

**Tourism Ireland's submission to the
Special Committee on Covid-19 Response**

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Introduction

Tourism Ireland is responsible for marketing the island of Ireland as a holiday destination overseas. It was established as one of the “six areas of co-operation” under the framework of the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday 1998 and operates under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in Ireland and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland.

The importance of inbound tourism cannot be overstated, as it is the island of Ireland's largest indigenous industry, employing around 325,000 people across the island in 2019. Last year, overseas tourism generated approximately €5.8 billion across the island of Ireland, driven by almost 11.2 million overseas visitors. Tourism is also a major contributor to the peace process – before and since the Good Friday Agreement.

In a normal year, around 75% of the tourism spend comes from international visitors. So, while domestic tourism is likely to recover more quickly than overseas tourism, the economic hardship on the tourism industry cannot be compensated for by domestic business.

While COVID-19 remains first and foremost a public health issue for now, it has presented – and will continue to present – profound economic implications and it has had an immediate and devastating impact on tourism and hospitality. This crisis is likely to deeply scar our tourism industry – on the island of Ireland, as well as overseas. For example, tour operators who have served the island of Ireland market for decades may go out of business or be forced to scale back their inventory significantly. It is too soon to say what, if any, of the ‘Ireland experience’ for overseas visitors will be lost.

Previous crises such as Foot & Mouth, SARS, 9/11 and the volcanic ash cloud in 2010 dramatically dampened demand for international travel. COVID-19 has dwarfed all these other crises.

Some facts to consider

- Tourism Ireland's response to Covid-19

COVID-19 has been on the Tourism Ireland radar since early January, when the outbreak escalated in China. Immediate action was taken by Tourism Ireland in the Chinese market – with the postponement of our planned sales mission and the temporary winding down of our operations. As the situation escalated throughout Europe in February and early March, almost all of Tourism Ireland's paid-for promotional activity was stood down or postponed, until the end of August 2020. Overseas tourism receipts are expected to be down about -75% in 2020.

Tourism Ireland is running an online campaign, which is using the hashtag #FillYourHeartWithIreland. Because people aren't travelling right now, the aim of the initiative is to bring the best of Ireland onto people's screens and to help ensure that Ireland stays 'front-of-mind' with prospective visitors for future holidays. It involves the sharing of inspirational content that speaks to the world at this difficult time and connects people with the island of Ireland. Tourism Ireland is sharing this content with its millions of fans and followers on its social channels – including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. The content is also being shared with Tourism Ireland's database of influential travel and lifestyle journalists, who are all looking for great 'armchair travel' ideas right now. We are also in the final stages of a significant capital investment in marketing technology infrastructure, which will position us well when the international travel begins again.

Tourism Ireland has worked closely with Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Northern Ireland, along with the tourism industry at home and abroad, in assessing the impact of COVID-19 and working on a recovery plan. We are pleased to be represented on the new Tourism Recovery Taskforce established by Ministers Ross and Griffin. We are also pleased to be on the Northern Ireland Tourism Recovery Steering Group, appointed by Minister Dodds MLA.

In the context of international recovery, there are three standout points:

Firstly, in the face of the fundamental changes facing our industry, we need a comprehensive understanding of the changed consumer and the new marketplace. Tourism Ireland will commission an extensive COVID-19 programme of research in our major markets – to help identify when consumers are ready to consider holidaying again and which of our markets offer us the best short-term prospects. Tourism Ireland will then explore in-depth which segments and demographics are most likely to travel, which products and experiences will most appeal to them and what messaging will most strongly convince them to consider

holidaying on the island of Ireland. The insights we gain will ensure that our future 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. The first wave of research has just been completed; the scale of the challenge is significant.

Secondly, as an island destination, strong air and sea access links are vital for growth in overseas tourism. Last summer, there were more than 615,000 direct, one-way seats available on planes flying to the island of Ireland every week. However, the landscape has profoundly changed in recent weeks. Airline industry analysts OAG predict that it will be three to four years before Europe's capacity returns to the levels seen in 2019. The restoration of air connectivity will be essential to restoring growth in overseas tourism to Ireland. Sea access levels have been retained, however, and are likely to provide opportunities for closer-to-home markets. Sea may, in fact, become a more attractive option initially – particularly for cautious travellers.

Thirdly, there is no question that the shape of the Irish tourism industry that emerges from this crisis will be different than it was at the beginning of 2020. Tour operators who have programmed the island of Ireland for many years may be forced to scale back their inventory significantly. It is too soon to say what, if any, of the 'Ireland experience' for overseas visitors will be changed. However, we in Tourism Ireland will do everything we can to support our industry partners to get them to the overseas marketplace – when the time is right.

We look forward to working with key partners to develop a new plan for the restoration of international tourism to the island of Ireland, in 2020 and beyond.

Recommendations for action

Given that other EU countries are now beginning to plan lifting their quarantine restrictions, Ireland is in danger of being at a competitive disadvantage – in terms of winning any available tourism business. We need to closely monitor the situation in Mainland Europe, so that quarantine restrictions can be lifted as soon as it is safely possible – always bearing in mind that public health is the first and foremost consideration.

Currently, a 14-day quarantine period is mandatory for all passengers arriving at Irish ports and airports – including for British citizens. However, this does not apply to people transiting to and from Northern Ireland. Some clarity is required around this situation.

Some clarity is also required around practical considerations about arriving passengers and how they get to the location where they will self-isolate. For example, if an arriving passenger has Covid-19 and takes public transport from their point of arrival, there is a danger of infecting others.

Significant investment by Government in international marketing and demand stimulation will be essential for the recovery of Irish tourism.

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