

Northern Ireland Assembly Economy Committee

Opening Statement

by Niall Gibbons, Chief Executive, Tourism Ireland

23 June, 2021

Introduction and background

Chairman, members, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Niall Gibbons and I am Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland.

Tourism Ireland is the organisation responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a compelling holiday destination. Our principal objectives are to increase tourism to the island of Ireland and to support Northern Ireland to realise its tourism potential. We operate in over 21 markets around the world and undertake world-class global marketing campaigns for the island of Ireland. We work closely with Tourism Northern Ireland to ensure that our promotional themes overseas align with their development priorities for the industry.

Impact of COVID-19

Since March 2020, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on global travel and has presented a completely unprecedented and extremely serious situation for tourism, with devastating consequences for tourism operators in Northern Ireland and around the island of Ireland.

Prior to COVID-19, 2019 was the best year ever for tourism to Northern Ireland, when we welcomed 2.245 million overseas visitors, who spent £589 million during their time here, supporting 70,800 jobs. Following that record year in 2019, and then from developing into what was looking like another promising year in February 2020, tourism activity virtually ground to a halt by the end of March 2020. Except for a short period of opportunity during the summer, we subsequently welcomed almost no international visitors to Northern Ireland in 2020.

Aviation has suffered a dramatic collapse as a result of the pandemic and our international connectivity has been decimated. This loss of air connectivity is a major concern and will have a detrimental impact on our industry if it is not restored.

COVID Tracker Research: monitoring consumer motivations

From the outset, Tourism Ireland has been monitoring the global impact of COVID-19. In the face of the fundamental changes facing our industry, we knew it would be vital to have a comprehensive understanding of the changed consumer and the new marketplace. We therefore commissioned our largest ever programme of research in our major markets. The insights we are gaining from this research are helping to ensure that our promotional plan is as tightly targeted and as powerfully motivational as it possibly can be, in order to drive a strong recovery, as quickly as it is possible to realise it. It will continue to be a very valuable planning input for Tourism Ireland as the situation improves. Some of the key findings of our research include:

- the fundamental desire to travel remains;
- closer-to-home markets are likely to be first to recover;
- 'wholesome reconnection' is a recurring theme;
- visiting friends and relatives, as well as destinations which are familiar, are the holidays most likely to be considered first; and
- our competitive position (vis-à-vis other destinations) continues to deteriorate.

Brexit / EU Exit

Up until the outbreak and spread of COVID-19, Brexit had dominated all other uncertainties for overseas tourism. Tourism Ireland has been tracking the impact of the UK's decision to leave the EU since 2016.

Our most recent wave of research, in March, examined current consumer sentiment regarding Brexit. Among those surveyed in Great Britain, Brexit/EU Exit was off-radar, given that COVID-19 has restricted travel; therefore, holidaymakers perceived it to have very little bearing on current holiday planning. There was mixed understanding about the impact of Brexit but little engagement; however, some concerns around the practicalities of passports, queues, touring and roaming charges came to mind among the respondents, when discussing post-Brexit travel.

Just under half of the outbound holidaymakers surveyed in Britain were aware of the Common Travel Area; however, only one-fifth knew what it actually was. New requirements for pet passports and the need for a green card for those driving their own car in the EU could prove to be a future dampener, when travel resumes. Also, recent news that visitors from Mainland Europe to Northern Ireland will require a passport from 1 October is a serious concern; given that many visitors from Mainland Europe travel with a national ID card rather than a passport, this has the potential to impact negatively on overseas tourism to Northern Ireland, particularly in the area of coach tour business.

Framework for recovery: RESTART, REBUILD, REDESIGN

Throughout the pandemic, Tourism Ireland has identified key themes which need to be addressed for recovery. They are:

- Consumer motivation to travel: to help us identify when consumers will be ready to consider holidaying again and which markets offer us the best short-term prospects.
- Restoration of access: the airline industry has been hit particularly hard by this crisis. The island of Ireland has now found itself in a competitive situation for air routes, with no guarantees about which routes will operate. Support will be required to build demand and increase the viability of new and existing routes.
- Retaining a strong, internationally appealing industry: the overseas travel trade have long been loyal supporters of Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland; however, we are now facing higher levels of competition than ever before from destinations across the world. The excellent relationships which Tourism Ireland enjoys with the overseas travel trade are vital to our long-term success. We will need to invest, to create the demand which will support the product on the ground.

To support these themes, Tourism Ireland has established a framework for recovery. This is a three-phase plan to RESTART, REBUILD and ultimately REDESIGN demand.

Dedicated campaign for Northern Ireland in GB

Phase One of a dedicated campaign to promote Northern Ireland in GB has been under way since February. This phase has been about 'warming up' potential GB holidaymakers, sharing aspirational and inspiring content about Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland's aim was to keep Northern Ireland 'top of mind' with prospective GB visitors. All activity has been running under the banner 'Northern Ireland – Embrace a Giant Spirit'. Phase One includes:

- **Adrian Dunbar's *Coastal Ireland***: approximately 2 million people across GB tuned in to the second episode of a two-part series called *Coastal Ireland*, which aired on Channel 5 in February. The series was fronted by Fermanagh actor and *Line of Duty* star Adrian Dunbar and was supported by Tourism Ireland. Viewers saw Dunbar visit places like the Giant's Causeway, the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, Mount Stewart House and Gardens and the Mourne Mountains. He also met with motorcycle star Michael Dunlop.
- **Northern Ireland Embrace a Giant Spirit showcase**: Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI hosted a virtual showcase event for the influential GB travel trade in March, bringing to life some of the many wonderful 'Northern Ireland Embrace a Giant Spirit' experiences through a programme of interviews, demonstrations and immersive video content.
- **Partnership with The Guardian**: a major digital campaign with *The Guardian* went live on 31 March, reaching an estimated 4.7 million people. It aimed to inspire nostalgia and a desire for a future trip to Northern Ireland, offering genuinely interesting, entertaining and informative content to readers of *The Guardian*. A key element of the campaign involved two new videos showcasing what Northern Ireland has to offer – through the lens of two celebrities, Saoirse-Monica Jackson (best known for portraying Erin Quinn in *Derry Girls*) and broadcaster Eamonn Holmes, who fronted the videos. This partnership also includes a bespoke Northern Ireland page on *The Guardian* website; online ads on the lifestyle and travel section of *The Guardian* website to drive readers to the bespoke page; an online article about Northern Ireland and a gallery of great images from around Northern Ireland on *The Guardian* website; and posts on the social channels (Twitter and Facebook) of *The Guardian* – and on Tourism Ireland's social channels – to highlight the content.

- **'Always on' social media:** running parallel to the partnership with *The Guardian*, Tourism Ireland has upweighted its social media activity – with messages designed to keep Northern Ireland 'top of mind', for when the time is right.
- **Ongoing outreach to GB travel and lifestyle media:** Tourism Ireland has also upweighted its publicity activity. Since Northern Ireland re-opened to GB holidaymakers, Tourism Ireland has been inviting influential travel and lifestyle journalists to visit. Journalists from *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Scotsman* and *Travel Weekly* have visited Northern Ireland during June. Journalists from *The Sun* and Press Association are expected to visit in July.

The aim of Phase Two of this campaign is to generate demand and drive bookings for short breaks and holidays in Northern Ireland. This was scheduled to go live in mid-May; we await approval of funding, to launch Phase Two.

Redevelopment of Ireland.com

A significant redesign of Tourism Ireland's international website, Ireland.com, and our digital marketing capability, has been under way. The new Ireland.com is now live; in all, there are 33 market sites, in 30 different countries, in 11 languages. The site will be fundamental to our proposed kick-start success.

RESTART: Let's get back to Ireland

Tourism Ireland has been actively planning for the restart of travel from overseas. We are now rolling out a significant programme of kick-start activity to entice and welcome back overseas visitors.

Earlier this month, we launched a new £3 million promotional campaign, to build anticipation for holidays here this summer. This involved a major digital video campaign; called 'Let's get back to Ireland', the online video is building anticipation for holidays here this summer. It is being promoted via online video platforms (including YouTube), on social media, mobile devices, as well as on Connected TV (television that can stream digital content), in nine different markets: Great Britain, the United States, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and Switzerland.

RESTART: The Green Button campaign

Promoting Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland in the aftermath of COVID-19 requires a new, tactical campaign, delivered at scale in our main markets. In July, Tourism Ireland will be ready to act – with a major new consumer campaign called ‘The Green Button’. At that point, all Tourism Ireland activity will switch from creating a longing for holidays here to creating bookings. The aim of ‘The Green Button’ campaign will be to single-mindedly drive visitor numbers and intention to book a trip to Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland. The concept revolves around creating a commitment to travel here by ‘pressing the green button’ – green being the universal colour of ‘go’. Filming for the campaign took place in May; filming locations in Northern Ireland included the Giant’s Causeway, Harry’s Shack in Portstewart, Belfast City Hall, Titanic Belfast and the Glass of Thrones installations. The campaign will be highly visible, on multiple channels such as TV, digital and out-of-home.

Conclusion

We are conscious that health regulations differ in the two jurisdictions on the island; this may impact ease of travel for future visitors. However, our research shows that there is considerable pent-up demand for travel, so we can now look to the future with a certain degree of optimism. Now that there are signs that consumers overseas are getting back on the move, Tourism Ireland is ready on the ground to roll out an extensive global recovery kick-start programme and to work flat out to recover as much business as possible.

Tourism Ireland is committed to working with our colleagues in Tourism NI, Fáilte Ireland, the tourism industry and all stakeholders to support the recovery. We have a shared ambition for a sustainable recovery. Tourism Ireland’s focus will be on supporting the economic sustainability of our sector in the first instance, while being cognisant of our longer-term duty to communities and the environment. Above all, flexibility and agility will be key elements of Tourism Ireland’s work. We look forward to getting back in full swing, to continue to promote Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland as a ‘must-see’ across the world. We look forward to your continued support in doing so.

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