House of Commons
Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Tourism in Northern Ireland and its Economic Impact and Benefits: Government Response to the Committee’s Third Report of Session 2006-07

Second Special Report of Session 2006–07

Ordered by The House of Commons to be printed 16 May 2007
The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

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Committee staff

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Second Special Report

The Committee published its Third Report of Session 2006-07 on 15 March 2007. The response from Maria Eagle MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Northern Ireland Office, was received in the form of a letter and attachment dated 30 April 2007, and is published as the appendix to this report.

Appendix: Government response

Thank you for sending to me a copy of your Committee’s report on tourism in Northern Ireland. The findings of the committee and the conclusions and recommendations made very interesting reading and I believe the recommendations provide an excellent basis for developing tourism policy in Northern Ireland.

As you are aware, devolution in Northern Ireland will be restored on 8 May 2007 and tourism will become a transferred matter with responsibility falling to the new Northern Ireland Executive.

However, in the interim, my officials have sought views from those Northern Ireland Departments with an interest in the Committee’s recommendations and I am more than happy to share their initial responses with you. I am attaching an annex to this letter which sets out the responses to each of the Committee’s recommendations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. (Paragraph 26) The evidence that we have received demonstrates clearly that the involvement of seven departments of the executive in tourism has led to policy fragmentation, poor departmental co-ordination and confusion for the tourist industry. We received strong evidence that a Minister for Tourism would provide much needed leadership and focus to the tourism industry, would improve co-ordination between Departments and would demonstrate the Government’s commitment to developing the industry to its full potential. We recommend that the Secretary of State allocate overall responsibility for tourism to one of the Northern Ireland Ministers. Should devolution be restored in March 2007, we urge the Northern Ireland Assembly to examine the scope for rationalising departmental involvement in tourism policy and to appoint a Minister for Tourism.

The advent of Devolution on 8 May will result in the appointment of a dedicated Minister for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment which is the lead Department with responsibility for Tourism. The development of the tourism sector will form a major part of the new minister’s responsibilities.

2. (Paragraph 27) There is a lack of clarity in the different roles carried out by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland and the Regional Tourism Partnerships and we call on them to engage in discussions focused on improving the industry’s understanding of their roles.
This issue will be taken forward by DETI in conjunction with NITB and Tourism Ireland under the direction of the new minister.

3. (Paragraph 32) We fully recognise the impact of private sector participation in the Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs) and in the development of the industry in Northern Ireland. We believe that, even after the reorganisation of local government, there is a case for keeping the existing four RTPs but with their role and relationship with the new local authorities strictly defined. We would not favour transferring their responsibilities to the new super councils.

Pending the outcome of the RPA there remains a strong case for the retention of RTPs as the vehicles for the delivery of sub-regional strategies. DETI and NITB will give consideration to treating Belfast as a special case because of its gateway role and its recognition as a holiday destination in its own right.

4. (Paragraph 36) Until a decision is reached on the future number of Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs), the Government must ensure that RTPs are properly funded so that they can carry out their functions in identifying and pursuing local regional tourism priorities. This is essential to the development of the industry. The ending of PEACE II funding means that RTPs are relying on Government funding and we call on the Department to ensure, following the spending review, that realistic funding is made available to the RTPs.

The case for additional funding will be made to the new minister. Any bid for additional resources will have to be considered within the context of DETI’s overall priorities.

5. (Paragraph 41) A bureaucratic and complex picture of the division of responsibilities emerged clearly from the evidence of what is the existing accountability framework for the oversight of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Tourism Ireland. While we wholeheartedly acknowledge the importance of securing their full accountability, the NITB and Tourism Ireland must be allowed sufficient operational freedom to carry out their responsibilities. We are concerned that excessive departmental control affects the effectiveness with which these bodies can operate. We are bound to note that the level of bureaucracy appears very different in the Republic of Ireland, and lessons could be learned from the greater flexibility their system allows. We recommend that measures be taken to grant the NITB greater operational autonomy along the lines of Failte Ireland.

DETI recognises the need to balance the need for effective corporate governance within its agencies with the need to allow those agencies to have the necessary operational freedom to execute their responsibilities. During 07/08 DETI will look at the management issues surrounding NITB and consider options for the future.

6. (Paragraph 52) We are in no doubt of the tremendous potential for growth in the Northern Ireland tourist industry and its great potential value to the economy. However, the success of low-cost airlines and the opening up of new tourist destinations has made the tourist market more competitive than ever, and Northern Ireland needs to maximise its marketing weight and develop its tourist infrastructure to the best of its ability if it is to exploit this potential.
The NITB Product Development Priorities for 2007–2012 will focus on Northern Ireland’s competitiveness. These priorities will require resources aligned behind delivery—including ensuring Northern Ireland is sufficiently differentiated from the Republic of Ireland and near neighbours through the provision of globally recognised iconic attractions—signature projects.

Tourism Ireland will continue to market Northern Ireland in overseas markets in order to maximize opportunities for business. This will be done by ensuring that Northern Ireland is featured prominently in the main campaigns through the full range of marketing activities and that the Northern Ireland industry maximises its opportunities on overseas platforms. Tourism Ireland will continue to contribute to policy and strategy development with NITB and DETI.

DETI will continue to have overall control of policy issues and it will ensure that there is a coordinated approach between both agencies.

7. (Paragraph 53) If the tourist industry in Northern Ireland is to be able to exploit its full potential, it needs appropriate data to be collected for it to benchmark its progress and identify markets to exploit. We note that the Government is taking steps through the compilation of tourist satellite accounts to assess the full value of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy. We believe that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board could play a significant role in the collection of such data. We believe that this is an exercise that should have been carried out earlier and we urge that it be carried out thoroughly and expeditiously. We also urge them to work with the Northern Ireland Tourist Industry Confederation and the Federation of Small Businesses to ensure that the statistics collated are as comprehensive and accurate as possible.

Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSAs) have been compiled in conjunction with NITB using, in part, NITB data. Under DETI’s direction TSA updates will be completed on a regular basis. DETI will ensure that NITB continues to work with various bodies to ensure the quality of information is as high as possible and accepts the logic of a common methodology with ROI.

8. (Paragraph 65) Tourism Ireland has, through its overseas marketing campaigns, exploited marketing platforms previously unavailable to the tourist industry in Northern Ireland. Visitor numbers to Northern Ireland are, on current forecasts, showing an increase on 2005 figures and we commend Tourism Ireland on the progress it has made in a relatively short period of time.

Tourism Ireland has proposed a campaign to feature Northern Ireland tactically in the GB market in 2007. This will be a supplement to the main campaign for 2007. DETI will work with both agencies to ensure that the NI message is given prominence in that market.

9. (Paragraph 66) We are concerned by the discontent expressed by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) over Tourism Ireland’s approach to marketing Northern Ireland in Great Britain. We urge Tourism Ireland to discuss with the NITB options for tackling this market, including whether a regional. Multi-destination marketing approach would have a greater impact. We do not believe that transferring responsibility to the NITB for marketing Northern Ireland in the GB market would necessarily be the best resolution to this problem. Nonetheless we agree with the
Minister that it is essential that Tourism Ireland refines its marketing strategy with a view to ensuring that Northern Ireland is given greater emphasis in its marketing campaigns. We urge Tourism Ireland to continue its discussions with the NITB with the aim of introducing a separate, Northern Ireland specific marketing campaign. For example, the Minister should explore the advantages of clear service level agreements between the organisations.

Tourism Ireland recognises the concern expressed by NITB and others about the drop in visitor numbers from GB. Tourism Ireland has engaged with NITB and DETI to look at options for increasing NI’s share of the GB market.

A joint committee has been established between Tourism Ireland and NITB at a high level to agree an SLA and to revisit the work being done by Tourism Ireland to help NI reach its potential.

10. (Paragraph 74) The signature projects have the potential to achieve international standout for Northern Ireland. While we commend the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) on the progress that it has made in initiating and developing the projects, we are concerned that further development of the projects is being hampered by lack of funding and investment. While the Minister assured us that funding of the projects was not an issue, our evidence demonstrates deep concern that funding will not be forthcoming for developing and sustaining the projects. We call on the Government to ensure that sufficient funding is made available to the signature projects but also, in conjunction with NITB, to offer attractive incentives to the private sector so as to encourage the necessary investment in the projects themselves and in the hotels and other services that will be needed if they are to realise their full potential.

DETI accepts that funding for Signature Projects is crucial. NITB will continue to refine the Tourism Development Scheme to ensure that it is focussed on those projects which can offer most benefit to the tourism product.

11. (Paragraph 75) The St Patrick’s Centre is integral to the development of one of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board’s signature projects, and we call on the Minister to take steps to ensure that its future is secure.

The St Patrick's Centre is owned by a Trust but its budget is underwritten by Down District Council. It is not, therefore, a direct responsibility of a government department. Nevertheless NITB recognises that the Centre is of key importance to the Christian Heritage Signature Project and will continue to work with the Centre to ensure that it is marketed as widely as possible in NI and the ROI and via Tourism Ireland in all other key markets. In relation to the funding of the Educational Officer post, the Department of Education is currently in negotiation with the Director of the Centre with a view to securing funding for that post.

12. (Paragraph 84) We believe that, if Northern Ireland is to maximise its economic return from tourism, and remain competitive as a holiday destination, it needs the hotels and other facilities providing goods and services that tourists want to purchase. The current provision of quality hotels in Northern Ireland is insufficient, and we were particularly concerned to learn that there are only two 75 bed hotels in the area of the Causeway Coast.
DETI accepts that the provision of quality tourist accommodation is an essential part of the tourist experience and that NITB and InvestNI need to work together to fill this gap.

13. (Paragraph 85) The tourist industry needs a strategic partnership between the private sector and the public sector to achieve the "holistic" approach to development that will deliver a strong tourist product.

DETI accepts that this is a priority. This issue will be discussed at the Tourism Strategy Forum which is likely to be chaired by the DETI Minister.

14. (Paragraph 91) Whoever becomes responsible for tourism after March 2007 would be well advised to consider the schemes and incentives that have operated so successfully in the Republic of Ireland. We believe that the Government should give a clear signal to the private sector that it sees tourism as an important and growing element of Northern Ireland's economy. The clearest way for it to do so would be to explore scope for the use of tax breaks for the building of much needed hotels. We believe that these would ensure a more efficient allocation of resources to entrepreneurs looking to invest in the tourist industry than the capital grants currently disbursed.

InvestNI and NITB will continue to look at ways of improving their support schemes for the tourism industry; this will be taken forward under DETI's leadership. The determination of taxation policy is a Reserved Matter and therefore the use of new tax breaks (different from that currently available) in Northern Ireland would require agreement from HM Treasury.

15. (Paragraph 92) In this context, whilst we acknowledge the Government's long-standing commitment to the principle of unitary taxation, we note the success of fiscal incentives in the Republic of Ireland in establishing a world class tourist industry. If Northern Ireland is to be able to compete with the more established tourist industry in the Republic, it will need such support. We emphasise that investment in the tourist industry must be treated as a more long term investment than most other areas of economic activity. Incentives should reflect this and there is a clear role for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in drawing up appropriate criteria.

Fiscal incentives are a Reserved Matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Current policy is that the tax regime is applied uniformly across the UK. Any changes to the tax regime to promote tourism in Northern Ireland will require HM Treasury agreement. Northern Ireland Ministers will have the opportunity to submit tax proposals to the Chancellor as part of the budget process.

16. (Paragraph 97) The Committee nevertheless calls on the Government to take this matter forward with a sense of urgency. We call on the Department of the Environment to bring forward a planning policy statement governing tourist industry development for consultation within the next six months.

DOE is currently preparing its planning policy work programme for 2007/08 in anticipation of the return of devolution. When finalised this programme will be presented to the new Ministers for their agreement. Taking account of the Committee’s
recommendation the Department currently anticipates that preparation of a new Planning Policy Statement on Tourism will be included in the 2007/08 programme.

17. (Paragraph 98) We believe that one of the greatest assets of the Northern Ireland tourist industry is the unspoilt beauty of the environment, and that unfettered tourist development would put at risk this very asset. However, we believe that environmental concerns and a need to develop Northern Ireland's tourist industry should be carefully and sensitively balanced.

DOE agrees that one of the greatest assets of the Northern Ireland tourist industry is the unspoilt beauty of the environment, and that unfettered tourist development would put at risk this very asset. In bringing forward the proposed new Planning Policy Statement on Tourism the Department will work closely with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and other stakeholders to ensure that the need to develop the Region's tourist industry is carefully and sensitively balanced with environmental concerns.

18. (Paragraph 110) We are concerned at the evidence that we have received that low skill levels and negative perceptions of jobs in the tourist industry will impede growth in this sector. We also received with some concern evidence on the lack of skilled and trained chefs in Northern Ireland. Improving skills in the workforce will go some way towards changing perceptions of hospitality sector jobs as unattractive. A skilled workforce is essential if Northern Ireland is to maximise the return from its tourist potential. We believe that the Department of Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have an important role to play in improving the image of the hospitality industry through the promotion of programmes such as Hospitality Matters, which for unspecified reasons has now been abandoned.

The training provision available through the main Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) programmes is extensive and addresses the needs of the Hospitality and Tourism sector. A Skills Expert Group, informed by 6 Workforce Development Fora and 25 Sector Skills Councils, will advise on the medium to long term skills needs of Northern Ireland and determine what local skills priorities should be and the actions to be taken.

Employers have much to gain in an era where government is committed to providing the capacity to enable people to be trained in the skills required to obtain industry-recognised qualifications. People 1st, as the employer-led Sector Skills Council for hospitality and tourism operating in NI, is working with a range of key public and private sector stakeholders to devise potential HR solutions to address the needs of the industry.

19. (Paragraph 111) There is currently no mechanism for accrediting or recognising the skills of international workers in the hospitality industry, many of whom come from accession countries. Some of these workers will have very advanced qualifications obtained in their own countries, whilst others will not. It is important that the industry makes the most of the existing skills of its international workers, and we recommend that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment undertake research into ways in which qualifications obtained in certain accession countries who provide a large number of hospitality workers in Northern Ireland can be recognised. Consideration should be given to the use of the skills passport as recommended by People 1st as a
means of tracking training, recognising qualifications and encouraging further training.

People 1st is leading on the creation of the Sector Skills Agreement for the tourism, hospitality and travel sector and it is scheduled to be signed off as complete through the Sector Skills Development Agency’s (SSDA) NI Project Board by June 2007. It is understood that People 1st intend to include the Skills Passport idea as part of its Sector Skills Agreement. A number of other Sector Skills Councils also have proposals to introduce a skills passport. DEL has suggested to the SSDA and the DfES that the merits of such a measure on a cross sector and UK-wide basis ought to be considered to see if there is value in a framework that covers all sectors and facilitates movement of people between occupations, sectors, nations, etc.

Depending on the assessment SSDA and DfES in relation to a UK-wide Skills passport and of the views of local stakeholders in NI on its likely effectiveness and the outcome of direct discussions with People 1st, DEL will consider the implementation of the Skills Passport in Northern Ireland on a trial basis.

20. (Paragraph 112) We are concerned at reports that the large sums of money being invested in skills training for the tourist industry are being misdirected. We are convinced that giving the agencies concerned with promoting tourism in Northern Ireland and the tourist industry a greater role in developing skills training would ensure that skills provision is better focussed. Whilst noting the Minister's comments, we nevertheless urge the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give consideration to developing the Northern Ireland Tourist Board so that it can take on a role similar to that enjoyed by Failte Ireland south of the border with regard to education and training for the tourist industry.

It will be for the new Executive to consider the merits of moving responsibility for training from DEL to NITB, as per the Failte Ireland model, or addressing the issue by strengthening coordination between DEL, NITB and DETI.

21. (Paragraph 113) We are not yet convinced of the case for setting up an Academy to improve the level of operational skills in the Northern Ireland workforce, but we urge the Department for Employment and Learning to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of People: 1st's proposals.

DEL accepts that a Skills Academy is not the best approach to take in relation to the hospitality and tourism sector and understands that People 1st will not be promoting the introduction of this concept through its draft Sector Skills Agreement (SSA). DEL has requested People 1st to provide realistic costings for the proposals, and in particular relation to the Skills Passport, which are likely to be included in its draft SSA Action Plan.

22. (Paragraph 117) More needs to be done to develop the transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland. We were told that the current infrastructure, particularly road and rail services, were of a poor standard, insufficiently integrated, and had suffered from significant under investment. More investment by Government is required to bring the road and rail services up to the standard of other regions of the UK and we call on the Department of Regional Development to bring forward a coherent strategy to develop the standard of the infrastructure and to ensure continued investment in it.
The Regional Transportation Strategy 2002-2012 acknowledged that Northern Ireland has suffered from decades of underinvestment in its roads and public transport and that the Northern Ireland Executive at the time explicitly recognised the strategic importance of transport infrastructure and services to the future development and prosperity of the region.

The Regional Transportation Strategy identified strategic investment priorities and considered funding sources and the affordability of planned initiatives over the period 2002-2012. A total investment of £3.5 billion was envisaged subject to the normal budgetary processes. DRD is in the process of undertaking a mid term review of the Strategy which will address the progress of implementation to date, the budgetary position and the changing situation since the Strategy was published in 2002. The Strategy has been successful in attracting resources for transportation to the extent that around £1808m has been spent over the first 5 years of the Strategy period.

The implementation of the Strategy has been enhanced by the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland announced by the Secretary of State in 2005, whereby currently around £1billion of proposed Strategic Road Improvements have been identified which will support the objective of creating a modern, safe and sustainable transport system. In July 2006 the Minister for Regional Development announced a further £400m investment for the strategic road network. The proposed improvements have been the subject of consultation and the additional funding is likely to be available towards the end of 2015.

Additionally, the Republic of Ireland’s National Development Plan 2007-2013 contains proposals for Irish Government investment in North/South projects. These include priorities to be agreed for joint projects with Northern Ireland on e.g. a high quality road network on routes linking Dublin, Belfast and the North West (Letterkenny/Londonderry Gateway).

In relation to investment in public transport, the Department assisted Translink in 2003/04 to purchase 190 new buses at a cost of £23m. In 2004/05 & 2005/06 a further £48m was provided to purchase over 350 new buses. At present the Department has approved or is considering further proposals for investment in additional new buses totalling over £50m. This will facilitate the further development of the Metro service, assist with the dispensing of the 3 for 2 seating arrangements and the elimination of standing on school services and also in helping reduce the age of the Ulsterbus fleet.

With regard to rail services, the Department assisted Translink in the procurement of 23 new train sets which entered service in 2005 and is funding a major programme of railway station refurbishment of around £18m in addition to other works needed to ensure that services are maintained at present levels. The Department will take account of the recommendations arising from a strategic review of future options for railways in Northern Ireland. The review will provide Ministers with the outcome of an evaluation of the options for the size of the rail network and the level of rail services.

23. (Paragraph 120) We note Northern Ireland’s growing success as a conference venue, and in particular Belfast’s success in hosting a number of high profile conferences. However, the market for international conferences is extremely competitive, and we understand that Dublin is in the process of developing high quality conference
facilities. We urge the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to work closely with the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau to identify what support is necessary to ensure that Belfast continues to be competitive as a location for conferences.

NITB accepts the need to work with the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau to raise Belfast’s profile and a conference venue. Discussions will take place at a senior level between these organisations to work out a way forward.

24. (Paragraph 121) We believe that development of a National Stadium could provide the much needed exhibition space, as in Cardiff, which is required to attract major conferences to Belfast. Apart from the sporting and economic arguments in favour of locating the National Stadium in the city we believe that there would be considerable tourist advantages from such a decision.

The Government is currently considering the development of an iconic, Shared Future Multi-Sports Stadium which is acceptable to the governing bodies of Northern Ireland’s 3 largest sports, i.e. Soccer, Rugby and Gaelic Games. A viability study carried out by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) in 2004 suggested that a Shared Future Multi-Sports Stadium could be operationally viable provided the capital costs are met and all three sports’ governing bodies are engaged.

The decision to focus consideration on the Maze/Long Kesh was announced publicly in March 2005. Since then, the governing bodies of the three sports have agreed in principle to the proposal to establish the Stadium at the site. No other location in Northern Ireland—including Belfast—has the potential to satisfy the full requirements of the project brief, including acceptability to the three sports bodies.

This conclusion was reached following an extensive site selection exercise undertaken by the SIB on behalf of DCAL between 2004 and 2005. As part of that exercise 12 possible venues for the Shared Future Stadium were considered, including 6 in Belfast.

A Shared Future Multi-Sports Stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh would, of course, be a facility for the whole of Northern Ireland—not just Belfast. However, Ministers will wish to ensure that Belfast gains as much as anywhere from the tourism and other benefits. Indeed, Belfast has considerable opportunity to do so given its close proximity both to the proposed Stadium and the other major developments being considered for the Maze/Long Kesh site that were published in the Maze/Long Kesh Masterplan Report of March 2006.

25. (Paragraph 124) We believe that the surcharges placed by car hire companies on those who hire a car on one side of the border and drop it off on the other side of the border are a small but significant barrier to cross-border travel and an impediment to the development of the island of Ireland as a tourist destination. We urge the Department of the Environment to raise this issue with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland with a view to removing the regulatory burdens that lie behind these surcharges.

The Department of Environment does not consider that existing vehicle registration law produces any significant barrier to car hire companies operating either side of the border. A vehicle should be registered and licensed in the jurisdiction in which it is normally used. However, under the provisions of the Motor Vehicles (International Circulation) Order
1975, which gives force to EC Directive 83/182, a vehicle registered and licensed in another Member State can be used for up to six months in the UK without having to be re-registered and re-licensed here. Accordingly, a hire car registered in Northern Ireland which is dropped off in the Republic could be used in the Republic for up to 6 months without having to be re-registered in the Republic. The car hire company would only have to re-register the vehicle if they intended to retain the vehicle in the Republic for more than 6 months. In practice, a vehicle properly registered and licensed in either NI or the Republic which was routinely being used on both sides of the border is very unlikely to need to be re-registered.
Reports from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee since 2005

The following reports have been produced since the start of the 2005 Parliament.

Session 2006-07
First Report  Draft Protocol for Community-based Restorative Justice Schemes (HC 87)
Second Report The Work of the Committee in 2006 (HC 294)
Third Report Tourism in Northern Ireland and its Economic Impact and Benefits (HC 119)

Session 2005-06
First Report Education in Northern Ireland (HC 726)
Second Report The Work of the Committee in 2005 (HC 928)
Third Report Organised Crime in Northern Ireland (HC 886)
First Special Report The Work of the Committee in 2004: Government Response to the Committee’s Fourth Report of Session 2004-05 (HC 393)
Fifth Special Report Air Transport Services in Northern Ireland: Government Response to the Committee’s Eighth Report of Session 2004-05 (HC 529)
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