

**Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport
and the Gaeltacht**

The impact of Covid-19 across the Tourism Sector

Opening Statement by

Niall Gibbons,

CEO, Tourism Ireland

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Introduction

- Good afternoon Chair, Deputies and Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Niall Gibbons and I am Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland.
- As members will know, Tourism Ireland is the organisation responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas. It was established as one of the “six areas of co-operation” under the framework of the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday 1998.
- Before I talk to you about the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector this year, I would like to give you some context about overseas tourism prior to the outbreak and spread of COVID.
- Overseas tourism had recorded nine consecutive years of record growth. 2019 surpassed all previous records, when we welcomed almost 11.3 million overseas visitors, who spent €5.9 billion while here.
- With our unique all-island remit, we have seen a renaissance in overseas tourism to Northern Ireland over the same period – with 2.2 million overseas visitors last year, generating £589 million in revenue for the Northern Ireland economy.

- In a 'normal year' (pre COVID-19), we deliver world-class marketing programmes in over 21 markets around the world and reach a global audience of around 600 million people each year. Our extensive and targeted programme of activity includes advertising; social media and digital marketing; overseas publicity; as well as co-operative promotions with air and sea carriers and other travel partners.

Living with COVID-19 during 2020

- Since March, because of the restrictions on international travel, unfortunately most of Tourism Ireland's paid-for promotional activity has been cancelled or postponed.
- However, the Tourism Ireland teams around the world have been engaged in an extensive programme of activity throughout 2020 – to keep the island of Ireland 'front of mind', with prospective future holidaymakers – until such time as they can visit again.
- We have been running an online campaign, which is using the hashtag #FillYourHeartWithIreland. Because people aren't travelling this year, the aim of the initiative is to bring the best of Ireland onto their screens. It's about the sharing of inspirational content that speaks to the world at this difficult time and connects people with the island of Ireland.
- This campaign has achieved excellent engagement with our fans and followers on social media. It has delivered 293 million impressions (or opportunities to see) on our Facebook channels, with 30 million views and 5.7 million engagements. There have been 170,000 engagements on Twitter, as well as 5.6 million engagements and 5.5 million 'likes' on Tourism Ireland's Instagram channels.
- A key element of Tourism Ireland's promotional activity is to showcase Ireland's unique cultural and artistic experience around the world. Examples of this from our #FillYourHeartWithIreland campaign have included our collaboration with Philip King and his 'Other Voices: Courage' series, as well as our work with *Hot Press* magazine to highlight a musical celebration of Van Morrison's 75th birthday 'Rave On, Van Morrison'.

- During 2020, Tourism Ireland has been carrying out an extensive programme of COVID-19 research in our major markets. The research has supplied learnings into developing consumer behaviour and attitudes and these are fundamentally shaping our activity programme.
- Tourism Ireland has been represented on the Tourism Recovery Taskforces in Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as on the Aviation Recovery Taskforce in Ireland. Recommendations from the taskforces will be integral to our restart activity.

Looking to the Future

- This has been a catastrophic year for tourism, but I do believe that tourism can, and will, recover from this pandemic. Recent news about vaccine programmes is positive and gives us hope. In our research, Ireland has consistently been shown as one of the destinations that holidaymakers would be most comfortable visiting, even while social distancing measures are in place.
- Tourism Ireland has a three-phase plan to RESTART, REBUILD and ultimately REDESIGN demand.
- Our success in supporting the recovery of overseas tourism and driving business development is dependent on many factors. However, there are three key areas of action:
 - (i) Consumer motivation: to help us identify when consumers will be ready to consider holidaying again and which markets offer us the best short-term prospects. Our research shows that summer 2021 is most commonly seen as the next holiday window; younger holidaymakers, as well as those who have visited before, or have family or friends here, are most comfortable about travelling to Ireland; and closer-to-home markets are likely to present the best short-term prospects. However, it is fair to say that consumer sentiment has deteriorated in our more recent surveys.
 - (ii) Access: the airline industry has been hit particularly hard by this crisis. 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.

- (iii) Industry and trade: The overseas travel trade have long been loyal supporters 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. Tourism Ireland will need to invest, to create the demand which will support the product on the ground.
- While remaining very flexible and adapting to conditions, Tourism Ireland has developed a clear workplan. This will include:
 - (i) the launch of a significant kick-start campaign, as soon as the time is right.
 - (ii) the development of a new consumer campaign, to address evolving consumer motivations, with stage one of the new campaign ready for our kick-start activity.
 - (iii) and extensive social media and publicity activity, as appropriate, to keep the island of Ireland in the minds of prospective visitors.
- A significant redesign of our international website, Ireland.com, and our digital marketing capability has been under way throughout 2020. The new site is currently going live, with weekly market releases happening since the beginning of November; these will conclude in the middle of this month. Our new Ireland.com will be fundamental to our proposed kick-start success.
- The pace of recovery is unknown. However, based on the best information to hand, Tourism Ireland currently predicts the recovery could take in excess of five years. In order to improve on this position, an effective, sustained and large-scale marketing approach will be required. This should begin as soon as the health situation allows.
- As international travel begins to restart, it is clear that keeping the island of Ireland front and centre in consumers' minds will be critical. Every destination across the globe has experienced

the impact of COVID and will be seeking their share of the recovery. This increases the competition in the marketplace.

- When the time is right, Tourism Ireland needs to punch through the noise and create an immediate desire to visit. To achieve this, a significant marketing investment will be required to enable large-scale, reframed consumer communications in markets with the greatest opportunity.
- Tourism Ireland is committed to working with our colleagues in Fáilte Ireland, Tourism NI, the tourism industry and all stakeholders to support the recovery. We have a shared ambition for a sustainable recovery. Once this crisis is past and Ireland is open again to overseas visitors, we in Tourism Ireland will be ready to play our part in delivering a sustainable recovery, for the long-term future of our industry. And, speaking of sustainability, I was delighted that Lonely Planet recently named the Burren Ecotourism Network a 'Best Community Tourism Project' in its *Best in Travel* list for 2021.
- I am in regular contact with my counterparts in other agencies – including Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Bord Bia and Invest Northern Ireland – as well as the Department of Foreign Affairs, about how we will promote the island of Ireland overseas, as 'Team Ireland', in 2021 and beyond.
- Thank you. I'm happy to take any questions you might have.

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