

**Northern Ireland Affairs Committee**  
**Opening Statement**  
**by Shane Clarke,**  
**Tourism Ireland's Director of Corporate Services, Policy**  
**and Northern Ireland**  
**20 April, 2022**

**Introduction and background**

Chairman, members, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Shane Clarke and I am Tourism Ireland's Director of Corporate Services, Policy and Northern Ireland.

Tourism Ireland is the organisation responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a leading 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 roll out world-class global marketing campaigns for Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland. We work closely with Tourism Northern Ireland to ensure that our promotional themes align with their development priorities for the industry. This is a very integrated and collaborative approach.

**Importance of tourism to Northern Ireland**

Tourism is a vital industry for Northern Ireland as it is a significant driver of economic growth. 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 around 71,000 jobs.

Since Tourism Ireland came into operation in 2002, almost 32 million overseas tourists have come to Northern Ireland, whose visits have generated more than £7.2 billion generated for the Northern Ireland economy. Visitors from non-GB markets accounted for 9.5 million, or 30%, of those tourists and £2.7 billion in revenue.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on tourism**

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on global travel and has presented a completely unprecedented and extremely serious situation for our industry. Every destination across the globe has experienced the impact of COVID-19 and now, as we emerge from the pandemic, is seeking its share of the recovery. The competition in the international marketplace to attract tourists is more challenging than ever. Keeping Northern Ireland front and centre in consumers' minds, and making it as easy as possible for them to choose Northern Ireland, is therefore critical.

### **Nationality and Borders Bill**

As Tourism Ireland is responsible for promoting the island of Ireland – including Northern Ireland – overseas, we feel it is important that we voice our concerns about the impact this bill could have on overseas tourism to Northern Ireland.

Although British and Irish citizens (in line with Common Travel Area principles), and non-British and non-Irish citizens who already have a visa for the UK or other kinds of immigration permission. will not need an ETA (Electronic Travel Authorisation), we believe the realisation of

this bill has the potential to be very damaging. Everyone outside the aforementioned categories will need to apply for an ETA before travelling to the UK, including for 'local journeys' from within the CTA. For example, a Polish coach driver living in Co Louth who drives coach tour groups from Dublin to Belfast would require an ETA to cross the border, in order to comply with the law. A French person working in a hotel in Derry-Londonderry, but living in Co Donegal, would require an ETA to go to work.

Under the proposed rules, any non-Irish / non-British citizen who is encountered by the authorities in Northern Ireland without an ETA or other permission to be in the UK would be committing a criminal offence and would be subject to immigration enforcement.

While there may be no routine checks on the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, if this becomes a legal requirement, Tourism Ireland will have to share that information with prospective visitors, including on our international website, Ireland.com. We will also need to advise all overseas tour operators who feature Northern Ireland in their tour programmes.

The majority of overseas visitors to Northern Ireland arrive on the island of Ireland via Dublin. In 2019, most (62%) non-GB tourists came through the Republic of Ireland and their visits delivered £109 million to the Northern Ireland economy (or half of the non-GB revenue). Two-thirds, or 68%, of Northern Ireland holidaymakers from markets other than Great Britain use the Republic of Ireland as their point of entry (77% from North America, 68% from Mainland Europe and 54% from other areas). In fact, Dublin Airport provides an alternative gateway to

Northern Ireland, due to its proximity, share of Northern Ireland resident traffic and its route network, with direct flights from 180 locations.

Typically, the further a tourist travels to get to a destination, the longer they stay and the more they spend. GB visitors to Northern Ireland have a shorter average stay (3.9 nights) and lower average spend (£253) than other tourists (5.4 nights and £281).

Having to apply online for pre-travel clearance in order to cross the border would add an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy and complexity. Tourism Ireland research has continually confirmed that hassle and expense are key deterrents for travellers when choosing their holiday destination. For example, over the past two years, Tourism Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland's experiences in communicating the different COVID-19 entry requirements for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to tour operators demonstrated that any additional administration resulted in cancellations and lost business.

### **MCCP research**

Earlier this month, Tourism Ireland commissioned research to assess the awareness and perceived tourism impact of the proposed bill. The research was conducted by MCCP and involved interviews with both tourism industry professionals and overseas tour operators.

The research showed that, although the cost of the implementation of the proposed bill is not yet known, the tour operators and industry foresee an immediate drop in visits to Northern Ireland, as it will bring increased cost and administrative burdens which will be passed on to the traveller.

Northern Ireland, unlike other parts of the UK, relies more on non-domestic visitors and on visitors coming via Dublin as the main gateway. Northern Ireland is an important part of an itinerary but is not a stand-alone destination for many.

Industry and tour operators interviewed for this research made it clear that adding this barrier to a currently seamless offer is likely to strike Northern Ireland off itineraries. The 'unity' of the Tourism Ireland brand and island of Ireland proposition will be fractured after so much investment and many successful years.

The proposed bill has the potential to damage our reputation. Among those interviewed, it is seen as a step backwards, at a time when tourism needs support and forward momentum. Northern Ireland will become more isolated and become a harder sell, as an ETA is seen as a border check. Tour operators will want to adhere to the law, even if it will not be border controlled, and it is feared that any news of potential arrests will present perceptions that it is unsafe and not easy to travel to Northern Ireland.

In addition, the bill is seen by the industry as an additional bureaucratic burden that does not give due consideration to the economic impact on Northern Ireland.

### **Conclusion**

The realisation of the proposed Nationality and Borders Bill has the potential to be extremely damaging for overseas tourism to Northern Ireland. Our research highlights that there are significant concerns amongst industry and tour operators and certainty is urgently needed.

Since it came into operation, Tourism Ireland has invested over £1 billion in marketing the island of Ireland, including Northern Ireland, overseas. This investment – from the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly – has been made on the basis of unrestricted access across the island. If this bill is passed, the island of Ireland proposition will be fractured after so much investment and many successful years.

If the bill is passed, clear communication, clarity on its implementation and a simple application process will be required.

I ask members of this committee to consider the risks associated with this bill and look at mitigation options. It is vital for the future of the Northern Ireland tourism sector that all efforts are made to keep travel from overseas as hassle-free as possible.

**-ENDS-**