

An advisory Council to the
Department of the Environment

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Chairman

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Via email (hard copy to follow)

Sharon Smyth
Tourism Policy
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Netherleigh
Massey Avenue
Belfast
BT4 2JP

Dear Ms Smyth,

The Historic Monuments Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020.

The Council welcomes and supports the recognition in the foreword that 'tourism is everyone's business' and the need for a collective approach to policy development across government in Northern Ireland. The equal importance given to the people, as well as to the places, of Northern Ireland in successfully developing the tourism industry in Northern Ireland is [a significant element of the Strategy](#). The Historic Monuments Council welcomes in particular the principle of 'valuing what the tourist values' outlined in the Introduction, especially the recognition of the central need to protect and enhance the built and natural environment not only for visitors, but also for the residents of Northern Ireland.

1 Reaction to the key target to grow visitor revenue to £1 billion by 2020

As the Strategy acknowledges, this is an ambitious and challenging target. In trying to achieve it, Council would emphasise the importance of assuring that what makes Northern Ireland attractive to tourists in the first place – that is its varied and relatively unspoilt natural environments and historic landscapes – should not be compromised. This will be particularly important in successfully developing the culture/activity/special interest/eco-tourist segments of the tourist market identified as targets within the Strategy (p.7) and it is critical to the aim of achieving 'higher quality across the whole visitor experience' (p.3). Council while supporting the investment in, and development of, the key signature projects as a means of attracting first-time visitors to Northern Ireland, believes that what will stimulate tourists to make repeated visits to Northern Ireland will be the attractiveness and unique qualities of the unspoilt spaces and places in between our iconic tourist attractions.

- As a specific recommendation Council would suggest that better use should be made of the Historic Monuments of Northern Ireland in State Care as a widespread resource where there is public access and information. Many of these monuments are identified as iconic places in Northern Ireland by visitors and residents.

- Promotion of historic monuments as foci or points of interest on walking routes would raise the standard and quality of particular visitor experiences.
- Integration of signage schemes might be one clear way of identifying state care monuments as part of the Northern Ireland brand.
- Promotion of these sites on a cross-border basis would also help to attract increased numbers of heritage/special interest visitors to Northern Ireland.

2 Support for the 3 Priorities for Action (i.e. People, Places, Promotion) within the Strategy

Council is supportive of the three themed priorities for action, which form a useful system for considering the wide range of actions presented in the Strategy. In particular, the recognition of the importance of *People* to the successful application of the Strategy and the concept of encouraging the people of Northern Ireland to discover and share their stories with visitors is inspired. Not only will this kind of personal engagement with local people be valued by tourists, but it also enables a range of partners to support the Strategy.

- Specifically, Council wishes to emphasise the wealth of authentic stories in the built heritage of Northern Ireland. 'Sharing our stories' forms a very meaningful way for promoting the archaeology and history of Northern Ireland which is a central concern of the Historic Monuments Council.

3 Support for the cross-cutting theme of Partnership and associated actions in the Action Plan

Whilst recognising the ambitious and challenging character of developing partnerships across government and the private sector, Council believes that this cross-cutting theme and approach will be essential for achieving the key targets identified in the Strategy.

- Council would strongly support the recommendation in the Action Plan in relation to Partnership (p.25) that a key action point in achieving cross-government commitment to supporting economic growth through tourism will be the NIEA/NITB taskforce working together to achieve strategic priorities which are common to both organisations.

4 Support for the proposal to develop an approach for working collaboratively at a local level to deliver tourism

Council would agree that the current and proposed new local authorities have a critical role to play in 'creating quality places for residents and visitors' (Action Plan, p.19). Currently there are a significant number of historic sites and monuments in the care of local authorities. In this context Council would wish to reiterate the point made above regarding the importance of assuring that what makes Northern Ireland attractive to tourists in the first place – that is its varied and relatively unspoilt natural environments and historic landscapes – should not be compromised.

- Council would strongly recommend that in relation to the priorities and the action points identified in the Action Plan regarding the critical role of local authorities in creating quality places for residents and visitors (B) that under action points B1 and B2 the NIEA would be identified as a lead or as a partner alongside the local authorities. The expertise, advice and partnership of NIEA will be critical in assisting local authorities to identify and assessing quality places and in developing destination development plans and in ensuring that the character of the historic (and natural) environment is protected and sustained in the process.

5 Other significant areas not covered by the Strategy or Action Plan

Whilst the importance of investing in both capital projects and business skills is acknowledged within the Strategy, Council would emphasise the need also to invest in the up-keep of the historic environment, which is central to developing tourism. In the current draft this is not explicitly acknowledged as a Priority for Action within the theme of Places. Monuments in State Care form a very important asset for developing tourism in Northern Ireland, but require considerable expenditure in order to maintain them in a condition consistent with the high standards required of successful visitor attractions.

- Council strongly recommends that investment in the maintenance of the historic environment, specifically Historic Monuments in State Care should be targeted as an Action Point in the Places section of the Action Plan. To emphasise the importance of this action it is specifically relevant under priority C – create more opportunities for visitors to spend money, E - develop year round events to extend the season, H – demonstrate commitment to taking care of the environment and J – upgrade interpretation at visitor sites and give priority to the development of projects that explain our history and culture.

The popularity of books and websites devoted to visiting archaeological monuments in Britain and Ireland, reflects the potential for developing a cultural tourism founded upon Northern Ireland's rich archaeological landscape. In order to develop and promote this form of tourism, there is a need to make the whole of Northern Ireland's archaeological heritage more accessible, without physically over-developing it and compromising the character of both the individual sites and the historic landscapes that our visitors value. In recent years, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Built Heritage has developed a number of products that are key to supporting and promoting this form of cultural tourism – for example, the on-line Sites and Monuments Record, and publications on the archaeology and history of Carrickfergus, Strangford Lough and Co. Armagh and a new guide to the Historic Monuments of Northern Ireland in State Care. These products are excellent examples of good practice in both the interpretation and explanation of our history. They provide both the people of Northern Ireland and tourists with the means to access and explore, on their own terms, our otherwise hidden heritage.

- Council strongly recommends that the wider dissemination of these materials and a commitment to the future development of such products should be explicitly added to the Action Plan (Priority References A and J in the Places section).

Given the recognition of the value of taking an all-island approach to the historic environment in attracting visitors by NITB, Failte Ireland and Discover Ireland, Council would strongly recommend that integrated online access to information about the historic environment, specifically the sites and monuments records for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland should be available (currently these important sources of visitor and public information are not linked).

Yours sincerely



Professor Gabriel Cooney
Chair