



Opening address by Chairperson of Tourism Recovery Taskforce to Members



Welcome to the inaugural meeting of the Tourism Recovery Taskforce established by Ministers Ross and Griffin. I am honoured to have been asked to chair and particularly given the calibre of the group assembled here. I would like to set some context if I may, around the importance of the work we are about to undertake in the preparation of a tourism recovery plan, to lift this vital industry from the devastating impact of coronavirus. I do this based on personal experience of some 30 plus years in Irish tourism, having worked and lived through almost all of the global shocks the industry has endured during three decades of wars, the gulf war of the 90's, 9/11 and the war on terrorism, foot & mouth, swine flu and SARS that unsettled a traveling global community. World recessions/depressions which brought the country and tourism to its knees with never ending bad news and a hard fought and won tourism recovery from 2010 – 2014 to a phenomenal pace of growth from 2015 onwards.

But none of us could have predicted the impact of a pandemic and the unimaginable consequences that it has brought to Irish tourism and its complete shut down since March. Ministers Griffin & Ross held the first tourism advisory Covid19 group meeting on February 26th which continued weekly, the ITOA – inbound tour operators, an organisation I work with had the last industry buyer/supplier trade sales workshop on March 10th the day Trinity college announced its closure, and by Thursday March 12th the Government asked tourism businesses to close that day, the St. Patricks days festival cancelled and the Taoiseach addressed the nation on March 17th from Washington. For the vast majority of tourism businesses they will have been closed for 4-5 months of the peak trading season, are





opening with restrictions that will limit capacity for many, as it currently stands to 30% or at best 40% due to social distancing requirements – for so many viable now vulnerable businesses this is simply unviable with all the more uncertainty on the potential demand particularly when reopening to a recessionary environment, domestic and international visitors unlikely to return to our shores in any meaningful way until 2021. The estimated loss in tourism receipts this year currently stands at €5 billion – that is indeed sobering when you consider that tourism is Ireland’s largest indigenous industry that employed 265,000 people nationally 1 in every 10 of the labour force. It is twice the size of agriculture, far bigger in employment than the construction and IT industries or the financial services sector. An export business given that 70% of our revenue is generated from overseas visitors, crucially it cannot be out-sourced or off-shored and its economic benefits are in our cities but most importantly 70% of tourism businesses are outside the pale and in regional Ireland. Tourism is a hospitality industry, the obvious big employment sectors of hotels and restaurants but is so much more than that, its visitor attractions, transport, coaches and car-rental, a variety of accommodation including B&B, self-catering and guesthouses, caravan and camping, Shannon cruisers, adventure and activity providers, adventure parks, tour operators & OTA’s and tourist guide services crucially enabled by airlines, airports and ferries - an eco-system of interdependency that provides the vital social fabric of communities in rural and urban Ireland. Tourism is also interwoven into the corporate and education sectors supplying infrastructure to enable meetings, conferences, events and incentives attracted to Ireland’s capital and its’ CCD and regional business hubs and a destination with product that rewards high-end achievers.

Covid-19 has brought an existential crisis for Irish tourism - never before has every market and business category been decimated to the extent that we now find ourselves – the market has essentially failed due a health crisis, not an economic cycle, the industry is on life support requiring greater support and a sectoral specific response for survival and a roadmap to recovery over the next three years. The UNWTO foresees a decline of international tourism of 60-80% compared to last year. As you have heard it said globally tourism has taken the greatest hit and recovery will be slowest vs. all other industries. The industries export earnings, employment potential and regional economic social and environmental benefits justifies its recognition as a major driver of the country’s economic





recovery from the dual convergence of Covid-19 and Brexit. This post pandemic tourism strategy will require clear economic and business objectives, close collaboration between private and public sector stakeholders and Government, to empower businesses to develop and implement strategies that engender stable sustainable recovery and growth.

Irish tourism is no different to other destinations globally – directly and indirectly tourism contributes close to 10% of EU GDP and a coordinated approach to reopen and aid recovery will be required.

This is not a return to normal as we know it and won't be for some time. Therefore, normal courses of action or remedy will not deliver the response now needed to save and return tourism as we know it.

In my view this recovery report will be like no other given the gravity of the situation and the response required. We will need to be bold in how we think and deliver. Tourism led the way out of the last financial crisis creating jobs and most importantly keeping the lights on and communities alive in rural Ireland – the rich tapestry of tourism infrastructure needs to be assisted to get through this crises and come out of it with at a minimum the same level of debt it went into it with. You no doubt will have seen and heard of the many reports from ITIC to IBEC to the SME recovery plan, that recognise the importance of our sector and the significant aid and fiscal supports required for its survival and to recover to 2019 levels in the future and such measures as recommended by them all, will I am sure form part of our deliberations too.

I appreciate that you have all given of your time willingly to this very worthy and important taskforce and I intend to ensure that we make the most of it. I like to think that my chairing of meetings is inclusive and efficient. I will endeavour to keep meetings on topic and on time too.

I am conscious that our meetings will not be as we might all have wished – face to face but hope that someday soon we will have that opportunity. I was very grateful that you all found time the past days to take a quick call from me and it's important that we take the opportunity to get to know one another today. We have all been appointed in a personal capacity to bring his/her personal knowledge, skills, expertise, experience, competence, strategic leadership and ideas to work on the group. Mindful of this and in the interest of





good governance I wish to inform you all that yesterday I stepped aside as chairperson of ITIC – the Irish tourism industry confederation for the duration of the TRT project. This I have done to minimise any perceived conflict of interest and so that I can devote the time and attention to this important work.

