Board Meeting 19 March 2026

TOURISM NI
MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING
HELD AT LAGAN VALLEY ISLAND CIVIC CENTRE, LISBURN
ON THURSDAY 19 MARCH 2026

Participating:

- Ms Ellvena Graham OBE (Chairman)
- Ms Aileen Martin
- Mr Michael Counahan
- Ms Aine Gallagher (by remote call)
- Ms Karly Greene
- Mr John Hood
- Ms Linda MacHugh (by remote call, from item 2 (ii))

In attendance:

- Ms Laura McCorry, Chief Executive
- Mr Adrian Doherty, Director of Corporate Services
- Mr David Roberts, Director of Strategic Development (item 2(iv) & 2(vii))
- Ms Eimear Callaghan, Interim Director of Marketing (item 2 (iii))
- Ms Aine Kearney, Director of Events (item 2 (i))
- Mr Jim Daly, Executive Support Team
- Ms Caoimhe Roberts, Executive Support Team

Apologies:

- Mr Colin Johnston
- Mr Ciaran O'Neill

1. Introduction / Standing Items

The Chairman welcomed participants to the meeting and invited them to declare any interests in respect of agenda items. No declarations were made at this point.

1 (i) Minutes of Previous Meeting

Minutes of the Board's meeting held on 4th February 2026 were approved as an accurate record.

1 (ii) Matters Arising – Actions from previous Board Meeting

The Board noted the status of actions agreed at the last meeting and other actions to be completed. Members suggested that going forward the Board should be asked to confirm or propose that items are complete, before their removal from the live tracker (**ACTION**: ELT).

Members discussed their visit to Ballyburren the previous day and requested that consideration is given in advance of future industry visits as to how the Board/TNI can address issues raised by businesses and follow up thereafter. ELT to consider further (**ACTION**: ELT)

The Board also discussed the dinner with stakeholders on the previous evening and asked that future dinner events are held in rooms/spaces conducive to private roundtable conversations. (**ACTION**: EST)

2. Items for Discussion

2 (i) Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann

Director of Events, Áine Kearney, joined the meeting.

The Director of Events provided an update on the financial arrangements to host the Fleadh Cheoil in Belfast in August 2026. She advised that the business case had been approved by the Department of Finance, but written confirmation of DfE funding has not yet been received. To secure media space and maximise return on marketing investment, the Board approved the recommendation to activate spend at risk due to the time sensitive marketing investment required. The Board acknowledged if dedicated funding was not forthcoming, the commitment made would have to be absorbed within the final budget settlement.

Belfast City Council representatives Keith Forster and Damien Martin joined the meeting and delivered a presentation setting out preparations for hosting the Fleadh. A wide-ranging discussion ensued; the Board commended the council on their plans and thanked the representatives for the update. Belfast City Council representatives left the meeting.

2 (ii) Chief Executive's Report

Noting the report, the Board discussed the recent release of CSO statistics for January to December 2025. Members were advised that whilst the statistics indicate strong ROI market performance, this will be calibrated with industry sentiment regarding the forward look. This will be brought to the Board Meeting in May via the market outlook report. (**ACTION**: LMcC).

The Board was advised that Tourism NI expects to receive a funding request from Visit Derry to support the evolution of the organisation. Members commented on the potential for a reduced budget settlement and the importance of Tourism NI's resources being invested in direct delivery of tourism impact.

The CEO offered an update on the organisational renewal programme and the Board agreed John Hood would oversee delivery on behalf of the Board. The Board noted the Department had now approved the request to make permanent a temporary Grade 5 Director position within the ELT structure.

Linda MacHugh joined the meeting online.

The Board was advised that DoF had approved an update to The Tourist Industry (Financial Assistance) Scheme 2026 that will allow TNI to streamline its approach to financial assistance under this framework. Clarification is being sought from the Department on the details of the approval, and an update will be brought to the Board in due course regarding the individual programmes TNI would like to support within this framework subject to budget (**ACTION**: DR&AD).

2 (iii) Travel Trade Strategy

The Acting Director of Marketing joined the meeting to present a new strategy aimed at driving income from the international travel trade over the next five years to 2031.

A key focus of the discussion related to the NI Embrace A Giant Spirit brand and a desire to assess whether it remains appropriate and effective in a highly competitive tourism landscape. The Board stressed the need for a review but emphasised it should be completed quickly.

The Board commended the work on the draft travel trade strategy, endorsed the recommendations, and thanked Aileen Martin for her participation in the steering group.

2 (iv) Future Regulation and Grading of Visitor Accommodation

The Director of Strategic Development provided the Board with an update on the process to review Tourism NI's certification and grading programmes. It was noted that substantial changes to certification would require changes to primary legislation.

The Board reaffirmed its position to move towards deregulation of certification over time and in the short term to simplify and refine the certification criteria in tandem with the Department as far as possible. Whilst there is a need to continue to fulfil the legislative function and to carry out enforcement action where required, the Board supported proposals to refine and simplify the approach as outlined in the paper. The Board also asked for an update on accommodation grading to be brought to the Board. (**ACTION**: DR).

2 (v) Chairman's Report

The Board noted the content of the Chairman's report. She reported on a constructive conversation with the new Chair of VisitBritain, which touched on Tourism NI's participation as an observer at VB Board meetings. They agreed on a proposal which would see the VisitBritain Chair attend one TNI Board meeting per year and TNI's Chair attending one VisitBritain meeting in turn (**ACTION**: LMcC).

2 (vi) Sub-Committee Reports

A report was given on a meeting of the Finance & Casework Committee held on 4th March. A revised business case for the Destination Royal Hillsborough project was presented, and the Committee had agreed that this could now progress to DfE's casework panel for consideration. The Committee received updates on other City and Growth Deals projects. It was agreed that it would be useful for the Board to receive a progress update from Belfast City Council on the Belfast Stories project in due course. (**ACTION**: DR).

2 (vii) Newry Mourne and Down District Council Presentation

The Board was joined by Marie Ward and Conor Mallon of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (NMDDC) as well as the Director of Strategic Development, for a presentation of the Council's strategic plans for an alternative City & Region Growth Deal project.

The Board was supportive of the concept in principle and thanked the Council representatives for the presentation. NMDDC representatives and David Roberts left the meeting.

3. Reports

3 (i) Board Operating Framework

The Director of Corporate Services presented a draft Board Operating Framework, which amalgamated relevant parts of existing governance documents including the Partnership Agreement, Standing Orders and Scheme of Delegation into a single cohesive framework defining the Board's role and responsibilities.

It was agreed that the Board should continue to approve business cases valued at £1m+ and those deemed novel or contentious. It was decided that while the Board should be kept informed of business cases requiring Departmental approval, it was appropriate to do so via correspondence or update at the following Board meeting. Prior Board approval is not required.

The Chairman stressed the need to avoid the scenario reoccurring whereby, in the event of the Assembly's dissolution or the absence of an Economy Minister, the Chairman was the only person on the Board. It was agreed that the BOF should reflect this requirement.

Additionally, the Chairman stated that her role is to advise the Dept over the skills mix on the Board but the final decision on appointments is a Ministerial decision. The BoF should reflect this (**ACTION**: AD).

4. Papers for Noting

4 (i) Market Outlook

The Board noted the latest report on visitor trends.

4 (ii) Draft Agenda for May Board Meeting

The Board noted a proposed draft agenda for its next meeting.

4 (iii) Agenda Feedback

This new standing item has been added to permit the Board to feed back to the Executive Team on the content of agendas. Whilst the agenda for the current meeting had been weighty, Members welcomed the balance between strategic tourism matters and governance.

5. Any Other Business

As there were no other matters for discussion, the Chairman thanked participants and brought the meeting to a close.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next Board Meeting is due to take place on Wednesday 20th May 2026 at Tourism NI Headquarters.