

Tourism in Northern Ireland: **A Strategy for Growth**

Northern Ireland Hotels Federation

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Northern Ireland has the potential to be a truly great tourism destination. We have stunning scenery, hospitable people, fascinating history and all the benefits of the Giant's Causeway, Titanic and St Patrick.

Curiosity and new air routes have attracted increasing numbers of visitors to our shores. To capitalise and grow this business we need to focus on our strengths and address our weaknesses. You, our elected representatives, can really make a difference in taking this industry to its full economic potential.



Adrian McLaughlin
President, NIHF

The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation represents the hotel and guesthouse sector across the province, a sector that represents a significant percentage of the overall tourism industry. Annual tourism sales is over £1.6bn and it is worth £783 million Gross Value Added (GVA) or 3.5% to the Northern Ireland economy. The industry supports some 37,000 jobs.

Direct value added from tourism is rapidly approaching the size of the entire agriculture sector and the opportunity for further tourism growth is enormous when comparisons are drawn with the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. The sector is already larger than any single manufacturing sector, except tobacco.

Our members bring income and employment to villages, towns and cities throughout the country - one of very few sectors that can really deliver benefits to small communities and provide sustained out of state income growth for Northern Ireland.

For Northern Ireland tourism to reach Republic of Ireland levels of business (providing an extra 11,000 jobs and bringing an additional £270 million GVA) it needs considerable investment in a range of areas. But it is not all about money; investment in improving governmental and organisational cohesion and communication is just as important to realise this growth.

The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation is presenting the following five points as being the most crucial to further develop the tourism industry and provide sustained future growth and prosperity for the whole country.

1. Cohesion

The recent Tourism Satellite Accounts reveal that tourism spending patterns are spread across 123 different products in the UK's Input-output Classification. Practically every industry has an involvement in tourism, from hotels, bars and restaurants to retail, transport, agriculture, banking and telecommunications.

Tourism spans many Government departments including industry, agriculture, culture, education and finance.

The Federation calls for an inter-departmental committee to be formed that includes all the Government departments that have an impact upon tourism. Tourism needs to be placed at the centre of Government policies - decisions on planning, the environment, employment promotion, cultural diversity all have an impact on growing or restraining the tourism industry.

2. Promotion and Marketing

The Federation supports the joint marketing of the island of Ireland through Tourism Ireland and recognises the catch-up remit that this all-Ireland body is tasked with.

However, Northern Ireland's out of state visitor numbers (the true driver of economic benefit to the country) are still woefully low. Northern Ireland gets 21% of all visitors to the island of Ireland, not much more than the low point of the mid-1970s when it dropped under 20%. More strikingly, when business visits and those visiting friends and relatives are taken away, those purely in the province on holiday represent only 15% of out of state visitors. The figure for Scotland is 70%!

The Federation, therefore, is calling for an exclusive Northern Ireland marketing campaign on top of existing arrangements; one that includes a regional allowance and can focus on our near-neighbours and those with direct air access. The potential for increased visitor numbers from the Republic of Ireland alone is massive and needs to be addressed properly.

3. Infrastructure and Planning

World-class attractions and quality accommodation products are essential to produce the tourism growth. The current planning system makes addressing these issues a long and fraught process.

The Federation calls for a new policy on planning; one that separates domestic and commercial planning, takes account of sustainability and the environment, and results in a new improved timely process.

The Causeway Coastal Route is a good example of tourism provision being integrated in the transport infrastructure whilst the Air Access Fund has successfully broadened the accessibility of the province. However, these positive examples hide the fact that the general road and rail network is out of step with the needs of tourists. Private operators may provide buses to the Giant's Causeway but our own public transport operators do not service tourists well. Routes outside Belfast are infrequent and mostly aimed at commuters whilst cross-border provision is fragmented and expensive.

The Federation would like to see tourism being considered in all infrastructure development as well as further investment in improving transport options from all ports of entry and between all major towns and tourist attractions.

4. People

There is currently no agency in Northern Ireland with a dedicated responsibility for the training of tourism industry staff or for the promotion of the sector to schools and colleges. This is of serious concern for an industry that is highly labour intensive and continuing to grow rapidly. To compete with other destinations we need professional, well trained people and we need to continually attract new blood into the industry.

People 1st, the UK Sector Skills Council, looks at the broader picture whilst England, Wales and Scotland have their own delivery mechanisms. In Northern Ireland we do not have this infrastructure.

Therefore, the Federation calls on Government to set up a dedicated training agency to promote the hospitality and tourism sectors and to provide practical training in order to improve standards across all companies.

5. Signature Projects

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board identified five projects which could set the province apart in world tourism terms. These are:

- Titanic (Maritime)
- Mourne National Park
- Walled City of Derry
- St Patrick's Christian Heritage
- Causeway Coast

The Federation fully supports development of these five projects as being essential to the continued and future development of sustainable tourism. We call on Government to fully fund and deliver these projects as soon as possible.

We also request that the positioning of the National Stadium be considered carefully so as to maximise convenience for out of state visitors and to provide add-on benefits to the wider economy through food, drink, accommodation and retail sales. Now is also the time to consider future projects such as a National Conference Centre and a centre of excellence for environmental tourism in the province.

Conclusion

The tourism industry wishes to be seen as an industry of hope, change and opportunity. We would urge you, our representatives, to create an environment which nurtures and promotes it's growth. Growth in tourism through a structured and cohesive approach will bring rewards at national and community levels and the whole economy will reap the benefits.