

# **TOURISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND - A PUBLIC SECTOR QUAGMIRE!**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examined public sector tourism in Northern Ireland, a small country on the periphery of Western Europe which is notorious for being over governed. The authors found that its complex web of public sector tourism bodies created confusion and duplication within the industry. There was a lack of coordination and clear policy guidelines and many of the organisations were suffering from 'partnership overload'. To make matters worse for Northern Ireland its National Tourism Organisation, faced with a reduced remit and shrinking budget, was not capable of making decisions and providing the strategic leadership that is required to drive the tourism agenda forward. Northern Ireland, and indeed any small country involved in tourism, could learn valuable lessons from Northern Ireland's Celtic neighbours, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, countries which have taken action to remove some of their layers of administration and bureaucracy and make public sector tourism more streamlined and manageable.

## **Key Words**

Public Administration: Planning: Development: Bureaucracy: Coordination: Lessons: Streamlining.

## **Introduction**

In modern societies work and leisure are differentiated, and in the case of tourism the separation is extreme (Roberts, 2004). Youell (1998) notes how the tourist is separated not just from work but from everyday life, and by place as well as time. Tourism is extreme in the amounts of money that the world's richer people spend and in the huge imbalance between richer and poorer countries. It is also extreme in being one of the most thoroughly commercial leisure industries. Tourism, however, is not one hundred per cent commercial. The public sector has always played a role (Roberts, 2004).

According to Lickorish and Jenkins (1999), in practice, close cooperation with the operating sectors in commercially related functions such as marketing works best in tourism, but government cannot abdicate their responsibilities. Tourism development cannot be left to market forces alone if national benefits are to be secured. In its annual report, the OECD (1991: 2) concluded that 'if national tourism planning, promotion and management were left entirely to the private sector, this could result in the unbalanced development of infrastructure and market expansion, with the risk of growing congestion and increased pressure on environmental resources'.

In contrast to the private sector, the public sector involves government at a variety of geographical scales and may become involved in tourism for various economic, political, social and environmental reasons (Hall and Page, 2006). Dredge and Jenkins (2007) acknowledge that there is almost universal acceptance by governments around the world, regardless of ideology, that tourism is a good thing, with tourism policies being designed to expand the tourist industry. They discuss how government agencies at every level from the international down to small towns have adopted a progressively more active role in the use of tourism as a developmental tool. Indeed, many government agencies currently promote tourism as a panacea for underemployment in economically depressed areas (Page, 2007).

However, this is not a new trend, Shaw and Greenwood (1988) for example, in their study of the UK in the late 1980's, identified a number of economic considerations that have led to public sector involvement in tourism: improvements in the balance of payments: fostering regional development: diversification of the national economy: increase in public revenue: improvements in income levels: the creation of new employment.

Despite its economic potential however, some governments, especially in the industrialised market-orientated economies, may have no explicit tourism policy (Lickorish and Jenkins, 1999). Kerr (2003), for example, in his study of tourism policy in Scotland, found that in comparison to other industries tourism was less of a government public policy priority than other sectors. This was due to the general approach of successive UK governments. Although they accepted that there was a need for administration and funding support for the tourism industry, they minimised and marginalised the formal development support roles.

Although there may be occasions when they appear unsupportive, unimaginative, uncooperative, discouraging or preoccupied with other disciplines, the tourism industry could not survive without government intervention. Governments, after all, have the necessary and legitimate power to provide the political stability, social infrastructure, security and the legal and financial framework to smooth the progress and development of tourism (Dredge and Jenkins, 2007). How governments use such powers and how they devise and implement policy and assess its impact will depend upon many factors including their political culture, socio-economic issues, environmental outlook, the political and economic power holders/brokers and, of course, their perception of tourism on their economy and society. Furthermore, such policies will be influenced by the political philosophies and ideological preferences of the government of the day and the minister in charge, combined with the wider political environment in which they find themselves (Edgell, 1999).

The International Union of Tourism Organisations (1974), the forerunner to the World Tourism Organisation, in its discussion of the role of the state in tourism, identified five areas of public sector involvement in tourism:- co-ordination, planning, legislation, regulation and entrepreneur stimulation. Hall and Page (2006) have added two other functions to this list: - a social tourism role, which is very significant in European tourism, and a broader role of interest protection.

All seven functions are important and although Governments may not spend huge sums of money on tourism compared with their spending on health education, pensions and defence for example, the public sector has a vital role to play in tourism. The private sector recognises this and throughout the world industry representatives lobby central, regional and local government, demanding increased public sector support. Many governments have responded and in some countries, this has led to an increase in the number of public sector agencies with a tourism remit. However, whilst any recognition of the industry is commendable, is it possible for a country to have too many public sector agencies involved in tourism, and if so, what affect does this have on tourism development?

This paper will address this issue by examining public sector tourism in Northern Ireland, a small country on the periphery of Western Europe which is notorious for being over governed (Knox and Carmichael, 2006). The first section of this paper will provide a brief insight into Northern Ireland's political history which will help explain why the country has become over-administered. The next section looks specifically at Northern Ireland's tourism industry and identifies the area of study. This is followed by the methodology which also introduces the public sector agencies in Northern Ireland which have a tourism remit. The discussion is also broken down into two parts, the first deals with the problems that over-administration has created whilst the second discusses the lessons Northern Ireland can learn from other small countries.

## **Northern Ireland's Political Background**

The predominant feature of Northern Ireland political history since the late 1960's has been the struggle for independence. The 'troubles' in Northern Ireland, as they are often referred to, stem from the partition of Ireland. The island was partitioned in 1921, with the twenty-six southern counties gaining independence (the Republic of Ireland) and the other six northern counties remaining part of the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland). However, the majority of Northern Ireland's Catholic / nationalist population were unhappy with this arrangement and wanted a single, united and independent Ireland. It was the civil rights campaign of the late 1960's that galvanised the Catholic / nationalist community and ignited the 'troubles'. The ensuing years of bloodshed and heartache that followed can only be described as a human crisis.

After thirty years of a bloody civil war in which over 3,600 people had been killed and over 30,000 injured the Good Friday Agreement (1998) was signed. This Agreement transformed politics in Northern Ireland. Devolved Government replaced Direct Rule from London thus providing a historic opportunity for the people of Northern Ireland to put aside the divisions and violence of the past and to move forward and build a stable future together.

However, the system of government which operated in Northern Ireland during the 'troubles' continues to have a major impact on how Northern Ireland is governed today. Since the 1970s quangos have become the mainstay of Northern Ireland's governmental architecture (Carmichael and Knox, 2004). Greer (2002) discusses how quangos increased their power in the years of Direct Rule from London as the Secretary of State only spent a few days of the week in Northern Ireland. Knox and Carmichael (2005) argue that quangos and civil servants had an enhanced role and disproportionate influence over the formulation,

development and implementation of public policy in Northern Ireland compared to other parts of the United Kingdom (Knox and Carmichael (2006). For example, in 2002 Northern Ireland had 118 quangos, responsible for an estimated £7 billion out of a total £11 billion public expenditure (NIA, 2009).

Quangos have certainly proved valuable as a tool for administering and delivering public services in a country torn apart by sectarian divisions (Carmichael and Knox, 2004). However, according to Knox and Carmichael (2006), many quangos may well have outlived their usefulness in Northern Ireland despite their creditable showing as a device for political management. Questions of legitimacy and accountability have been raised, accompanied by concern over the efficiency and quality of services given the plethora of bodies that exist. This is in line with Birrell's (2009) argument that Northern Ireland is over-governed or at least, over administered. Not surprisingly, there have been repeated calls for streamlining. Consequently, a major examination of the system of public administration was launched in June 2002, but Knox and Carmichael (2006) described this Reform of Public Administration (RPA) as little more than institutional tinkering and according to Birrell (2009) the inherent problems remain.

### **Northern Ireland's Tourism Industry**

According to Buckley and Klemm (1993) and Wall (1996) the 'troubles' has been the main reason why tourism in Northern Ireland has not developed to its full potential. Between 1969-1971, for example, as violence escalated tourism numbers fell from 1,080,000 to 435,000 (Greer, 2002). The decline in visitor numbers was particularly hard on the holiday market and by 1973 holiday travel accounted for only 7% of all visitors (Smyth, 1986). The effects of civil unrest in Northern Ireland led the Financial Times in July 1978 to state that 'apart

from whatever else they have done, the bombings, shootings and other horrors which go under the general rubric of 'the troubles' have in the past decade virtually wiped out the Northern Ireland tourist industry' (Financial Times 4 July 1978, cited in Symth, 1986:120).

Not surprisingly tourism in Northern Ireland was affected by the negative media coverage as the region quickly gained an unpleasant image of terrorism (Boyd, 2000; Wilson, 1993; Wall, 1996). Donnelly (2005) discusses how Northern Ireland, and Belfast in particular, was portrayed by the world media as a wasteland patrolled by soldiers in armoured vehicles and bullet-proof vests. The following quote from Kerr (2003: 105) sums up how difficult it was to market Northern Ireland as a tourist destination during the troubles:- 'Belfast became more famous for conflict than tourism, indeed it was once renowned as the Beirut of Western Europe'.

Political instability and frequent violence have therefore had a detrimental affect on tourism numbers and occupancy rates. This has resulted in a small tourism base in terms of receipts and visitors, unsuitable tourist developments because of a poor economic and social image and a lack of a suitable infrastructure (Boyd, 2000; Wilson et al., 1997). Baum (1995) referred to the period from 1969 when political tension escalated as the 'lost years' in terms of tourism development. O'Neill and Fitz (1996) also discuss how the troubles have severely stifled the development of the tourism product.

Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) the political climate within Northern Ireland has changed for the better creating new opportunities for tourism. Progress has been made but much more work is needed as peace alone will not automatically guarantee tourism growth (Devine and Devine, 2004). For example, despite the peace process the number of pure holiday visitors to Northern Ireland is still only 20% of total visitors. This would suggest that much more investment is required to develop and market

Northern Ireland's tourism product. However, Northern Ireland is no longer designated with 'Objective One' status therefore the generous levels of structural funding which it has received from the European Union since the 1990's will be reduced significantly over the next few years. Another worrying statistic is that 88% of all leisure and business visitors to Northern Ireland comes from either the the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain (Northern Ireland Tourist Board Marketing Plan, 2007). New air routes to mainland Europe and the USA may help to address this problem but there are a myriad of other factors to consider such as fuel prices, the strength of the pound and political uncertainties both at home and abroad.

From a planning perspective, another cause for concern is the large number of public sector organisations in Northern Ireland with a tourism remit. This was identified as an issue in the Tourism Industry Stakeholder Survey in 2004. This independent study commissioned by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board concluded that 'responsibility for tourism in Northern Ireland is complicated and confusing and not for the faint hearted'. Although it did not provide a breakdown of the figures the report did state that 'many of the 221 private sector organisations surveyed believed there was significant overlap in functions and that value for money was not being achieved'. The respondents also complained about the lack of communication, leadership and strategic direction from the public sector.

Despite the Tourism Industry Stakeholder Survey (2004) highlighting the fact that Northern Ireland's tourism industry is over administered no action has been taken and it seems that the Government is content with the current structure. At a national level the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Northern Ireland Events Company and the Countryside Access and Activities Network all have a tourism remit. At a regional level there are four Regional Tourism Partnerships whilst at a local level there are the twenty six Local Authorities and each one has a tourism department. There are also two cross border

organisations set up under the Good Friday Agreement (1998), Waterways Ireland and Tourism Ireland and they too are directly involved in tourism planning and development. Even though at local level the number of Local Authorities may be reduced to eleven in 2015 as part of the reforms under the RPA (decision pending) one must still question whether a country the size of Northern Ireland really needs so many public sector organisations to be involved in tourism. This may certainly be appropriate in large countries such as Germany and France but does a small country like Northern Ireland, with a population of 1.7 million people and a geographical area of 5456 square miles, need such a complex web of public sector tourism bodies?

Against this background, the aim of this research was to examine the problems that a small country will experience when it has too many public sector agencies with a tourism remit. The study focused on Northern Ireland but it also draws on lessons that could be learnt from other small nations, namely Northern Ireland's Celtic neighbours Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

### **Research Design**

The Tourism Industry Stakeholder Survey (2004) was based on the private sector therefore the authors of this study decided to take a different approach and concentrate on the views of public sector officials. There was, of course, the risk that public officials would not be willing to go record and criticise their own organisation, other public agencies and their paymasters (the Government) but as the reader will discover during the discussion the respondents were actually very open and willing to express their views.

A qualitative approach was the most appropriate for this study because it focused on a select number of public sector agencies from which detailed information was required.

Using the critical case sampling technique a total of 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with public officials from Northern Ireland. In order to make comparisons and draw lessons from Northern Ireland's Celtic neighbours interviews were also arranged with a former Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism in the Republic of Ireland, senior managers from Failte Ireland (the Republic of Ireland's National Tourism Organisation) and VisitScotland (Scotland's National Tourism Organisation) and a senior tourism official from the Welsh Assembly.

Considering that this study was focused primarily on public sector tourism in Northern Ireland it was logical to include a senior manager from its National Tourism Organisation. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board was established as a result of the 1948 Development of Tourist Traffic Act (Northern Ireland) and was the first National Tourist Board in the British Isles. Despite losing its overseas marketing role to Tourism Ireland in 2001, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board still regards itself as the strategic leader for tourism in Northern Ireland. Its main roles and responsibilities include translating changes in the market into strategy for Northern Ireland; advising Tourism Ireland on product strengths and delivering product and regional marketing initiatives; marketing Northern Ireland to domestic and Republic of Ireland markets (Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Corporate Plan, 2005-2008).

Dredge and Jenkins (2007) and Page (2007) discuss how public agencies at the regional and local level are now playing a greater role in tourism planning and development. Interviews were arranged with senior managers from the four Regional Tourism Organisations – Armagh and Down Tourism, Causeway Coast and Glens, Greater Belfast Tourism and North West Tourism. The Regional Tourism Partnerships are membership organisations that work in partnership with the trade and public agencies. Their funding comes from a combination of sources including government (through the Northern Ireland

Tourist Board), Local Authorities and subscriptions from business members. The Regional Tourism Partnerships main objective is to enhance regional tourism performance and in doing so contribute to Northern Ireland's overall competitiveness. Although marketing remains their primary focus, in 2005 their remit increased and now includes product development and industry training.

Representatives from eight Local Authorities were also included in the sample. Despite losing control over issues such as housing and roads after Local Government Reorganisation in 1972 Northern Ireland's twenty six Local Authorities retained their remit for tourism. In fact the role of the Local Authorities could increase as a result of the RPA because, although the number of councils is likely to be reduced to eleven (decision pending) the new Super Councils will take over some of the functions of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

An interview was also arranged with a senior manager from the Northern Ireland Events Company. The Northern Ireland Events Company was established in 1997 and was the first national public agency dedicated to events in Europe. Law (1991), Gratton and Henry (2001) and Shaw and Williams (2002) discuss how countries and cities compete to host an international sport events to demonstrate to the world their modernity and economic dynamism. In the case of Northern Ireland, however, creating a positive image was as much if not more about politics than economics. After 30 years of civil war Northern Ireland decided to use events to help eradicate the negative image that the 'troubles' created and that the world media exaggerated. The Northern Ireland Events Company has two grant schemes - a Major Events Fund for large events attracting significant out of state media and the Events Growth Fund for smaller events which have the potential to grow into large scale events. Both application forms require a marketing plan which must specify the level of media coverage and the number of bed nights the event is expected to generate.

Outdoor recreation is an important part of tourism which explains why a senior manager of the Countryside Access and Activities Network was included in the sample. The Countryside Access and Activities Network was established in 1999 in response to the publication of Northern Ireland's first Countryside Recreation Strategy. It is charged with the strategic development and management of countryside recreation across Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is one of its core funders and it is directly involved in developing and marketing countryside activities as tourism products.

The sample also included senior managers of Tourism Ireland and the Director of Marketing of Waterways Ireland - two 'cross-border' organisations that were set up as part of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Tourism Ireland is charged with growing overseas tourism business to the island of Ireland and supporting Northern Ireland to realise its tourism potential. In this regard, it is the guardian of Tourism Brand Ireland and has responsibility for the overseas destination marketing of the island of Ireland. It operates under the policy direction of the North/South Ministerial Council and its sponsoring departments are the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland and the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism in the Republic of Ireland.

Waterways Ireland is the largest of the six North/South implementation bodies established under the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The statutory function of Waterways Ireland is to manage, maintain, develop and restore the inland navigable waterway system on the island - principally for recreational purposes. It operates under the policy direction of the North/South Ministerial Council and the two governments. In an attempt to encourage and support greater use of the waterways for recreational purposes, a Marketing and Communications Division was established within the organisation in 2001 specifically to promote and market the inland waterways as a tourism product both at home and abroad. It was allocated a marketing budget of £750,000 which has now risen to £1,000,000 per annum.

According to Birrell (2009) the most significant, if not the most publicised external influence, on public policy in Northern Ireland came from its membership of the Europe Union (EU). EU directives may not have targeted tourism directly, yet the EU was an important source of funding. For example, in 1983 the Vice-President of the European Commission claimed that Northern Ireland received more per capita from the European Regional Development Fund than any other area except Greenland and its tourism industry was certainly one of the beneficiaries (NIA, 1983). Although the sample may not have included an EU representative the authors did factor in questions on the EU during the interview process.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach with the NVivo 6 software package merely serving as a data management tool. In the first stage the author reviewed the transcripts repeatedly searching for themes that were relevant to this ‘particular study’. The next stage was to develop a coding scheme. Gradually the analytic strategy shifted from open coding to comparative analysis. This in turn led to what Saunders et al. (2000) referred to as ‘data transformation’, in which the information was condensed, clustered, sorted and linked. The main findings that emerged from the data are discussed in detail in the next section of this paper.

### **Discussion**

According to Gray (1989) being involved in too many partnerships creates fragmentation, increases confusion among participants and limits strategic development. Kanter (1994) also warns against working with too many organisations as it is very demanding on staff and can

affect their commitment and input to particular projects (Kanter, 1994). This section of the paper will discuss the specific problems that public officials and their respective organisations in Northern Ireland have encountered as a result of the tourism industry being over-administered.

According to Fyall and Garrod (2005), those interested in the management and marketing of the tourism industry misunderstand the dynamics of collaboration at their peril. They discuss how collaboration, in its many forms, is not only integral to the management of tourism but is arguably the single most important aspect of management in determining the success, or indeed the failure, of niche tourism markets. Yet, according to a senior manager of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the sheer number of public sector organisations involved in tourism has created an environment that is not conducive to collaboration:

‘There are simply too many organisations involved in tourism in Northern Ireland. You spend most of your time and effort trying to pull them together. For example, we had to water down our five Signature Projects in order to keep everyone happy. It is the same when we are setting up committees and organising forums, we know we upset certain organisations but it is not practical to invite everyone’ (Director of Marketing, Northern Ireland Tourist Board).

Indeed, the following extract from a senior tourism official from North Down Borough Council shows just how divisive inter-organisational committees and forums can be when numbers are restricted and certain parties must be excluded:

‘Our relationship with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is poor. For example, we were not consulted for the Activity Tourism Strategy (2005) and were not invited to the Activity Tourism Forum, but this is typical of them. They see the Local Authorities as the very end of the food chain - the little grubby people on the ground delivering’ (Tourism Manager, North Down Borough Council).

These two quotes would suggest that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is experiencing what Devine (2008) termed ‘partnership overload’, which in itself creates a range of other problems not just for the Tourist Board, but for the industry as a whole in Northern Ireland. A

senior manager of the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership rather sarcastically highlights one of these problems when he stated ‘there is no risk of duplication - there is duplication’.

Duplication is a particular problem in relation to marketing. According to a senior official for the Countryside Access and Activities Network there has been a number of occasions when Northern Ireland has been represented at an international tradeshow by at least three public sector organisations basically marketing the same product. For example, in 2007 the Countryside Access and Activities Network produced a new brochure ‘Cycle Holidays in Northern Ireland’ which featured twenty four packaged cycling holidays from eleven local activity providers and tour operators. This brochure was distributed at the Irish Outdoor Adventure Show in Dublin. Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and two of the Regional Tourism Partnerships were also present at this show and they to were promoting cycling holidays in Northern Ireland.

In an attempt to prevent duplication the Northern Ireland Tourist Board does insist that all formal requests from the Regional Tourism Partnerships and the Local Authorities to Tourism Ireland (the cross border organisation which promotes Northern Ireland overseas) must first go through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. This may prevent some duplication but it also creates another problem, bureaucracy. The Regional Tourism Partnerships and Local Authorities find this arrangement frustrating and time-consuming with one senior manager from the Belfast Tourism Partnership describing it as ‘bureaucratic nonsense’. Carmichael and Knox (2004) discuss how throughout Direct Rule from London, there was a need for bureaucracy to contain the Northern Ireland conflict. Unfortunately the formal rigid system that was created still remains in place today which is a major problem for an organisation such as the Northern Ireland Events Company which requires flexibility and autonomy when preparing a bid to host an international event:

‘The problem with public sector tourism in Northern Ireland is that we spend too much time arguing and discussing structure, procedures and protocols rather than getting things done (Senior manager, Northern Ireland Events Company).

The dispute over the visitor centre at the Giants Causeway is probably the best example of how bureaucracy is damaging tourism in Northern Ireland. The Giants Causeway was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986 and it is Northern Ireland’s number one tourist attraction. In 2000 the visitor centre at the Causeway was destroyed by a fire. At the time of writing, which is ten years after the fire, public sector agencies are still arguing over the design of the new visitor centre and how it should be managed. In the interim it is the visitor who has suffered as the makeshift facilities, which are nothing more than public toilets and a car park, are not what tourists expect and demand from a site which in 2008 was nominated as one of the world's seven natural wonders.

Funding is also an issue for public sector organisations in Northern Ireland. In most countries tourism will receive a slice of the ‘financial cake’ from central government, but in the case of Northern Ireland this is a rather small slice. Northern Ireland’s tourism industry has not recovered from the lack of investment during the troubles and in this study the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Northern Ireland Events Company and the Regional Tourism Partnership all complained about their dwindling budgets and how they are unable to carry out their work properly. For example, the Northern Ireland Events Company receives its funding from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure but unfortunately its budget has remained static since 2002 which is a cause for concern.

‘We were the first European country to set up a national public body dedicated to events. In many ways we have set a precedent. Countries such as Scotland, Denmark, Fiji, Libya and South Africa have all made contact and used our model as an example of good practice. Yet in terms of resources we are now one of the smallest with an annual budget of £1.6 million. Our budget has not increased since 2002 and the only explanation we have received is that there is not enough

money in the pot to go around' (Senior Manager, Northern Ireland Events Company).

In the Tourism Industry Stakeholder Survey (2004) the industry representatives stated that they would like the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to be more influential with government departments, agencies and other bodies in raising the profile of tourism. According to one of its senior managers, however, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is constrained by the lack of power and resources.

'The Northern Ireland Tourist Board should be the lead agency for tourism but at present we are neither given the power nor the resources and as a result many of the government departments and agencies which have resources for tourism refuse to follow our lead' (Senior Manager, Northern Ireland Tourist Board).

During the interview this senior manager went on to explain how the Northern Ireland Tourist Board suffered as a result of losing its marketing role to Tourism Ireland in 2001 and the EU decision in 2006 to end the International Fund for Ireland Tourism Programme and the Peace II Programme both administered by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The RPA's recommendation (final decision pending) to increase the role of the new Super Councils in tourism also concerns the Northern Ireland Tourist Board:

'I worry about the new Super Councils. They (Central Government) will take even more money away from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's budget and give it to them (the Super Councils). This will weaken the Northern Ireland Tourist Board even more' (Senior Manager, Northern Ireland Tourist Board).

According to a senior manager of Waterways Ireland the accumulation of these factors has left the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in a very poor state:

'I don't think that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is capable of providing the leadership and strategic direction to move the Northern Ireland tourism industry

into the 21st century. They lack resources and seem very disorganised internally. They are continually employing consultants to write-up strategies which is merely a case of putting new tags on what has already been done before when what is needed is action in terms of product development - something the Northern Ireland Tourist Board seems to have forgotten or cannot afford' (Senior Manager, Waterways Ireland).

A senior manager of the North West Regional Tourism Partnership felt the situation has been exasperated by the lack of communication.

'Almost ten years after the Good Friday Agreement there is still confusion over the role of Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Regional Tourism Partnerships. This should be made crystal clear so that if an organisation has a query or an idea for a joint project they know who to approach' (Senior Manager, North West Regional Tourism Partnership).

Lank (2006) discusses how communication helps to build trust and a culture of cooperation whilst Mohr and Spekman (1994) describe it as the glue that holds inter-organisational relationships together. Page (2007) believes that the National Tourism Organisation is best placed to act as a conduit for two-way communication between industry and the public sector. Yet, in this study and the Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey (2004) the majority of respondents were unhappy with the level of strategic communication and engagement they had with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board:

'The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is impossible to deal with. It relies on the Local Authorities to provide it with the latest visitor figures yet it communicates with us (the Local Authorities) through the media which is so unprofessional' (Senior Manager, North Down Borough Council).

'The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is one of those organisations that are always to phone you back but never do' (Senior Manager, Countryside Access and Activities Network).

In defence of her staff, a senior manager of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board explained how she felt that too much was expected of them:

‘If my staff went to every meeting they were invited to they would simply have no time to do anything else’ (Senior Manager, Northern Ireland Tourist Board).

Indeed, trying to deal with such a large number of public sector bodies must be difficult for staff but this lack of communication and collaboration between public sector agencies is damaging the industry as it is creating confusion. Consequently, tourism in Northern Ireland is currently suffering from a lack of coordination and the absence of clear policy guidelines. The following quote from a senior manager of Waterways Ireland, a cross body organisation, would support this view:

‘There are far too many public bodies to deal with in Northern Ireland and it is so difficult to find out who is responsible for what. This makes coordination and finding a common vision virtually impossible’ (Senior Manager, Waterways Ireland).

### **Lesson Drawing**

Greer (2002), Knox and Carmichael (2006) and Birrell (2009) discuss how Northern Ireland has become over-dependent on the public sector and this is certainly the case in relation to tourism. The complex web of public sector tourism bodies that has developed has and will continue to create problems for the industry. This issue was highlighted by the private sector in the Tourism Stakeholder Survey (2004), but as this study has shown there is also a general consensus amongst public sector officials that a country the size of Northern Ireland really does not need so many public sector organisations to be involved in tourism.

According to Rose (1991) countries can learn important lessons from each other. Baum (1999) and Nash (2002) also advocate the use of lesson drawing in public sector tourism but both stress the importance of careful judgement when undertaking the lesson drawing process. 'One cannot borrow blindly or condemn blindly for the success of a programme is affected by the specifics of context as well as generic attributes' (Rose 1991: 4). Whilst acknowledging that lesson drawing has its limitations, the following section identifies some of the lessons that Northern Ireland can draw from its Celtic neighbours, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

In Wales the National Tourist Board was abolished in April 2006 and its staff and functions absorbed into the Assembly Government's Civil Service. The aim was to streamline structures and processes and to simplify decision-making in order to make it more flexible and responsive to the needs of industry. According to the First Minister at the time 'Wales is too small a country to have a sixty-member Assembly and so many unelected quango boards' (BBC News 3/7/2004). A similar argument could be made for Northern Ireland. In fact this would not be the first time that the future of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board was questioned. Deegan and Dineen (1997), for example, discuss how the Tourism Review Group in 1989 recommended that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board should be dissolved and replaced by a new organisation called the Northern Ireland Tourism Development Organisation. This new organisation would operate under the direction of a policy design and strategic planning unit within government which would set the main policy parameters for the industry. Unsurprisingly, a senior manager from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has warned against such an extreme move.

'I am in regular contact with my counterpart in Wales. He has described the decision to merge the National Tourist Board into the National Assembly as a living nightmare. He can no longer make any decisions without consulting the Minister and wading through reams of red-tape. Basically they have created a larger, more bureaucratic and more risk-averse tourism organisation which totally

contradicts why the decision was taken in the first place' (Senior Manager, Northern Ireland Tourist Board).

This senior manager is, however, in favour of Northern Ireland adopting a more centralised approach to tourism and would like Northern Ireland to follow the example of Scotland and the Republic of Ireland and centralise its regional tourism bodies. The Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland is also in favour of this move:

'I think Northern Ireland suffers from fragmentation as it seems to have a public agency for just about everything. The idea of subsidiarity is for larger populations and therefore the Republic of Ireland and Scotland's decision to centralise their Regional Tourism Organisations was a step in the right direction and one which Northern Ireland should seriously consider'.

In the case of the Republic of Ireland there were originally seven Regional Tourism Authorities with each one responsible for the promotion of tourism in their respective region. According to the Chief Executive of Failte Ireland, the Republic of Ireland's National Tourism Authority, the Regional Tourism Authorities had performed a very important marketing role for over forty years but because the tourism industry had changed a fundamental restructuring of the regions was required.

'We have a problem with regional tourism in that an increasing number of overseas tourists are staying in and around Dublin (the capital city). The regional bodies were under resourced and had become ineffective. They had a very narrow remit and concentrated on producing local brochures that meant nothing overseas'.

The Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism (1997-2002) expressed a similar view:

'I was never a great exponent of regional marketing. We are a very small country in comparison to some of our European neighbours so promoting seven different regions was a waste of valuable resources'.

Although the seven Regional Tourism Authorities have wound up their operations and transferred their functions and staff to Failte Ireland these regions will, however, still have a voice through a Regional Tourism Development Board which will feed directly into Failte Ireland. According to the Chief Executive of Failte Ireland this new structure will allow greater focus on the individual needs of each region at a national level and direct involvement for the regions in the development of a national policy and tourism strategy.

‘If you are really going to have an impact as a national development authority for tourism you need conduits around the country with a similar remit to what you have so they can deliver programmes at local level. As part of Failte Ireland the regions will now be better resourced and will be involved in everything we do’ (Senior Manager, Failte Ireland).

The staff of the Regional Tourism Authorities have become employees of Failte Ireland and are accountable to the new Regional Boards reporting directly to the Director of Regional Development in Failte Ireland. A Tourism Officer who worked for the North West Regional Tourism Authority for sixteen years believes the restructuring was the correct decision:

‘Under the new set-up the regions will have a greater input into how tourism is developed within the regions. The old Regional Tourism Authorities were merely an under resourced marketing body. The new structure will require regional staff to specialise and play to their strengths whether that be product development, training or marketing’.

If the Government Minister responsible for tourism in Northern Ireland felt that it would be too extreme to copy Wales and abolish the National Tourist Board or to replicate the Republic of Ireland and Scotland and centralise the regional tourism bodies, then there are other options. Both the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Failte Ireland lost their overseas

marketing role when the cross-border body, Tourism Ireland, was created in 2001. However, in the interim the Government in the Republic of Ireland has increased Failte Ireland's role in product development and made it the lead body in skills training for the hospitality and tourism industry. This has reinforced Failte Ireland's position as the lead tourism agency in the Republic of Ireland:

'Our territory is very clearly marked and we now have a very broad remit. We are also much better resourced with over four hundred staff and a €100 million budget' (Senior Manager, Failte Ireland).

Senior management within Failte Ireland do sympathise with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and urge the government to expand its role.

'The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has been fairly well neutered since Tourism Ireland was set up. It needs to be given a strong product development role just like the one we are trying to grapple with down here. It should also be more actively involved in training and enterprise development. Of course all this requires money and from what I can gather the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's budget is being reduced rather than increased which is ridiculous considering Northern Ireland's tourism potential in this new era of peace' (Senior Manager, Failte Ireland).

If funding is such a major issue in Northern Ireland then the Government could make savings by subsuming the Countryside and Access and Activities Network into the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is already a core funder of the Countryside and Access and Activities Network and if they merged then the staff responsible for countryside recreation could focus more on product development and less on marketing - an approach that has worked very well in the Republic of Ireland and Scotland:

'Our research shows that the scenery and the number of things to do in the countryside are the two main reasons why international visitors come to Scotland. We have developed an excellent outdoor product and this is reflected in the number of repeat visits to rural areas' (Senior Tourism Manager, VisitScotland).

Alternatively, the Government in Northern Ireland could transfer the functions of the Northern Ireland Events Company to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. In 2000 the government in the Republic of Ireland introduced the Sports Tourism Initiative to attract major international events. Rather than set up a new events agency the Initiative is coordinated through a Sport Tourism Unit within the existing structure of Failte Ireland, an approach Tourism Ireland would like Northern Ireland to consider:

‘The Northern Ireland Events Company is a relatively small organisation and because events are directly linked to tourism it makes economic sense to locate them under the same roof as the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. This has worked in the Republic of Ireland where a very successful Sports Tourism Initiative has been administered by Failte Ireland’ (Senior Manager, Tourism Ireland).

However, a senior official of the Northern Ireland Events Company warns against such a move and highlights the success of EventScotland which is independent from the National Tourist Board:

‘We (the Northern Ireland Events Company) operate in a commercial environment and my staff must be able to react at short notice. If we are simply subsumed into the Northern Ireland Tourist Board we will not be able to bid competitively for events - we would lack the flexibility required. In 2004, for example, we teamed up with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and produced a joint grant-application form which turned out to be an administrative nightmare. We had our applications processed within weeks whereas it took months for the staff in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to wade through their red tape and for all the relevant managers in its hierarchy to sign off the forms. The events industry is fiercely competitive and such a rigid bureaucratic approach simply would not work’ (Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Events Company).

## **Conclusion**

Tourism in Northern Ireland is over administered. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the four Regional Tourism Partnerships, the twenty six Local Authorities, the Northern Ireland Events Company, the Countryside Access and Activities Network, Waterways Ireland and Tourism Ireland all have a tourism remit. This study has found that this complex mosaic of public sector agencies is not conducive to collaboration and the bureaucracy it creates merely causes confusion and duplication. There is a lack of coordination and clear policy guidelines and many of the organisations are suffering from ‘partnership overload’ and a lack of funding. To make matters worse for Northern Ireland its National Tourism Organisation, faced with a reduced remit and shrinking budget, is not capable of providing the strategic leadership that is required to drive the tourism agenda forward

Northern Ireland is a small country and looking elsewhere, it is clear that some countries of a similar size or even larger than Northern Ireland have decided to remove some of their layers of administration and bureaucracy. Scotland, for example, has merged its fourteen Area Tourist Boards into VisitScotland, the Republic of Ireland has also centralised its Regional Tourism Authorities whereas Wales has taken an even more controversial step and abolished its National Tourist Board.

It is important for Northern Ireland, and indeed any small country involved in tourism, to bear in mind the old adage ‘that too many cooks can spoil the broth’. Therefore, from a planning and development perspective it would make sense to merge the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Countryside and Access Activities Network. Northern Ireland’s Government should also consider whether a country of its size really needs Regional Tourism Partnerships. Removing this layer of bureaucracy would prevent duplication and help the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to re-establish itself as a strategic leader for tourism in Northern Ireland. At present Northern Ireland’s politicians are considering the RPA’s

recommendation to reduce the number of Local Authorities from twenty six to eleven. These new 'Super Councils' would have an increased tourism remit which means they could perform the functions of the Regional Tourism Partnerships. However, politics in Northern Ireland is notoriously slow and cumbersome. In fact the RPA began in 2002 and at the time of writing it has been rumoured that, if approved, the new Super Councils will not come into operation until 2015. Thirteen years to restructure local government – it's no wonder Northern Ireland's tourism industry finds itself bogged down in a public sector quagmire!

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