

Northern Ireland Visitor Information Plan, 2016-2020 Draft Strategy



Prepared by TEAM Tourism Consulting for

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Northern Ireland Visitor Information Plan – The Strategy

1. Context, purpose, aims and objectives

1.1 Context

In 2010 TEAM Tourism Consulting prepared the Northern Ireland Visitor Information Plan for the period 2010-2020. Since 2010 there have been many important changes in tourism markets, in the ways that different market segments access information and, perhaps most importantly for Northern Ireland (NI), in the structures, roles and responsibilities for tourism, following on from the implementation of the Review of Public Administration (RPA). In the light of these changes, Tourism Northern Ireland (TNI) commissioned TEAM to conduct a mid-point review of progress and prepare an updated version of the Visitor Information Plan.

The implementation of RPA has significant implications for visitor information policy, which is a key tourism responsibility of the new Local Authorities (LAs). It was part of the brief for this project to ensure a collaborative approach to achieve more streamlined and cost-effective visitor information provision. To this end, this new Visitor Information (VI) Strategy and the Action Plans that will flow from it, will provide a strategic and operational framework for the LAs to use in shaping their own policies and structures for visitor information provision. LAs have played a key role in shaping this strategy and will be an integral part of the action planning later in 2016.

This report focuses on the future strategy for visitor information provision¹. It will be revised and finalised when the new NI Tourism Strategy has been completed and approved. Thereafter a set of Action Plans will be prepared for the period to 2020, providing synergy with both the NI Tourism Strategy and the new tourism experience branding proposition.

There is an accompanying Project Report which:

- Outlines the programme of work that was undertaken to provide the basis for the Plan;
- Provides an analysis of implementing the 2010 Visitor Information Plan, and the lessons from which have been built into this Strategy.

1.2 The purpose of the 2016 Visitor Information Plan

The underlying purpose of the 2016 Visitor Information Plan is to facilitate those aspects of the overall Northern Ireland Tourism Strategy that require action relating to visitor information (VI). Most importantly, it is intended to support the major experience branding campaign that will be the focal point of TNI's marketing programme for the years ahead. This has major implications for the design and the implementation of the VI Plan.

¹ The primary focus here is on provision of information to visitors travelling to and within Northern Ireland. However, visitor information provision is an integral part of the destination marketing process and must support the earlier stages of attracting people to come to NI and helping them plan their visit; and the later stages of encouraging repeat visits and recommendation through CRM.

1.3 Strategic aims and objectives

The strategic objectives set out in the 2010 VI Plan remain valid, but it is recommended that they should be extended and divided into higher levels aims: and policy objectives, designed to achieve those aims, as follows:

Strategic aims

- To enhance the quality of visitors' experience of Northern Ireland and thereby:
 - Increase length of stay and maximise visitor spending within NI;
 - Maximise repeat visits and recommendations.
- To enhance the reputation of Northern Ireland as a welcoming and fascinating destination.

Policy objectives

- To make it easy for potential visitors to plan and book their visits to/within NI and to navigate around NI.
- To ensure the highest quality of personal visitor welcome and information provision at key gateway, destinations and attractions.
- To be proactive in supporting TNI's major experience branding campaign, through the provision of directly relevant information and by facilitating the telling of NI's major stories of interest to visitors.

2. Market and technology trends and their implications for Northern Ireland

Information technology and the ways in which consumers access tourism information have continued to evolve since the Visitor Information Plan 2010. In many cases, the drivers of change were evident well before 2010 but others have emerged since then. The following are some of the key factors relevant to policy on tourism information provision:

- The **customer's decision making 'journey'** is becoming less linear, more complex and iterative, as the ability to access and share detailed content increases. The model of Dream, Select, Plan, Book, Visit, Recollect and Recommend remains a very useful concept for planning information provision; but in practice, it is not so simple. For example, the Booking and Selecting stages can be concurrent, and Planning can be undertaken in destination (the Visit stage) etc.
- **The Internet is clearly the primary medium** for gathering information pre-visit and sharing it post-visit, but is **now dominant also during the visit**, through the combined power of mobile technology and social media.
- Some of the **key sources of information are well established** (e.g. Google, TripAdvisor, Expedia etc.) whilst others have emerged or become more powerful over the past five years (e.g. Trivago, Groupon, AirBnB).
- **Destination websites** are primarily used at the planning stage of the customer journey. Their relative importance in influencing consumer behaviour varies. It can be substantial in the case of some national and major city sites, but limited in most other locations.
- **Social media usage has increased exponentially** since 2010. Facebook is huge in the sharing stage, which is increasingly in-visit, but is not the only player – Twitter, Foursquare and Instagram are all mainstream.
- **'Mobile first'** has also emerged as a trend strongly in the last five years. Smart phones and tablets are increasingly being used at all stages of the customer journey including inspiration, planning and bookings (albeit less so for smart phones). Wireless access of information during visit is now essential for most visitors. There is a demand for pre-visit and in-visit information in different formats - web, mobile web and app. Research² highlights that, while visitors use a mix of sources of information in destination, 51% are online.

These trends are reflected in Northern Ireland's tourism. The NI Destinations Visitor Survey 2014³ highlights the importance of the **internet as the key medium for accessing information** used in planning a trip to Northern Ireland. The Discover Northern Ireland website was used by 22% of visitors, TripAdvisor by 21%, the Tourism Ireland site by 17% and other websites by 12%. Discover NI research⁴ highlighted the fact that users are mainly accessing it via a PC/laptop (62%) but 22% access by Smartphone and 16% by tablet.

However more **traditional media** like guidebooks (18%) and brochures (9%) were still important (particularly among out of state visitors - guidebooks were used by 27% of the out-of-state visitors). Apps (3%) and VICs (1%) were not commonly used in planning a trip. VICs were apparently well used within Northern Ireland - **39% of NI visitors** said they had visited a VIC in NI at some stage of their trip - albeit visitor numbers to NI VICs have fallen over the last five years.

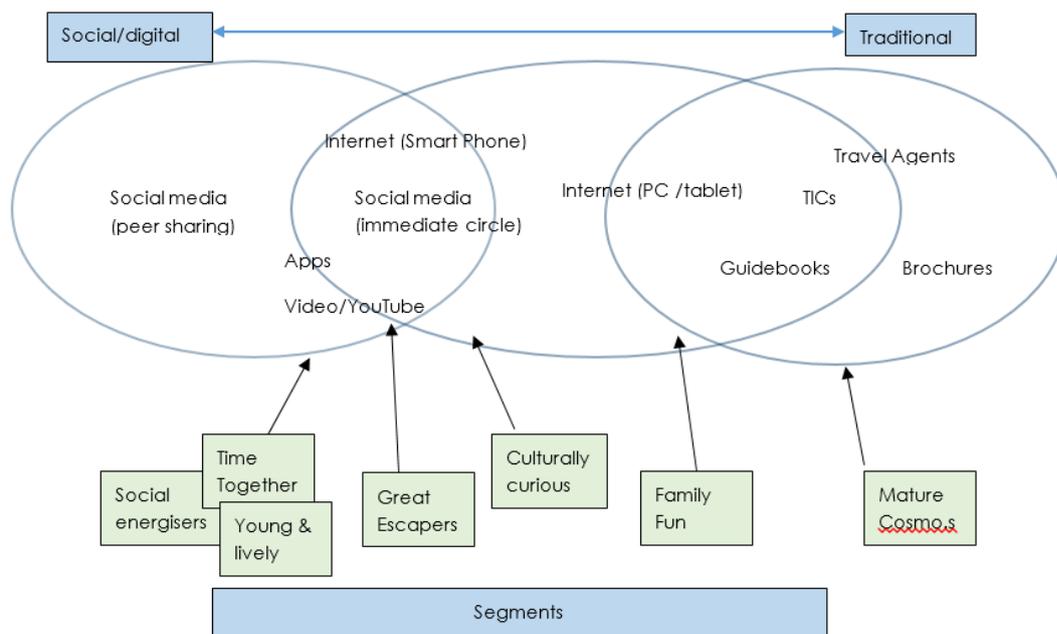
² Source: The 2014 Traveler's Road to Decision - think with Google

³ Millward Brown Ulster for TNI

⁴ DNI Research Findings (2013) AVBrown for NITB

For Northern Ireland, whilst there is rapidly increasing customer use of online sources, there is a need for provision of information in traditional form. The balance will vary by market segment, as shown in the diagram below; and it will change further over the years ahead, as all segments become more familiar with digital channels. Thus, in the diagram, the balance will gradually move towards the sources on the left hand side (i.e. social / digital).

Currently, only the Mature Cosmopolitans rely more on traditional sources than digital. Their use of online sources may be expected to increase substantially over the next five to ten years.



Annex 1 contains a table providing more detail about the extent and nature of the requirements of each of TNI's target segments for information in digital form.

3. Key conclusions arising from the consultations

The following are the conclusions arising from the consultations that are of greatest significance for this strategy. More tactical issues raised in the consultations will be considered at the Action Planning Stage.

3.1 Building on the 2010 VI Plan

- For those who attended the regional workshops the primary objectives of the 2010 VI Plan remain valid – i.e. to enable and encourage visitors to explore more and spend more; and to have an exceptional experience so that they will return and recommend NI to others.
- Large parts of the 2010 Plan, including the underlying principles and the actions proposed, are seen as remaining valid. Thus the updated plan will bring forward relevant actions, wherever appropriate, within a new strategic framework.

3.2 Market requirements

- If the new VI Plan and subsequent implementation is to be truly market led, there needs to be a clear understanding of where the real opportunities for information provision are greatest – i.e. where (potential) visitor numbers are highest and there is the opportunity to increase visitor satisfaction, and benefit to the destination.
- It is vital that information provision should align with and provide fulfilment for the future strategic marketing and branding initiatives of TNI and the Local Authorities (LAs).
- Different market segments have very different requirements and these vary through the customer journey. Information provision needs to be market and channel specific with delivery tailored according to the circumstances.
- From the perspective of fulfilling the touring visitor's needs, and reinforcement of national branding, there needs to be consistency of provision across all of NI, in terms of style, message, quality of experience, content and storytelling, across multiple channels of information distribution.
- Potential visitors use many different sources of travel planning information, online and offline; the majority undertake their primary research online, both before and during the visit.
- Visitors, particularly the 'Time Together' segment, use social media heavily and expect prompt responses to questions. Knowledge, skills and capacity are required to handle this well, but, there is no coordinated plan for engagement or quality assurance. A plan for a joined up, cost-effective, networked approach to social media is required.
- TripAdvisor and other review sites are very influential in guiding visitor purchase decisions. It is essential for destinations and businesses to constantly review comments relating to their facilities and operations and respond constructively; equally important, they should be proactive in ensuring that these sites have excellent content – photos, video, text. The sites should be regarded as essential distribution channels. NI industry up-skilling to this end needs to be facilitated.
- Rapidly increasing access to information and interpretation online via smart phones has major implications for VICs, which are no longer at the front line of information provision for most visitors. Overall, visitor numbers are falling and the significance of VICs is reducing. Thus the extent and nature of the network of VICs must be kept under review and evaluated against alternative forms of VI provision, to ensure best Return on Investment (RoI).

3.3 The evolution of information provision

- Visitor information provision must evolve, to ensure a wider, more flexible distribution network that is fully fit for purpose in an increasingly digital world.
- Increased use of digital technology offers multiple potential benefits for both the providers and the consumers of visitor information provision, including:
 - Enabling visitors to access extensive consistent information for the whole of NI (and the south), including up-to-date information, particularly on events;
 - Provision of sophisticated search and route planning applications;
 - Access to new tools (notably Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR)) to enhance visitor enjoyment and understanding of the destination;
 - Provision of information in other languages - e.g. FAQs in multiple languages – increasingly important with larger numbers of international visitors; and
 - Tracking of visitor movements, activities and requirements.
- Realising these benefits to the full will require a common web-based platform of tools and content for the providers of information; and access to high quality broadband for information providers and consumers alike – but there are currently significant shortcomings in both terrestrial and mobile broadband provision.
- There is a clear continuing desire, particularly by international visitors and some segments of the domestic market, to receive personal advice and printed information. Personal advice can potentially provide a greater opportunity to influence visitors' choices and increase visitor satisfaction. How can this be provided most efficiently? Mobile staff using tablets and core print, such as a simple attractions map/guide, are being used increasingly in high footfall locations. Personal service and technology are thus complementary rather than alternatives.
- In visitor attractions, transport hubs and other high footfall locations, where space is at a premium and commercially valuable, the 'footprint' for information provision needs to be small. Thus information desks, display racks and digital kiosks may not always be the best solutions; mobile 'meeters & greeters', equipped with tablet and possibly EPOS, are an alternative. For these situations, flexibility is required, according to the volume and type of demand and the circumstances for information provision.
- Volunteers are increasingly being used for visitor welcome and information at places and times of high demand in NI and elsewhere. Retired people (for civic pride) and students (for work experience) make good volunteers. There may be opportunities to extend the idea further, but professional recruitment, management, scheduling and quality assurance of any volunteers will be essential to maximising the benefits. Budgets are required to meet the costs involved.
- Local VICs can potentially offer a wider range of services, including guiding, storytelling, training and selling local arts and crafts.
- Demand for many types of print is reducing – and many businesses in the accommodation sector are less willing to advertise in guides. However, events, attractions, restaurants are still keen to be featured in local print, although they want to understand the potential Return on Investment (ROI). Printed maps are still in high demand.
- There should be one point of input for each type of data/content, to a single database/content management system for onwards distribution to local, national and international sites / partners. The need is for a content management plan, ensuring that the right data/content is acquired in the most cost-efficient way for distribution to target users, whether tourism suppliers, intermediaries or end customers.

3.4 Roles and responsibilities

- There is a real need to clarify roles and responsibilities between TNI, LAs/DMOs, industry and community in information provision, in the light of:
 - The changes that have taken place, and that have still to take place, at the local level as a result of RPA;
 - The new tourism strategy and operational policies emerging at the national level;
 - The major changes in the ways in which visitors or potential visitors access information; and
 - The willingness and, in many cases, enthusiasm, of national and local partners to assist.

This is an essential task for the updated VI Plan to fulfil.

- There is a strong interest in greater partnership working amongst the LAs, national organisations, transport providers and tourism businesses. However, it is clear that such working will only be successful and sustainable if all the parties benefit from it – i.e. the benefits must be mutual.
- Many look to TNI to be a centre of excellence in terms of leadership, skills and support, inspiring and helping industry partners and LAs to move in the right direction. Leadership is required in relation to VI strategy, guidelines for local decision making, new and emerging technology, content acquisition and distribution, upskilling and training. Some players consider that TNI is not fulfilling this role adequately at the moment and the new Plan must seek to address this. The LAs are mostly very positive about the practical support and training that TNI has provided, but recognised that this did not include the private sector sufficiently.

4. The core strategy

4.1 The value of information

This strategy is designed to ensure that future information provision will maximise achievement of the strategic aims and objectives set out in Section 1.3. In this respect, it is important to recognise that different types of information have different levels of value or benefit. The following table illustrates the point notionally, by showing different categories of information requirement, the potential value that fulfilment may have in achieving the aims and objectives above and the likely level of volume – 1 lowest to 5 highest – based on TEAM's intuitive assessment.

Type of Information Requirement	Value	Volume
1. Interpretation & storytelling	5	1
2. Itinerary Planning for NI	5	3
3. Local activity planning – things to do, see and enjoy	4	3
4. Directions and travel – walking, driving, public transport	2	5
5. Local services – toilets, parking, amenities, shops	1	5

If this analysis is valid, then the information in greatest demand by volume (i.e. types 4 and 5) has the least added value to the destination. It follows that such information should be delivered wherever possible through mechanisms that have a low cost (or no cost) to the public purse, using multi-purpose community services, simple mechanisms of a traditional kind (e.g. signs and information boards) or smartphone based technology.

The corollary is that public funding should be invested in fulfilling, or helping others to fulfil, the types of requirement that provide the opportunity to genuinely add value for the destination community (i.e. types 1-3); and in actively promoting such services to drive up demand.

The figures for value and volume shown in the table above are indicative, based on expert opinion, but should be substantiated and elaborated through research.

4.2 Strategic priorities

Arising from the research and consultations, as outlined above, the following are recommended as 11 key strategic priorities for the VI Plan for 2016-20:

- 1. Recognise the fundamental importance of online channels** as:
 - The primary media through which visitors and potential visitors will obtain information before and during their visit; and which they will use to communicate their experiences, good or bad, to friends, relations and to social media communities.
 - The essential source of reference for VICs, accommodation reception staff and everyone else providing advice and information to visitors.
- 2. Consequently, develop a wider, more flexible Visitor Information Network for NI,** embracing all of the most relevant and influential channels, online and offline.

3. Ensure **consistency of VI provision throughout NI and across all channels**, online and offline, in terms of branding, style, message, quality of experience, content and storytelling across multiple channels – recognising the importance of creating emotional affinity as well as meeting functional needs. More specifically, the VI provision should have a specific focus on promoting and supporting TNI's forthcoming experience brand.
4. Regarding VI provision 'on the ground':
 - **Focus particularly on 'prime locations' locations** combining opportunity to inspire, influence and engage large numbers of visitors and achieve real benefit for the economy (categories 1-3 of information in the table in Section 4.3 above);
 - Tailor the precise form of VI provision to the circumstances of each location, the requirements of the market segments in question and the need to get the best return on investment.
5. **Ensure high quality data and editorial content** (including video and photography) is acquired in the most cost-effective way, for distribution to target users through the most cost-effective channels. This should include outstandingly good inspirational and informative content for NI's destination websites, reflecting TNI's new experience brand and targeted at NI's target market segments.
6. **Review opportunities to extend the use of volunteers** further, ensuring professional recruitment, management, scheduling and quality assurance and provide guidelines for local action – drawing on the lessons learned in the successful volunteer schemes in Belfast, Derry and elsewhere.
7. **Enable all of the main VI providers to have access and contribute to an NI tourism web platform of common content and applications.**
8. In other locations:
 - **Review VICs against other opportunities for alternative forms of information provision** (e.g. in accommodation, pubs, restaurants, shops, local attractions, taxis, etc.), in order to achieve the best RoI in financial and social terms;
 - **Consider opportunities for local VICs to offer a wider range of community services.**
9. **Ensure a pro-active, joined up approach to social media**, paying particular attention to TripAdvisor and other review sites – this to engage the most appropriate players, public and private, within the VI Network.
10. **Review the role of print within a multi-channel approach to VI distribution**, as an integral part of the content management plan.
11. **Promote the need for high quality/capacity broadband provision for visitors and businesses throughout NI.**

There is one further strategic priority that relates to VI provision, but which has been defined as falling outside the direct scope of this strategy. It is the **acquisition, management and use of customer data, as the foundation for customer relationship marketing (CRM)**, an essential component of the tourism marketing strategy for NI. The new VI Network for NI will offer many points of contact with existing and potential visitors, providing opportunities for acquiring valuable customer data. There will need to be clear guidance on the nature and methods of data acquisition at these points of contact; and the way the data is to be managed and used. There is a strong case for a partnership approach to this subject, potentially involving the same stakeholders that will be involved in the VI Plan implementation. Thus an Action Plan for customer data and CRM could be prepared alongside the other Action Plans proposed in Section 5.1 below.

4.3 A new Visitor Information Network for Northern Ireland

Based on the Strategic Priorities above, the primary recommendation of this VI Strategy is to **create a new NI Visitor Information Network**, using a wide range of distribution channels and providing the framework for a new partnership approach, using common branding.

The ethos of this network should be **proactive** in seeking to achieve the aims and objectives outlined above, and particularly to ensure fulfilment of TNI's experience branding campaign at key locations within NI.

The proposed key elements of the new VI Network are as follows:

Type	Location	Role	Responsibility
<i>1. Prime VI Locations, combining high footfall and high value</i>	Major attractions Major events Cruise ships Gateways to NI Motorway service stations	Local + national information provision by most appropriate method(s), e.g. : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roving ambassadors, with tablets and key print item(s) • Electronic kiosks • Information display s/racks • Mobile VICs 	National partners LAs
<i>2. Visitor Information Hubs – city or town centre</i>	Primary (top 5 or 6) tourism destination centres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Hubs, responsible for all forms of information transfer in their areas – dealing with visitors, partners and businesses • Role model VICs providing local + national info + ticket sales • Content acquisition • Social media engagement • Brand representation • Recruitment, training and management of volunteer force 	LA/TNI partnership
<i>3. Online information and social media</i>	Everywhere!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated online presence and social media engagement, involving all information providers, local business, community groups, etc. • Mobile web and apps 	TNI supported by VI Hubs
<i>4. Local/ community information centres</i>	Towns and villages which attract significant numbers of visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal welcome/ information • Local ticket sales • Poster displays and leaflet racks • Interpretation and story telling • Local guiding 	LAs, local tourism or community associations
<i>5. Local information points</i>	Accommodation, pubs, restaurants, shops, attractions, taxis, etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poster displays and leaflet racks • Personal welcome/ information 	Local businesses & voluntary organisations

Each of these elements of the VI Network should be designed to fulfil specific types of information requirement, as identified in Section 4.1, as follows:

Type	Types of information Provision	Value
<i>1. Prime VI Locations, combining high footfall and high value</i>	• Itinerary Planning for NI	5
	• Directions and travel – walking, driving, public transport	2
	• Local services – toilets, parking, amenities, shops	1
<i>2. Visitor Information Hubs – city or town centre</i>	• Interpretation & storytelling	5
	• Itinerary Planning for NI	5
	• Local activity planning – things to do, see and enjoy	4
	• Directions and travel – walking, driving, public transport	2
	• Local services – toilets, parking, amenities, shops	1
<i>3. Online information and social media</i>	• Interpretation & storytelling (apps inc AR & VR)	5
	• Itinerary Planning for NI (map based apps)	5
	• Local activity planning – things to do, see and enjoy	4
	• Directions and travel – walking, driving, public transport	2
	• Local services – toilets, parking, amenities, shops	1
<i>4. Local/ community information centres</i>	• Interpretation & storytelling (subject to space)	5
	• Local activity planning – things to do, see and enjoy	4
	• Directions and travel – walking, driving, public transport	2
	• Local services – toilets, parking, amenities, shops	1
<i>5. Local information points</i>	• Local activity planning – things to do, see and enjoy	4
	• Directions and travel – walking, driving, public transport	2
	• Local services – toilets, parking, amenities, shops	1

5. High Level Action Plan

5.1 Action Areas

The action required to implement this strategy falls into seven categories:

1. Creation of a *new NI Visitor Information Network*, as outlined above, ensuring consistency of VI provision throughout NI, in terms of branding, style, message, quality of experience, content and storytelling, across multiple channels – *within the framework of TNI's anticipated new Experience Brand and its roll-out programme.*
2. Operation of effective and efficient *volunteer programmes*, building on the recent successes of well organised volunteer schemes for places and events where there have been large numbers of visitors potentially requiring information and support – e.g. in Belfast, Derry, Glasgow, London and elsewhere).
3. Development of an *integrated suite of NI tourism websites and mobile apps, thematic and geographical*, providing outstandingly good, inspirational and informative content and functionality, focused on NI's target market segments – the design of these sites to learn from global best practice amongst destinations.
4. Acquisition and distribution of *high quality, multi-media content* in the most cost-effective ways.
5. Use of a common *web-based platform and suite of applications* by all those involved in the new NI Visitor Information Network.
6. Pro-active and coordinated *engagement of NI's tourism community with social media.*
7. Integration of the principles and concepts in this strategy into local destination management planning, through *local information provision plans which should specifically address the implementation of the two local elements of the new NI VI Network.*

In each of these respects, more detailed planning will be required. For the first five categories, at least, it will be important for TNI to take the lead in this planning work, working in close partnership with key players from industry, local authorities and national and local organisations.

5.2 Implementation mechanisms

The need and the opportunity for partnership activity to deliver the VI Strategy and Action Plan is clear and there is willingness, even enthusiasm, amongst most of the key stakeholders. However, a key lesson from the evaluation of performance in delivering the 2010 VI Plan is that partnership activity does not happen automatically. It needs to be well founded, nurtured, managed and directed. This will require strong support at senior management level in all of the partner organisations (TNI, LAs, NIEA/HBD, NT, Translink, the Airports, etc) and sufficient funding committed by them to ensure success.

There also needs to be the commitment and the mechanisms for everyone directly involved in delivery to work together to implement each of the Action Plans on a continuing basis.

To fulfil these requirements, there is a need for an overarching **VI Plan Implementation Steering Group** of senior managers from the partners, to drive and oversee implementation and to monitor performance. In addition, there is a need for **Action Groups**, consisting of stakeholder staff responsible for management of visitor information operations. The proposed roles and responsibilities of these groups is outlined in **Annex 2**

The proposal is for three such Action Groups, each covering two of the action categories identified in Section 5.1, perhaps as follows:

- Categories 1 and 2 – ‘Creation of the new NI Visitor Information Network’ and ‘Operation of effective and efficient volunteer programmes’
- Categories 3 and 5 – ‘Development of an integrated suite of NI tourism websites and mobile apps’ and ‘Use of a common web-based platform and suite of application’
- Categories 4 and 6 – ‘Acquisition and distribution of high quality, multi-media content’ and ‘Pro-active and coordinated engagement of NI’s tourism community with social media’.

Each Action Group should be responsible for producing an **Action Plan** for each of its two categories. An outline specification for each of the plans is included in **Annex 3**.

Local Authorities should be involved in these Implementation and Action Groups. In addition, working individually or together, they should be responsible for a suite for preparation of **local VI Plans**, reflecting the VI Plan for NI, and specifically **addressing the implementation of the two local elements (numbers 4 and 5) of the new NI VI Network** (see p.10 above).

However, these mechanisms should be part of or closely related to the mechanisms for implementation of the new NI Experience Brand, the implementation of which is expected to follow from publication of the new NI Tourism Strategy, with LAs as essential local delivery partners.

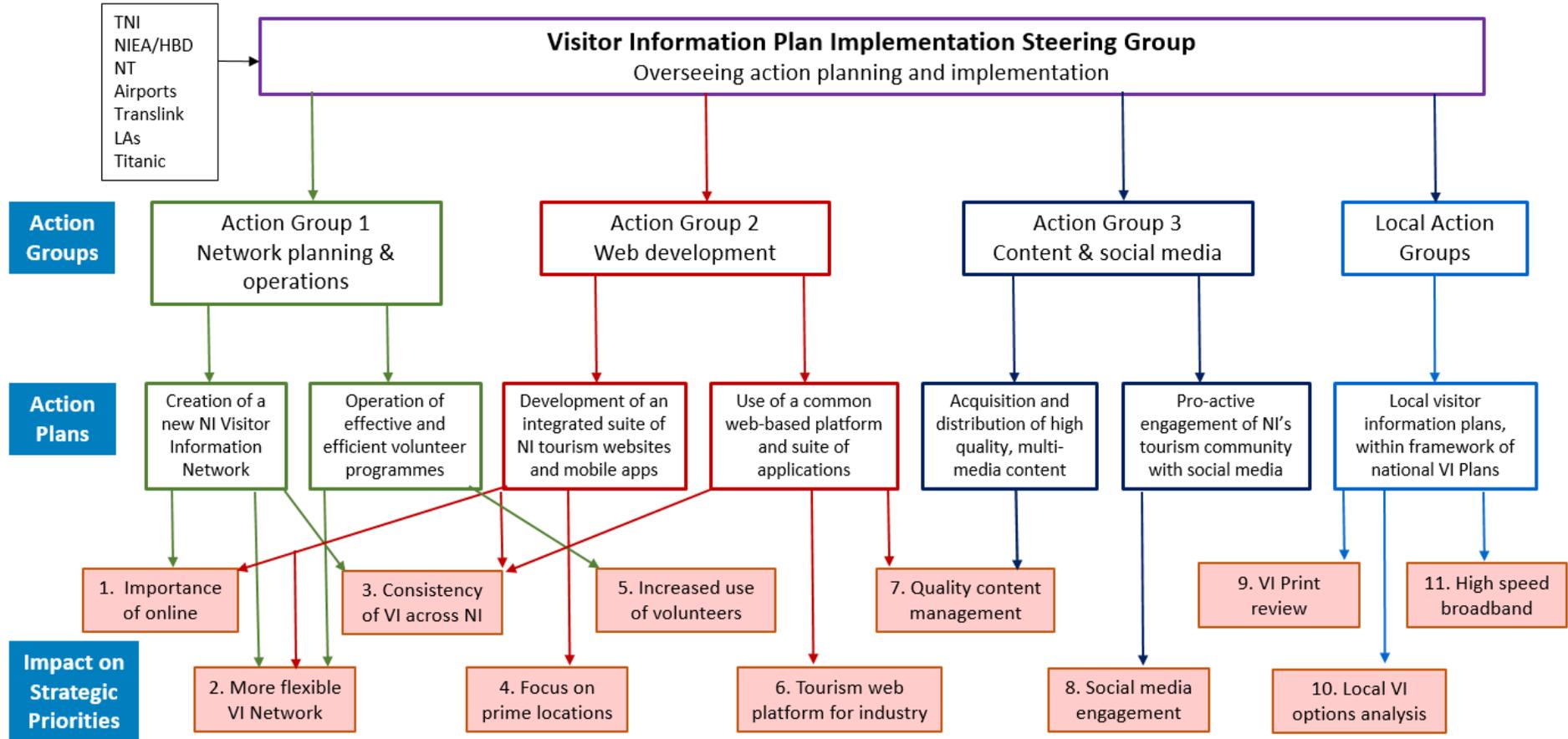
5.3 Broadband for industry and visitors

A subject mentioned at several of the workshops, where action is required is to *ensure high quality/capacity broadband provision for visitors and tourism businesses throughout NI*. Consistently good provision will be vital for the successful performance of the industry, but it not directly within the remit or the resources of TNI or its tourism partners to deliver. However:

- The local VI Plans can identify the nature and extent of problems with broadband provision locally and suggest where there may be the opportunity for self-help in remoter rural areas, by tourism businesses working together to secure satellite or other provision;
- The VI Plan Implementation Group can bring influence to bear with the main broadband infrastructure providers.

The chart on the next page shows diagrammatically the VI Planning and Implementation Structure (as proposed above), the Action Plans to be produced and implemented, and the way in which the actions will deliver the Strategic Priorities.

Proposed structure and responsibilities for action planning and implementation



6. Examples of relevant good practice

6.1 Visitor information strategy

The most thorough and innovative example of VI strategy is , which includes visitor information. It represents a substantial departure from traditional thinking and has considerable relevance for Northern Ireland. Although the circumstances in Northern Ireland are significantly different to those in Scotland, there are five key aspects that have primary relevance in NI also and which have informed the thinking set out in this document:

- Provision of high quality inspiration and information online is fundamental and is core to VS's own role
- The importance of social media (including review sites) is fully understood and an active, ongoing programme of social media engagement by VS, DMOs and the industry is a key part of the whole
- National and local partner organisations are integral and essential to the future provision of visitor information on the ground and to ensuring quality of experience, enabling a substantial reduction in the network of traditional, publicly subsidised VICs
- The recognition that information services in general, and VICs in particular, have a key role to play in creating emotional affinity between the visitor and the destination, through warmth of welcome, storytelling and 'living the brand' – 'The Spirit of Scotland'.
- A common visual identity will be used for all elements of the new customer experience network.

The essence of VisitScotland's new approach to information provision is shown below:



6.2 Visitor information operations

As part of the work on the VI Plan, TEAM has prepared a short report containing summary information about relevant initiatives in other parts of the UK and abroad. This is included in the separate 'Project Report'. It shows how some of the concepts proposed in this strategy have been applied successfully elsewhere. These are as follows:

Type of initiative	Case study
A Hub VIC, responsible for information provision throughout a large District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanet Visitor Information Provision, Margate, Kent
Taking information and welcome to the visitor and digital applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Derry/Londonderry Visitor Information Provision
Personal service in modern centre, with a 'meet the locals' programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kowloon Information Centre, Hong Kong Tourist Board
VIC + wine showroom, run by DMO with commercially generated funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Margaret Valley Visitor Centre (Western Australia)
Combined attraction and VIC, run by local authority on a commercial basis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charleville Cosmos Centre and Visitor Information Centre, Queensland, Aus
Community-run VIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glenarm Visitor Information Centre
Local commercial partner information provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beccles, Suffolk, bookshop partner
Creation of a countywide partnership visitor information network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit County Durham
Use of social media for visitor information provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VisitEngland - #Real Time Travel Guide
Volunteer rangers providing information and welcome for visitors and storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Heritage Guides, Lagan Valley Regional Park
'Meeter & Greeter' volunteer schemes in Kent, London and Auckland (NZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Kent Greeters – towns and countryside • TEAM London Ambassadors Programme • Auckland Tourism – Team AKL volunteer programme for major events
Commercial 'Meeters and Greeters'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Welcome People
Online visitor information provision by specialist volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask Oregon Ambassadors
Different solutions from around the world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile information points/centres
VIC with visitor attractions and community use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Herne Bay – The Clock Tower Information Centre

Annex 1 – The characteristics and requirements TNI’s Target Market Segments for information in digital form

Segment	Broad characteristics	Information used
N and ROI segments		
Mature cosmopolitans	45+, ABC1. Looking for break based around a special occasion / romance /cool nightlife (theatre, eating out etc)	Less likely to use digital channels More likely to use: Specific accommodation provider’s own website (typically 4*) and TripAdvisor. Also use: TNI and Tourism Ireland websites, and airline/ferry websites.
Time together	18-34. Taking a break either for a special occasion or to get away from daily pressures.	Will tend to use digital channels More likely to use: Specific accommodation provider’s own website (typically 4*) Also use Airline/ferry websites, TripAdvisor and TNI and Tourism Ireland websites. More likely than other segments to have / use Smartphones
Family Fun	34-44. Looking for fun quality time with the family, and safe child orientated attractions	Use digital channels More likely to use: TripAdvisor, TNI website, Travel Agent’s website Also use: airline/ferry websites, : specific accommodation provider’s own website, Tourism Ireland website
ROI segments		
Young and lively	18-34 - Groups of adults looking for fun, urban environments	Use digital channels, and social media
Great Britain, Germany, France, North America		
Social Energisers	18-34 – Looking for action packed days, and lively nights. Travelling as friends / groups	Use digital channels and avid users of social media
Culturally Curious	45+, independent. Looking for authentic experiences exploring new culture, landscape, and history.	Use digital channels and some social media (but are not heavy sharers)
Great Escapers	Typically in their 30s – Looking for natural environments and a break from stress	Use digital channels and but less likely to use of social media

Annex 2 – Mechanisms for VI Strategy Implementation

VIP Implementation Steering Group

The first task in implementing the VI Strategy will be to create the high level VI Strategy Implementation Steering Group and constitute it formally with clear Terms of Reference, setting out its role and responsibilities in delivering the Northern Ireland Visitor Information Project (NI VIP).

The Steering Group will have primary responsibility for delivering the NI VIP and will establish the three Action Groups that will plan and implement the work-streams. Its main functions will be decision-making, problem solving and strategic guidance for the project. It is recommended that the Chair of each Action Group will also sit on the Steering Group to aid two-way reporting, risk and issue definition, escalation and resolution. It is suggested that one of TNI's Senior Management chairs this Group.

Members of the Steering Group will be drawn from the senior decision makers in TNI, Local Authorities, trade bodies and each of the main stakeholder organisations. Those consulted during the VIP Review will be key candidates. Buy in at this level will be essential for effective implementation.

The first function for the newly formed Steering Group will be to prepare the overall Project Delivery Plan, Timeline, Budget and Risk Register (to include mitigating actions) and establish the three Action Groups proposed in Section 5, most importantly to:

- Review and develop further the outline specifications in Annex 3 for the Action Plans that the Groups are to prepare
- Identify and engage key stakeholders who are able to input to and deliver the Action Plan(s).

Thereafter, it is proposed the Steering Group meets formally on a bi-monthly basis to receive a progress update from each Action Working Group, make any key strategic decisions and revisit and update the Project Delivery Plan and Risk Register.

Once the three Action groups have prepared their Action Plans, the Group should instigate the preparation of the Guidelines for the Local VI Plans and encourage the Local Authorities and DMOs to prepare these Local VI Plans.

TNI will require a dedicated NIVIP Project Manager to drive the project as a whole, support preparation of the Action Plans and stimulate the delivery of the main actions. This Project Manager will service the Implementation and Action Group.

Action Groups

Members of these groups will be operational managers from the stakeholder organisations with current involvement, significant competence and experience in the respective Action Group subject areas and in the operational implementation of the Action Plan(s).

Each Groups primary task initially will be to prepare Action Plans according to the specifications agreed by the Implementation Steering Group.

A significant constraint and risk for the Action Groups is that most or all of the members will have their own full time job, so gaining their active engagement in planning and implementation will not be easy. For this reason, the Project Manager will need to be actively involved in progressing the work of each group.

The Action Groups should meet monthly to review progress and ensure that the necessary actions are take, in accordance with the overall Project Plan.

Annex 3 – Outline specifications for the VI Action Plans

One of the first tasks for the VI Plan Implementation Group and its Action Groups (as proposed in Section 5.2) will be to review and develop further the outline specifications below, so that the Action Groups can commence work on the Action Plans. All the Plans will be presented to the Implementation Group for approval.

Visitor Information Action Planning
<p>1. Detailed plan for design and implementation of the new NI Visitor Information Network, with consistency of branding, style, message etc throughout NI.</p> <p>This should include integration of visitor information into the implementation planning for TNI's new Experience Brand, nationally and locally. The VI plans for each of the Hot Spot locations will be an integral part of this. Although the plan will take a holistic view of the network, it will not go into details regarding the local level of provision, which will be covered in the local VI Plans (see below).</p> <p>Main task areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Define Experience Brand considerations, opportunities and implications for the VI Network• Define the VI Network branding considerations – what are we aiming to become to whom, and with whom should we aim to be aligned?• Define what the Network might look like for consideration and agreement, using the table in Section 4.2 as a starting point• Define the scope, services and business case for each category of provision, followed by a plan for implementation of each – with options, as appropriate• Establish a detailed implementation plan, including timeline, budget and resources required for the work-stream
<p>2. A plan for an integrated suite of NI tourism websites, thematic and geographical, providing outstandingly good, inspirational and informative content and functionality, focused on NI's target market segments</p> <p>Main task areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Undertake a technical and stakeholder review of all existing NI websites, in terms of effectiveness, to identify key strengths and weaknesses• Define requirements, in terms of:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Communication by TNI with its full range of target audiences, including consumers, visitors, industry and strategic partners○ Fulfilling TNI's marketing plan (including communicating with visitors travelling to and within NI); and more specifically, the roll-out of the new Experience Brand○ Fulfilling the related needs of TNI's strategic partners at national and local level, where a collaborative approach would be mutually beneficial• Define how the required new suite of NI websites might look• Undertake a gap analysis and transition plan to migrate from the existing suite of websites to the proposed suite of sites• Establish a detailed implementation plan, including timeline, budget and resources required for the work-stream

3. A content management plan, ensuring that the right data/content is acquired in the most cost-effective way, for distribution to target users through the most cost-effective channels – to include a review of the role of print within a multi-channel approach

Main task areas:

- Specify the content requirements to deliver Action Plans 1 and 2 above
- Identify how these requirements can best be met
- Consider who is currently collecting and creating which types of content
- Create a document considering new options for content creation, collation and distribution, defining which content will be created, collated or gathered by whom from whom
- Undertake a gap analysis and transition plan to migrate from the existing arrangements to the new
- Establish a detailed implementation plan, including timeline, budget and resources required for the work-stream

4. A plan for a common web-based platform of tools and content for everyone in the NI VI network

Main task areas:

- Review all existing platforms and tools in use within the existing Network, identifying the key strengths and weaknesses and the areas where a collaborative approach might benefit NI
- Define requirements, in terms of providing:
 - The ICT infrastructure to support the suite of websites arising from Action Plan 2 and the content management plan in Action Plan 3
 - Tools for greatly increased collaborative working between TNI and its strategic partners at national and local level
- Specify the optimum solutions to fulfil the requirements
- Undertake a gap analysis and transition plan to migrate from the existing platform to the proposed new solution(s)
- Establish a detailed implementation plan, including timeline, budget and resources required for the work-stream.

5. A plan for a joined up, cost-effective, networked approach to engagement with social media, paying particular attention to TripAdvisor and other review sites; to include skills training for all involved

Main task areas:

- Define the potential role of social media for TNI and its strategic partners, in terms of:
 - Promotion
 - Content acquisition (user generated content) and distribution
 - Visitor servicing
 - Research (consumer satisfaction, competitive positioning)
 - Quality assurance
- Review the main social media channels in terms of their potential effectiveness in fulfilling the above requirements and prepare a plan for cooperative action by all players in the network

- Review the existing social media engagement by tourism sector (destinations, accommodation, attractions, F&B etc)
- Undertake a gap analysis and transition plan to migrate from the old approach to the new one
- Establish a detailed implementation plan, including timeline, budget and resources required for the work-stream.

6. A review of opportunities to extend the use of volunteers further, ensuring professional recruitment, management, scheduling and quality assurance and preparation of guidelines for local action, drawing on the experience of Belfast, Derry and other destinations.

Main task areas:

- Undertake a thorough review of the experience of volunteer schemes within NI, elsewhere in the UK and abroad, to identify key lessons to be learned
- Based on the best practice, create a handbook for recruitment, management and operation of volunteer schemes, particularly in the 'Hotspot' locations and events; but also at the local community level
- Define the opportunities for volunteer usage within NI, detailing volunteer numbers, locations/venues and technical resources required
- Create a detailed business plan and budget to launch the initiative
- Establish a detailed implementation plan, including timeline, operational budget and resources required for the work-stream.

7. A Visitor Information Delivery Plan for each District or group of Districts, to apply the recommendations of the new NI VI Plan at the local level, to meet the needs of local stakeholders interests and to address the implementation of the two local elements (Types 4 and 5) of the new NI VI Network.

Main task areas:

- Identify the organisation and/or person responsible for producing each local delivery plan and the key local stakeholders to be involved in planning and implementation
- Prepare Guidelines for the preparation of these local plans, within the framework of the NI VI Plan
- Encourage and assist preparation of the Local Delivery Plans, using the Guidelines, each including a detailed implementation plan, including timeline, operational budget and resources required for the work-stream.