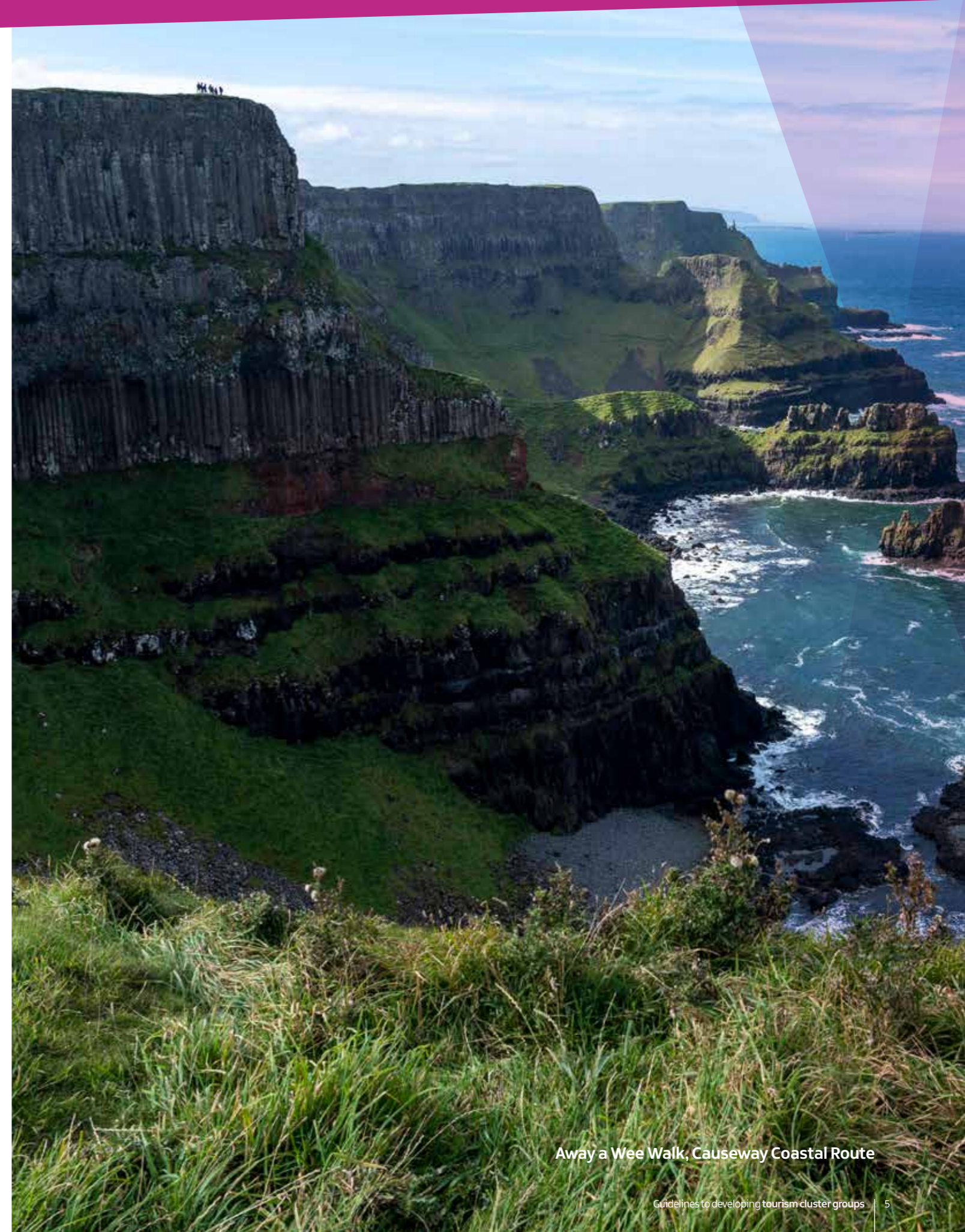
This guide is designed as a practical tool to help you get started to establish groups that have clear objectives, a common purpose around their visitors and with the best foundations to grow and develop. It is aimed at those who want to start an 'experience' cluster group but other groups with other agendas should find it equally useful as the principles remain the same.

The main point to note is that you cannot 'over engineer' a collaborative working group or you will take the air out of its lungs. This guide will show you that structure and formality is highly necessary at the starting point but over time, the group also needs to be allowed the freedom to bond and develop naturally, allowing their own entrepreneurialism, creativity and passion to be expressed and aligned, whilst maintaining a customer centric focus to all the plans. This is when the collaboration magic will really start to happen.

This guide is divided into five steps. It will offer advice on gathering the right people who can work together through to developing an action plan with the right foundations in place. Each of the five practical steps will cover the main considerations that we have learnt through our own experience.



There are questions to answer and guidance to follow. By the end of the guidelines you should be able to complete an action plan with a clear focus for the future.



Step
1
WHY develop a cluster group

At times, tourism businesses may want or need to 'go it alone' with a business idea and vision and this can of course work for some, but not all. When working collaboratively with other businesses, there tends to be a more proactive rather than reactive approach, which can often achieve much more over a period of time.



There is no one size that fits all in collaborative working groups. It all depends on the individual needs of the participants, the focus and objectives of the group, the challenges and demands of the visitor and the experiences to be developed. It is never just as simple as inviting a few local businesses to a meeting to discuss 'cluster working', leaving them to it and hoping that the green shoots will appear! It takes a strong determination, a clear focus and a lot of hard work on the part of the individuals involved, to create momentum from which new opportunities can grow.

However, there are some key ingredients to success that will apply to every type of cluster group and it is these that will be shared in this guide.



HEAR FROM OTHERS

"Some businesses think that if their local council advertises their product or experience as part of a summer publication or a local website that the business will just flow and they can sit back and rope in the money. This is so far away from how successful businesses really operate. It takes a lot of very hard work, investment in time and a strong collaborative team mentality over quite a few years but when this investment starts to pay off it can take your business far further than would have possible by working alone".

Top key ingredients to developing a successful collaborative working group.

- People managing to form quality relationships and networking to achieve results.
- People being prepared to break down barriers and build trust.
- Great teamwork without any hierarchy.
- Everyone prepared to contribute for the good of the team and not just the good of themselves.
- An independent facilitator or mentor who can keep the group on track but allow the ownership and decision-making to lie firmly within the group.
- A committed hardworking group of people united by a common vision and clear objectives.

If the basic ingredients of the group are right, then what is the reason for collaborating in the first place? Ultimately, there is no better reason, than developing ways to encourage visitors to come more often, spend more, stay longer, be even more delighted and recommend the experience to many others.

Step 1

WHY develop a cluster group

10 good reasons to set up a cluster group:

1	To improve product knowledge, cross selling and visitor referrals.
2	To encourage a greater pride in the area/ destination and offer a better experience for visitors.
3	To deliver some defined goals and actions within a set time frame.
4	A small group of businesses have identified a strong reason for collaborating.
5	There is a clear demand from international markets.
6	A strong group is showing 100% commitment to contribute to the collective growth and development.
7	A group have come together and want to do something. They are outward looking and see the destination as the priority over an individual business achievement.
8	The businesses in a potential group are already steady, reputable and well respected by both visitors and colleagues.
9	There is a need to help businesses in the area meet others to develop opportunities to create/evolve visitor experiences around a common theme or purpose.
10	A facilitator/mentor has been identified who can pull the group together and facilitate its launch, early steps, agreements and actions.



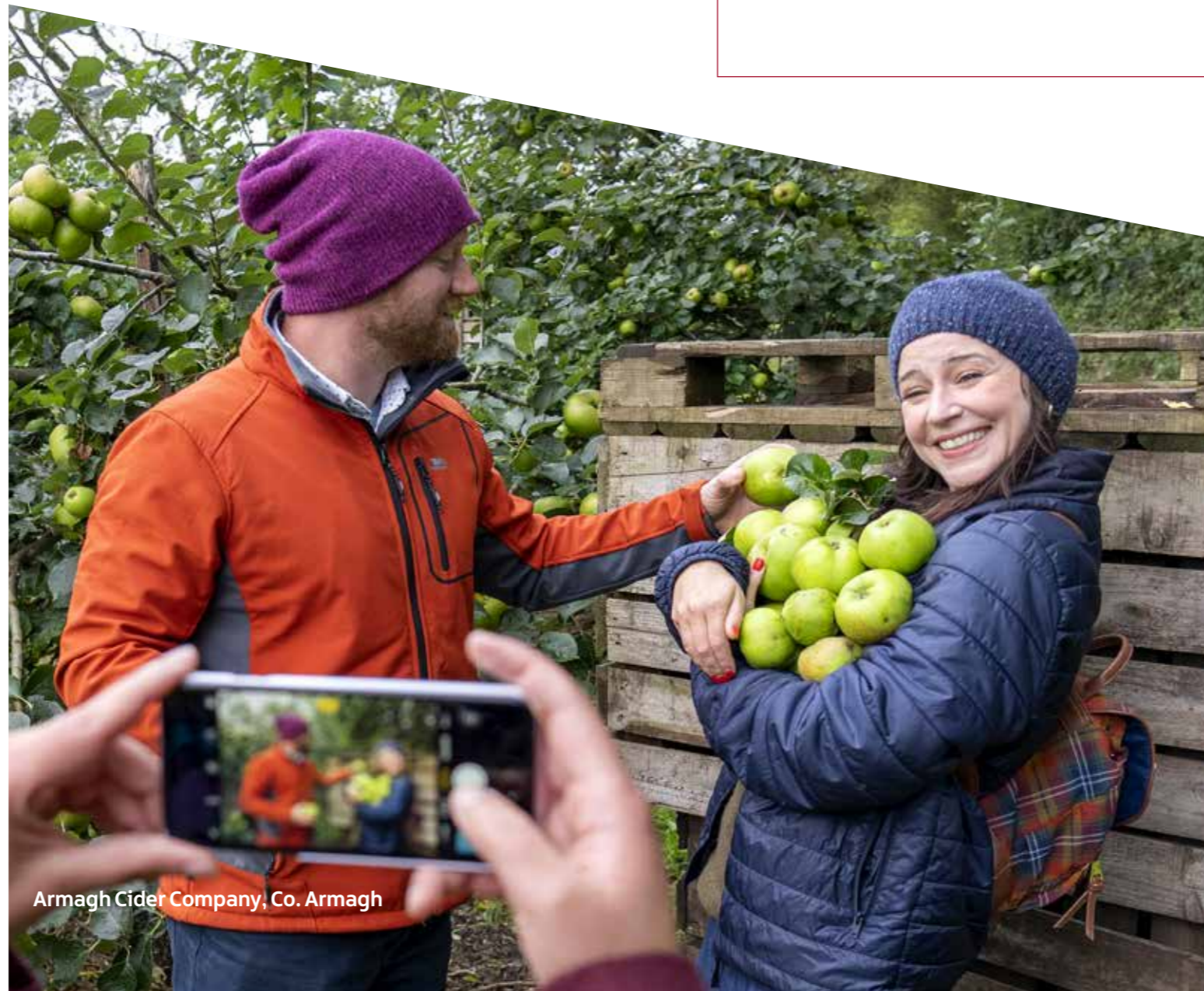
HEAR FROM OTHERS

“At the outset I wasn't sure about this way of working and thought that I don't have time to attend another set of meetings where

no decisions are made, and the talk just goes around and around. I soon realised that I would get out of it what I put in and so my advice is to put the commitment in, get involved and show up with a proactive spirit. I now know that I couldn't afford NOT to be in the Cluster Group. 90% of my business comes from international visitors on a shared itinerary and is growing every year. While the domestic market is the core to some Northern Ireland businesses my priority is the international market.”

What a cluster group is and what it's not:

What it IS	What it IS NOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A group where everyone has an equal status. • Working together to achieve a shared goal. • Contributing one's expertise freely for the benefit of a shared objective. • Opportunity to learn from each other and grow everyone's confidence. • Focus on developing visitor experiences. • Focus on communication and actions. • Self-managed without the need of external funding. • Usually not more than 15 like-minded businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A hierarchical group. • Working independently for oneself. • Charging cluster group participants for expertise and ideas. • Competitive and closed for fear of losing advantage. • Focus on destination issues, e.g. signage, litter etc. • Focus on structures and meetings. • Managed through a public body such as council / Tourism Northern Ireland. • A very small group, such as two or three unrelated businesses.



Armagh Cider Company, Co. Armagh



At this stage, you have a good idea of what is involved. You have reflected hard on why you want to set up a cluster group and you think there are the right ingredients

and enough momentum to work in this way. You are clear that a cluster group is right for the participants and that everyone is prepared to work hard to achieve results. You know that there are no quick fixes and it may take 2 or 3 years of continual effort before results start to be seen.

The next step will look at WHO should be in group and how to create a successful collaborative team.

Step
2
WHO should be part of the group

Involving the right individuals to participate is vital. Everyone must be team players and willing to contribute on behalf of the team and not their own business.



HEAR FROM OTHERS

“Working as part of a cluster group really only works for people who are passionate about their destination and can work as a team. It is not for inward looking people who still believe that their competition is within their destination.”

The following is a review checklist when considering the types of people to invite to join in:

- ✓ Dynamic tourism providers who are commercially driven to grow their business and grow tourism in their local area.
- ✓ Businesses who are already delivering a quality visitor experience or have the potential to deliver experiences.
- ✓ Some movers and shakers with leadership capabilities who can drive forward and unite the group.
- ✓ Businesses and individuals who are well respected by both visitors and the community.
- ✓ Businesses who are focussed on providing experiences and not just supporting services for the destination.

The clustering process is not a closed shop and attracting new businesses into the process over time is important. It can also deepen the pool from which new leaders with energy, vision, local contacts and the ability to pull in additional resources can emerge.



HEAR FROM OTHERS

“Our learning journey to Cork for 2 nights was one of the best things our group did. It was organised by the Council and paid for by each of us. The benefits to the group through the bonding on the trip was immeasurable.”



Step 2

WHO should be part of the group

Conduct a mini product audit of the area to make sure that the right businesses are involved.

It is easy to think you know what products and services are on your doorstep, but it is worth going through a structured exercise to make sure you really know. This information will inform many of the decisions you make in the set-up process, so it is worth knowing that you have got it right.

The best way to approach this is by thinking like a visitor. What is there to do and see in the area? How do you access it? How do you get around? Where do you stay? Where is there a great local experience for eating and drinking? Where can you buy souvenirs or arts and crafts? What else is special or a 'must see' nearby? Going through this process may give you good insights into who else might be a good addition to the group and if they are the right individuals to take part.



HEAR FROM OTHERS

"Only work with people who actually want to grow, who are prepared to refine what they do and to understand the market better."



HEAR FROM OTHERS

"When I first started with our cluster I was overwhelmed and felt like I had no experience and nothing to offer. A year down the track and I feel far more confident and have much more to contribute. It is like having a big group of mentors who I can call on for anything I need and who really want me to succeed."

Getting the mix of participants and the group balance right is also critical to its success and this needs to be struck across a variety of attributes. Consider how well the group matches up to the attributes below:

Balanced by business type	You will need a balance of different types of experience providers, e.g. a food tour, a wildlife walk experience, a bakery of artisan specialities, an adventure operator, a tea shop, a historic house etc.
Balanced by confident and skilled participants vs. less so	Is there a good balance of skilled confident operators in the group vs. less skilled, less confident? It is important to have some leaders in the group early on to be able to encourage the others, but not to be too dominated by only strong personalities.
Good team players	The cluster group will not survive if it is dominated by an elite few who make all the decisions. Others will just drift away. Everyone in the group must be prepared to work as a team and contribute fully, building good and trusting relationships with each other.
Balanced by skills and experience	There is often a limited skill base within a fledging group – especially around experience pricing, knowing markets, social media, communications, business focus, selling skills etc. These skills can be learnt from within the group and also from external training providers.
100% level of commitment from participants	From the outset, the commitment must be 100%. This is an investment of time and resources over a longer term. There is no room to carry any part-time passengers, however skilled!
Committed and united around a vision	Everyone in the group must be prepared to be non-competitive over the longer term to achieve collective goals.
Signed up to an informal contract between participants	From the outset it is worth setting up the group with some formality so that boundaries are in place. This can become more relaxed over time when momentum is gathered. An informal contract between individuals is needed from the start.



A dedicated group have come together with a common desire to develop collaborative experiences in an area. You know that you have the right people involved and a good balance of skills and experience within the group. The next step will lay the foundations to get the group started and put a strong structure of management, administration and governance in place.



St George's Market, Belfast

Step

3

HOW to get the group started

Getting the group started cannot be left to chance. For a cluster group to thrive, the right foundations need to be laid with clear objectives and goals defined and within a good structure of management administration and governance.

'To do' checklist for getting started:

- ✓ Ensure the mix of participants in the group is balanced.
- ✓ Draw up and get participants to sign their commitment to an informal contract.
- ✓ Clarify the process for new members joining and those leaving to the satisfaction of the group in line with group objectives.
- ✓ Agree the ground rules from the outset. Include a process for resolving challenges and conflict.
- ✓ Involve an independent group facilitator/ mentor to work with the group from the set up.
- ✓ Ask the right basic questions.
- ✓ Organise the management, administration and governance of the group.
- ✓ Set a clear vision with objectives, goals and actions. It may be long-term, tactical short term but either way it must be measurable.
- ✓ Develop a measurable action plan with the weekly / monthly tasks to be completed defined by a timescale and by who will do it.



HEAR FROM OTHERS

"There are huge benefits of being part of this type of collaborative/ partnership working. The cluster group gave me more confidence in what I do and helped me to grow my business. Our business skills have improved and with improved product knowledge so has our capacity building and abilities to cross sell. It's good to not feel so isolated and have a group of people who I really trust that I can bounce ideas off. We collectively feel really proud of what we can offer."

Step 3

HOW to get the group started

Putting measures in place to track success.

Whatever measures are appropriate for your group, define them from the outset. This way you can measure success over time and use these successes as a motivator when the going gets tough.

The measures you use can be tailored to your individual objectives as every group is different. They may be about the number of saleable experiences created or developing business competence. Or it may be something else entirely. The example below looks at measuring sellable experiences and business know how but you can adapt to make the same structure relevant for you.



As part of the measurement process, it is useful to gather information from the outset on a number of areas and then set up milestones over time to review progress.

These key aspects could be reviewed at the start and end of the process and perhaps at various milestones too, along the way.

Key aspects of the cluster group	Start of the process	End of the process	Comments
Rate the quality of the collaboration between members of the group.			
Rate the commitment of the businesses involved.			
To what extent is the vision, objectives and actions clear and measurable.			
Rate the quality of the internal communication of the group.			
Rate the potential for cluster growth in % terms.			
Rate the engagement for getting 'market ready' experiences listed on channels.			
Rate the potential to apply training and learning to develop the group activities.			
Rate the potential for future growth.			



HEAR FROM OTHERS

“The cluster group is the ideal vehicle for helping to maximise the tourism opportunities within my destination. Yes, it has a formal structure, but it is needed to ensure that all participants can flourish and play to their strengths. The make-up of the group is diverse and is such that it has so much valuable tourism and business expertise that can be shared and helped to support everyone. Each participant has to be proactive and display a can-do attitude to maximising the global reach of creating and selling our destination experiences.

Step 3

HOW to get the group started

Getting to know each other's businesses.

Part of building the sense of teamwork within the group is getting to know each other's businesses. The participants may not know each other's businesses well beforehand and this knowledge is vital if the group are to help each other grow with new insights, new innovations and recommendations to others. The best way to get to know a business is to experience it as a customer.

Some ideas to encourage this are:

- Arrange free visits for the group to experience each of the businesses in person.
- Every member of the group to write a biography sheet covering what their business offers, why they decided to start it, what the market demand is and what are they most passionate about.
- Walk in a visitor's shoes – two stages before arriving and two stages after. What was the access like, how easy was it to find out information about the experience on the move, opportunities for feedback, authentic engagement, how did the experience FEEL?
- Arrange meetings in each other's venues to keep the learning current and insights fresh.



Belfast Food Tour, Belfast

Ask the right basic questions.

Asking the right questions at the beginning will save a lot of soul searching down the track when gaps in knowledge are identified and surprises hit. These hiccups can potentially derail the fledging group in its infancy.

1	Is there a clear market demand?	How do you know? Where does it come from? Is it domestic or international? If it is from international countries – which ones? Why is there a demand? It is important to be clear.
2	Is there enough capacity in the area for an increase in visitors?	Is there enough accommodation and other services to cope with an increase in visitors? Is the area more aligned to FIT (Free and independent visitors) or is there capacity to service tour groups?
3	Do we have the right people around the table? Who might be missing?	You may come back to this question throughout the setting up process as you define the objectives. Do not be afraid to lose a member or two at this stage and pull in others.
4	What are the constraints in our area that will hinder progress of this group?	What are the weaknesses of our area and our group? Can they be overcome? It is worth doing a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis so that challenges can be identified from the outset.

Step 3

HOW to get the group started

What is the vision, objectives, goals and actions?

This is the time to start to think WHY the group is forming and what they want to achieve. Is it to take some new experiences to an international audience? Is it to grow business and attract more visitors to the area? Perhaps it is to share some hidden assets of the area with a much wider audience? Most cluster groups do not reach maturity of tangible success for 2 or 3 years. Is this cluster group prepared to work hard for a slow burn to reach its goals? Is there a long-term vision or is it tactical and immediate?

To establish a clear focus, it may be helpful to follow the process below.

WHY	WHY are you developing a cluster group?	<p>Is it to grow the market and grow your business?</p> <p>Is it to reach new audiences?</p> <p>To offer visitors more to do and see in your area?</p>
WHO	WHO must be part of the cluster group?	<p>WHO else should be joining your group to enhance the visitor experience fully?</p> <p>WHO are you developing experiences for?</p> <p>WHO else might be able to help you to develop?</p>
HOW	HOW will you get the cluster group started?	<p>HOW will you inspire the market with this idea?</p> <p>HOW will you engage people at the right level?</p> <p>HOW will you work together as a group?</p>
WHAT	WHAT is the focus for the cluster group?	<p>WHAT are the timescales for developing the new visitor experience?</p> <p>WHAT are the milestones to reach your goals?</p> <p>WHAT is the market demand for this idea?</p> <p>WHAT is the long-term vision for the group?</p> <p>WHAT are your objectives to achieve your vision?</p>

Tourism Northern Ireland have developed a variety of toolkits and market information to help businesses develop and grow. These are useful resources to use to make sure that you are developing plans with the visitor focus firmly at the centre of everything you do.

<https://tourismni.com/globalassets/grow-your-business/toolkits-and-resources/northern-ireland-tourism-toolkit.pdf>

Organise the management, administration and governance of the group.

The management and general organisation of the cluster is critical to its success. Do not imagine that it will 'just happen'. The organisation needs to be detailed and structured and like any new relationship – it needs diplomatic work and sensitive management. If you don't do this, the group is more likely to lose focus. When there is a perception of lack of boundaries, fear about the collaboration can set in.

Top 2 pieces of advice from our experience

- Involve an independent group facilitator to help set up the group, get agreement on the objectives, long term vision and group ground rules contract.
- Make sure that the management and admin of the group is more formal and structured until the ways of working are established and trust is beginning to build.



Belfast Food Tour, Belfast

Step 3

HOW to get the group started

Role of the independent facilitator.

- Demonstrates clarity on what is expected from the group and the ways of collaborative working.
- Organises the group contract and rules of participation.
- Encourages the group to develop measurable objectives to deliver a defined vision.
- Develops an action plan to deliver objectives and make sure that measures and timings are time bound. Followed up with the group to ensure completion.
- Delegates responsibilities among the group to deliver specific tasks in the action plan.
- Develops an agenda for each meeting and follow up with a report on agreements.
- Arranges learning journeys to visit other cluster groups and observe successes and challenges, this is a useful way to encourage the group to bond, relax and build trust.
- Brings objectivity to the group.
- Once trust has built, confidence is increasing and the group is beginning to take ownership, identifies new leaders to become cluster coordinator and be prepared to step back.

Some of the following successful facilitator/mentor actions were gathered from other cluster group experience. These might be useful in developing a brief for this role.

- Encouraged the need for greater partnership working and supported the thought that 'going it alone' could be a risky business strategy.
- Helped to break down the natural competitive barriers that exist between businesses.
- Created a vision that the participants can buy into.
- Secured participant ongoing involvement in the process.
- Recognised the tourism issues that exist and signposted these to other forums so that the focus of the cluster group was not derailed.
- Encouraged entrepreneurship and the importance of selling in the global marketplace.
- Supported and inspired the group to grow organically and within its means.
- Was always on the look out to find potential new leaders.
- Recognised the need for an initial more formal approach that could become more informal over time.
- Helped the group to move into a sustainable position and take on the cluster coordinator role themselves.



HEAR FROM OTHERS

"At first I wasn't convinced we needed an independent facilitator, but I soon saw their skill in getting the group to open up, to talk and making sure everyone was involved."

The group is now formed, an independent facilitator in place and the right businesses involved to work together to create new or improved experiences for visitors in the area. This next step will look at how to define a clarity of purpose and a set of actions to deliver this.



Step
4
WHAT is the focus

This step will focus on how to develop a measurable action plan.

This next part may take many months to complete as the group starts to work together. You can only move at the speed of the group and there may be many challenges to overcome, before enough trust is built and commitment demonstrated to move forward. The best chance of overcoming these are with formality, structure and patiently allow the group to settle into working together and go forward.



Castleward, Co. Down

Setting objectives

What are your objectives? Where is the growth going to come from? The following are some of the considerations you may need to address:

- Are you going to increase the number of visitors?
- Are you going to increase the spend of visitors?
- Are you going to increase the length of stay of visitors? – if so, by how long?
- Are you going to target higher value international visitors - if so – who and how?
- Are you going to grow the domestic market? – if so, what is the target?

Are you going to develop new experiences or enhance the existing ones?

- What investment will you need to support your plans?
- What new or enhanced services will you need to deliver your vision?
- What are the key challenges and threats that you need to address?

How will you measure the progress of the cluster group and of the visitor experiences?

List the objectives in order of their priority:

	Objectives	Why is this a priority	Timescale	Measurement
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				



HEAR FROM OTHERS

“Despite being in business for many years –prior to being part of the cluster, I didn’t really believe that we had a product that we could take to an international market. My business really only operated within a domestic market. The cluster has given us so much more confidence and now we are going to the Meet the Buyer event both as a destination as well as an individual. We have been in the cluster for a year now and it has brought about so many benefits.”

Step 4

WHAT is the focus

Collaborative working.

As the group continues to work together, you may need to consider the following:

- Clarifying and differentiating roles to help the group work together comfortably.
- Developing a guideline on how the group want to engage in referrals and cross selling.
- Developing guidelines on the commercial sensitivity of building relationships inside and outside the cluster group.
- Addressing skills training and business coaching needs such as sales/marketing, SEO Web optimisation - digital strategy and audit, defining your target audience, selling to both consumers and travel trade etc.
- Considering web and social media activity from the user perspective. Do you need more effective imagery, video and more emotive content text?
- Making the product offerings and experiences bookable (directly and indirectly) as well as both accessible and saleable online.
- Developing fam trips and learning journeys.

From previous cluster group experience, these are some of the types of support that was commonly asked for:

- Marketing support, pricing, yield management.
- Support to attend trade shows, consumer shows and 'Meet the Buyer' events.
- Third party booking systems knowledge and expertise training.
- How to become a partner into a tour operator's programme.
- Training on how to prepare and pitch for 'Meet the Buyer' event.
- How to best use the available marketing Intelligence and research available.
- How a cluster group can become completely sustainable in its own right.
- Social media / IT training in 1:1 or small workshops.

How to encourage more trade involvement.

As the confidence and business competence in the group grows, you may want to consider reaching out to attract new markets and get your experiences on the travel trade radar. The first steps to do this are:

- Improve visibility on Tourism Northern Ireland and Tourism Ireland channels.
- Attend a 'Meet the Buyer' event.
- Attend trade shows.

There are many considerations before you start to work with the trade for the first time, and it is a process to work through to make sure you are fully prepared. Marketing to the travel trade as a group rather than independently has proved to be very successful for other cluster groups.

A good place to start is by understanding fully the steps outlined in Tourism Northern Ireland's Inbound Tourism Toolkit for Northern Ireland. It is packed with explanations and advice on pricing, routes to market, how the travel trade work and more.

What is the long-term sustainability plan?

How many of the following have you addressed? These will all affect the long-term sustainability of the group.

- Are there any outstanding infrastructure challenges within the area that will limit the growth of tourism?
- Are there any technological issues that will limit your development?
- What training needs have you identified in the group to meet your strategic objectives and goals?
- As a group, what financial needs have you identified and how will these be addressed?



HEAR FROM OTHERS

"You have to put the destination in front of your own business and promote that – first and foremost. Then when together you have attracted more visitors to your area you can agree to start to promote your own business. I am definitely more attractive to potential customers as part of a collective and part of an itinerary than I ever have been as a standalone business."

The right foundations are in place, a committed collaborative group has started to develop a shared focus and objectives to achieve it. An independent facilitator is working with the group and has put in place good structures to manage the administration and governance of the group, the final step will offer some guidance on how best to stay on track and keep moving ahead.

Step
5
**HOW to stay
on track and keep
moving ahead**

This next step will focus on how to stay on track and keep developing.



Meet the Buyer, ICC Belfast

Let's recap on the guidance:

- ✓ A group of around 15 participants who are committed to collectively develop new market-ready experiences have joined together to grow business for the group.
- ✓ The right products in the cluster group that have a clear collaboration focus (geography, theme, visitor demographic etc.).
- ✓ A good mix of personalities and skills / experience within the group.
- ✓ An independent facilitator or mentor.
- ✓ A clear market demand.
- ✓ A good understanding of how the target market for the new experiences fits into the core existing markets and experience brand for Northern Ireland.
- ✓ An understanding on how to set objectives and action plans for the group.
- ✓ An identified plan for sustainability.



HEAR FROM OTHERS

“It was really valuable to go on a learning journey to other places who had more years under their belt and learn what their pitfalls and successes were to draw on their experiences. As a group we also really got to know each other better and through this better camaraderie, the relationships within the group have really solidified to the benefit of everyone. We now communicate on a WhatsApp group which saves lots of meeting time and still keeps us all plugged in with each other.”

Step 5

HOW to stay on track and keep moving ahead

Staying focussed and on track.

Everyone is busy and it may sometimes feel that joint working with other businesses is too much of a drain on time and resources for relatively little gain.

One of the biggest fears that has been cited by participants is 'cluster fatigue', by which they mean, attending lengthy meetings where no decisions get taken or the meeting is dominated by a few loud voices. Or worse still, the group loses their way and ends up discussing the minutiae of litter collection or parking restrictions. The focus is somehow lost in the ether and the group starts to dissolve.

It is really important to be mindful of these negative perceptions and find ways to address them as you build trust with participants.

Face to face meetings are good for relationship building but are only valuable if they are structured and focussed. Always have an agenda and encourage a progress report from each action owners before a wider discussion takes place.

Meetings don't need to be overly formal, despite their structure and can take place in a variety of different ways.

Consider some of these:

- Host a dinner and set an agenda beforehand with reports on progress and discussion from each subgroup individuals who have taken responsibility for a particular action or set of related actions.
- Meet in each other's venues and combine the meeting with increasing product knowledge.
- Invite a guest speaker to join the meeting and talk about a related topic such as website Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), social media, pricing. Working with the trade etc.
- Use technology to meet. A great user-friendly platform is zoom www.zoom.us. It is free to use and allows a group of people to interact in real time through audio and video. Other platforms are Skype and Google Hangouts.
- Walking and talking. This may be useful for a subgroup to get together to discuss a particular challenge or topic.

What to do when things go wrong.

Problems are usually due to one or more participants finding the process challenging or there being interpersonal conflict. It is essential that problems are identified quickly and resolved in an honest transparent manner. If this is not possible then the group needs to be reformed and re-focussed.

If problems are left to 'resolve on their own' the risk is that the cluster will not progress and the remaining participants disheartened. A decisive timely action can often save the progress of the group and keep it intact.

Benchmark with others.

Learning journeys are always cited as a winning formula. Not only do participants get the opportunity to learn from others who may be further down a similar track, but they get a confidence boost when they can see how comparatively well, they are doing themselves.

The other aspect of a learning journey is the chance to build relationships and trust amongst the businesses. It is often said that this is the moment in the cluster journey that they became friends are really bonded as a group.

What needs to be done and who is going to do it?

Deciding on what actions need to be done, can often become a very long shopping list which is likely to change as new priorities emerge. It may be helpful to have an outline Action Plan that details the overall path that you will follow and then break this down into quarterly chunks.

To get started, focus on the first 3 months of activity and then review this before moving on. If you take on too much, in the initial stages the group may become overwhelmed and more focussed on the actions than actually doing them! The more details that you incorporate into your action plan, the more likelihood you will have of managing to get things completed.

What works for one group may not work for another. Each will have its own opportunities, challenges, traditions and culture. Some groups are able to move quickly into substantial development while others might take time to develop.

The key ingredient for success here is to assign roles and responsibilities within the group with realistic timescales and a way of measuring success on each action as you grow. By dividing responsibilities into subgroups of 2 or 3 people, there is often a greater chance of success as they are more likely to motivate each other. This is especially so if there is an ongoing expectation of an update to the group on monthly progress.

Action	Who	By when / milestone	Cost	What success will look like	How we will measure this



HEAR FROM OTHERS

“People buy from people and with the cluster, we have dramatically increased the likelihood of being recommended by other businesses in the area. As a group we are now friends and the trust has grown between us, when we recommend each other we do so from the hearts and with a good experience of each other's products. The visitor is delighted as they can feel the warmth of the recommendation coming through.”

We wish you every success with the progress and development of your cluster group and look forward to seeing the new visitor experiences that are created.

Good luck!

More information and sources of help

Local authorities	Local authorities play an active role in business and skills development. Make sure you know your local authority tourism team so that you are aware of all the opportunities available.
Tourism Northern Ireland	<p>Tourism Enterprise Development Programme https://tourismni.com/Grow-Your-Business/programmes/tourism-enterprise-development-programme/</p> <p>Details on how to engage and align with the new experiences brand for Northern Ireland – Embrace a Giant Spirit https://tourismni.com/Grow-Your-Business/northern-ireland---embrace-a-giant-spirit/</p> <p>Other Toolkits from Tourism Northern Ireland on how to grow your business, market segmentation etc. https://tourismni.com/Grow-Your-Business/toolkits-and-resources/</p>
Tourism Ireland	<p>For information on Overseas Industry Opportunities www.tourismirelandindustryopportunities.com</p> <p>For information on marketing internationally www.tourismireland.com/MarketingIndustryOpportunities</p>
Invest NI	<p>Collaborative Growth Programme https://www.investni.com/collaborative-growth-programme</p>

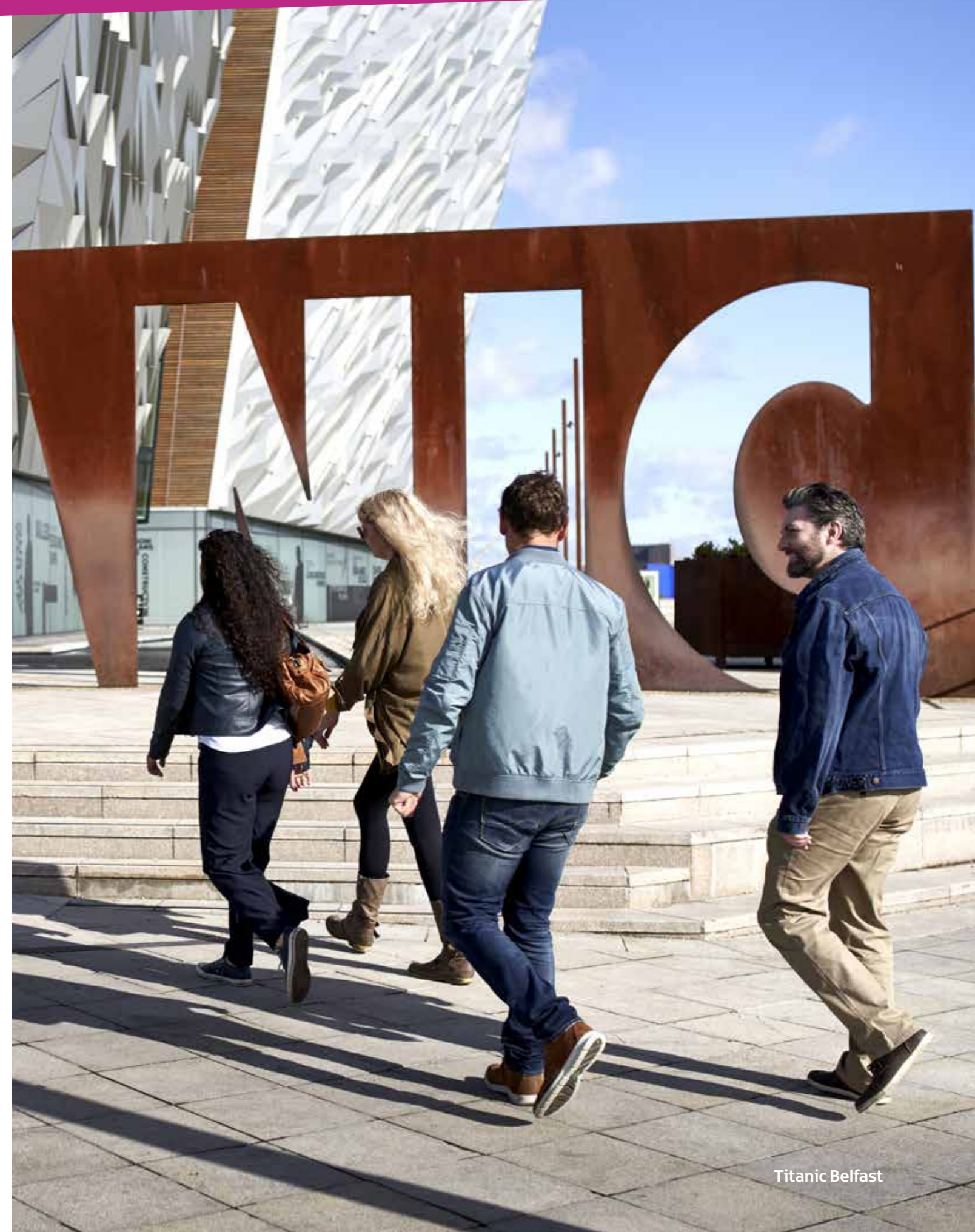


HEAR FROM OTHERS

“Northern Ireland – Embrace a Giant Spirit is an opportunity and an invitation to create economic uplift for everyone involved in

tourism, in all parts of Northern Ireland. It will build on the strengths and successes of the last decade to give authentic experiences provided by businesses large and small that will leave our visitors with unforgettable memories.”

John McGrillen CEO, Tourism Northern Ireland



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



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