

# HISTORIC BUILDINGS COUNCIL

An advisory Council to the Department of the Environment

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Sharon Smyth  
Tourism Policy Branch  
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment  
Room 55,  
Netherleigh  
Massey Avenue  
Belfast  
BT4 2JP

Dear Ms Smyth

## **DRAFT TOURISM STRATEGY FOR NI TO 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Draft Tourism Strategy for NI to 2020.

The key targets to grow visitor revenue to £1 billion by 2020 and visitor numbers to 4.5 million are wonderful aspirations, and are all applauded by the Historic Buildings Council. More visitors to NI will enrich the city, creating a vibrant, modern, attractive, progressive and cosmopolitan city; and this is crucial in order to secure a political and economic stability for the future, perhaps more than we can presently predict.

Council felt that too much emphasis has been placed on the 5 Signature projects which directs tourists to very worthwhile sites but has overlooked areas such as Fermanagh and its Lakeland. It was here that tourism continued during the years of 'the troubles' with the influx of European fishermen and boating enthusiasts, Sperrin Mountains, Antrim Coast etc are these just 'maybes'?

These Signature projects are not viewed in a broad context with a backdrop of countryside, villages and towns. To visit the destination project you first have to travel through surroundings that will either enhance or detract from the tourist experience. No mention is given to supporting a backdrop of well-maintained and valued villages and unspoilt countryside – which have the potential to (as Action Plan, Pillars: Product and Places, J, p23) “explain our history and culture”.

Some 'type' of educational programme is needed to address the lack of knowledge which the majority of NI people have about their own heritage and surroundings, perhaps starting with the tourist industry personnel. Northern Irish people tend to be 'reticent' in publishing the wonderful heritage we have in Culture, Arts, Engineering skills, even the history on our own doorsteps, some of which helped to change the world in many different arenas and facets.

NI's people need to be of the right attitude and mindset to accept visitors of different nationalities and cultures. The proposal is right to suggest that promotion needs to be given to the economic potential that the proposed 4.5m people will generate for the local economy, and this needs to be done effectively.

Council agrees in principle with the proposals, although more thought needs to be given to strategies for developing Arts and Culture, and in doing so, creating more attractive open and public spaces, for example, street artists, buskers etc. Do we need to review licensing laws for this? Visitor experience would be enhanced in the promotion, not only of Northern Irish culture and produce etc, but also in the creation of a more cosmopolitan, European feel, cafe culture etc. Enhancing, protecting and promoting historic environment of Belfast, more sympathetic signage and street furniture would encourage tourist movement around the city.

The Historic Built Environment is understated and more should be made of the rich legacy of buildings we have inherited, many built when the north east of this island was enjoying a massive economical growth. This seems to show a lack of awareness of the historic built environment's value to tourism, not only in its preservation but also in its dynamic development and economic potential. These buildings and structures can all play a significant part in each of the tourist areas particularly in towns and cities, and if identified in rural locations, to tourists travelling between the Signature projects. Government, in its widest sense, must protect and enhance the built and natural environment for the benefit of future visitors and residents. If the historic built environment and any sensitive development therein, is seen as an integral part of the visitor experience it will naturally "add to the sense of place" (p23). If taken as an isolated project any interpretation will be in danger of being superficial, contrived and 'touristy' being of little benefit to residents.

Other possibilities;

1. - More accommodation unique to Northern Ireland:
  - High quality accommodation in Buildings at Risk;
  - Farm accommodation in existing buildings in partnership with DARD (as in Pillars: Places - C4 of Action Plan).
2. For "cultural" and "eco" tourists - sustainability in re-use of existing buildings;
3. In partnership with DEL – traditional building crafts.

The only 'Place' mentioned, loosely referring to our industrial place in the world is the Titanic Signature Project (A1). This presumably is primarily telling the story of the ship of the same name, and the shipbuilding industry that existed in the early 20th century. Where does one find the story of the fantastic growth of the north east of Ireland from the mid-19th century with respect to linen, shipbuilding (before and after 1912), and not only in Belfast but in other areas such as the Foyle, together with the 'spin-off' industries such as rope making and engine building. Weaving and spinning machinery, giant fans for mines, farm implements, vertical take-off aircraft (world first), ejector seats for aircraft, air conditioned buildings (world first), medical advances (Professor Pantridge), tyres (Dunlop), and many more. These must be tourist attractions in their own right and they cannot all be catered for in one iconic building.

"Incorporating story-telling into every new development" is completely unrealistic. More thought should be given to urban and individual development certainly, but if previous development is to go by, there is little thought and little story behind the concept/design. Commitment to the Rural Design Guides, as described, must be shown by adherence to the principles outlined in these guides.

More joined-up thinking on the part of planners would help improve the environment in Belfast dramatically. Instead of continually understanding each new development (along the Lagan side for example) in isolation, it should be viewed as part of a wider urban plan. A more strategic outlook to urban planning would undoubtedly improve the setting and subsequently encourage tourism in years to come; perhaps a longer term Tourism framework for NI should be considered.

Council is pleased to see many references to partnering, both within and outside Government bodies, but each discipline needs a dedicated champion to enthuse the many disparate ventures abounding in the country and to come up with an agreed policy which encompasses a realistic and financially rewarding tourist venture. A champion for the Arts, Environmental aspects of flora and fauna, the countryside, the historic built environment, history both social and international influences, technical innovators linked to the industries of NI both past and present, and possible others. These leaders must have a dedicated vision, their appointments to run beyond the timescale of Governments, and be prepared to address the media speaking out for their faculty to both the NI people and in tourist outreach.

Council applauds the various Departments involved in any or all of the 'tourist products and places' working together for the greater promotion and investment of Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely,



**FRANK ROBINSON**  
**CHAIRMAN**