

Visit Belfast, Green Tourism & GDS-Movement White Paper

Sustainable tourism for cities and stakeholders, and the Belfast model for success

Green Tourism

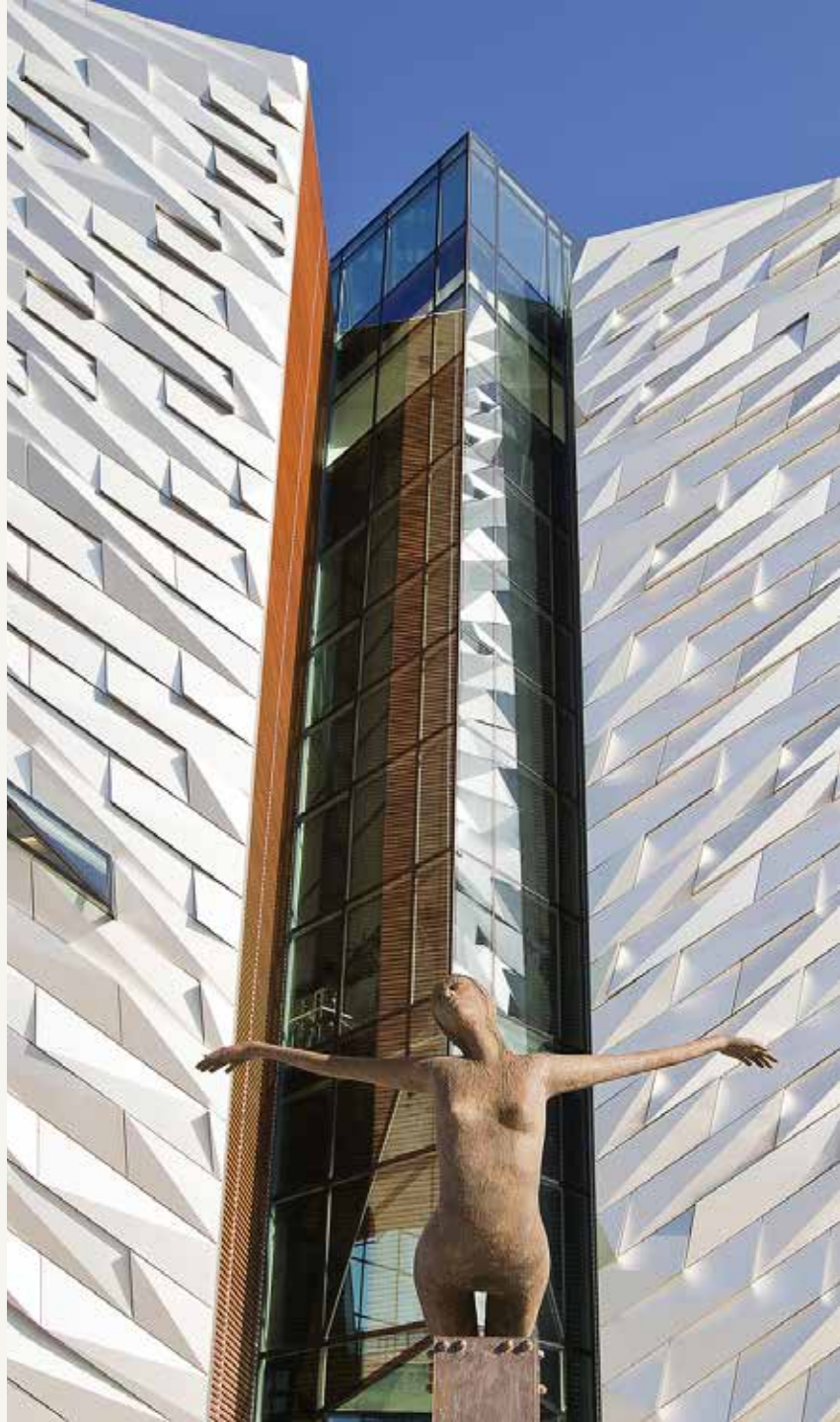
Belfast

visit Belfast

GLOBAL DESTINATION SUSTAINABILITY MOVEMENT

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Introduction

The accelerating momentum of the global climate emergency creates a more complex environment for governments, destinations and tourism and hospitality operators to work in.

Ecological and social problems driven by overpopulation, overconsumption, environmentally malign technologies and global warming impacts consumer and government attitudes to the environment and in consequence, to tourism.

Tourism's historic near-immunity to economic, currency, social and political changes and pressures was broken apart by COVID, which now gives us the opportunity to rethink and reprioritise what's important to us – our planet, our communities, destinations, businesses, operators and the visitor.

Belfast demonstrates what can be achieved in a small amount of time. Visit Belfast, Belfast City Council and industry partners' response to COVID was integrated with major actions to generate low carbon results. The journey they have embarked on demonstrates significant achievements in the sustainability of the destination. Supported by Green Tourism and the Global Destination Sustainability Movement, Belfast has shown how local action (in response to climate change) can have significant benefits. An intervention and support programme was designed that shows how a destination can recalibrate the way it works, with quantifiable evidence of impacts and benefits.

Why are we telling you this?

We want to demonstrate how decisions can be made everywhere to adapt and mitigate climate change, while maintaining tourism and business competitiveness – actions don't have to be bold and incisive to reset the agenda, but decisions do have to be made.

Here we recount the case study of Belfast's transition in tourism sustainability and the lessons learned, to help you think about what needs to be done in your area.

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Objectives

Lessons from Belfast's ambitious 18 month programme for transitioning to become a more sustainable destination are offered for take-up by tourist destinations keen to address climate change.

Destination management and marketing organisations (DMMOs), industry stakeholders and local authorities don't have to reinvent the wheel when planning to mitigate climate change.

By writing up Belfast's Green Tourism interventions and outcomes, we offer a template to help others act in their area, helping businesses[1] adjust to and audit changes they make. Adapting to local circumstances is critical, but here, courtesy of the experience in Belfast, is a pathway for others to instigate changes and improvements to benefit the planet and their visitors.



1 Our definition of tourism and hospitality businesses is inclusive of commercial, community based, charitable or social enterprises

The Context

Environmental policies and targets are now universally integrated into international, national and regional government thinking.

But, as the climate crisis worsens - greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, catastrophic and intensifying heat waves, droughts, flooding and wildfires becoming far too frequent - governments, communities and the commercial sector responses still have to catch up to this new reality.

The UN General Assembly's Agenda for Sustainable Development includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals[2] (SDGs) – set in 2015 and designed to take us to 2030 – which provide a universal call for action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. However, their latest report[3] suggest that we aren't responding to and acting fast enough to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Globally, prioritising responses to the climate crisis has been aligned with DMMOs and their local authority and member stakeholders finding ways to recover from the COVID pandemic. Belfast specifically considered that the pandemic had accelerated the need for destination stewardship, community alignment, digital conversion and sustainable development, to lay the foundations for building a stronger, more resilient tourism sector in the coming decades.[4 5]

Within this context, Belfast selected two partners to accelerate the transition to a zero carbon and circular tourism and hospitality industry. The Global Destination Sustainability Movement is the premier industry organisation to monitor and advise destinations of all sizes on their approach to sustainability and regenerative tourism. This includes benchmarking, improving and recognising destinations' sustainability strategies, performance and regeneration results, through the Global Destinations Sustainability Index[6].

Green Tourism's (green-tourism.com) role has over the last 25 years been to translate sustainable goals into auditable and achievable business actions with over 2,800 member tourism and hospitality related businesses, equipping them to add value to visitors' experiences while benefitting a more sustainable planet.



2 www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals
3 The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf (un.org)
4 Rebuilding City Tourism 2021-24; VB-BP_2022-23-Shortened.pdf (visitbelfastpartners.com)
5 DestinationNEXT Futures Study | Destinations International
6 www.gds.earth

Belfast's Tourism and Economy

Tourism has been a central platform in Belfast's economic development.

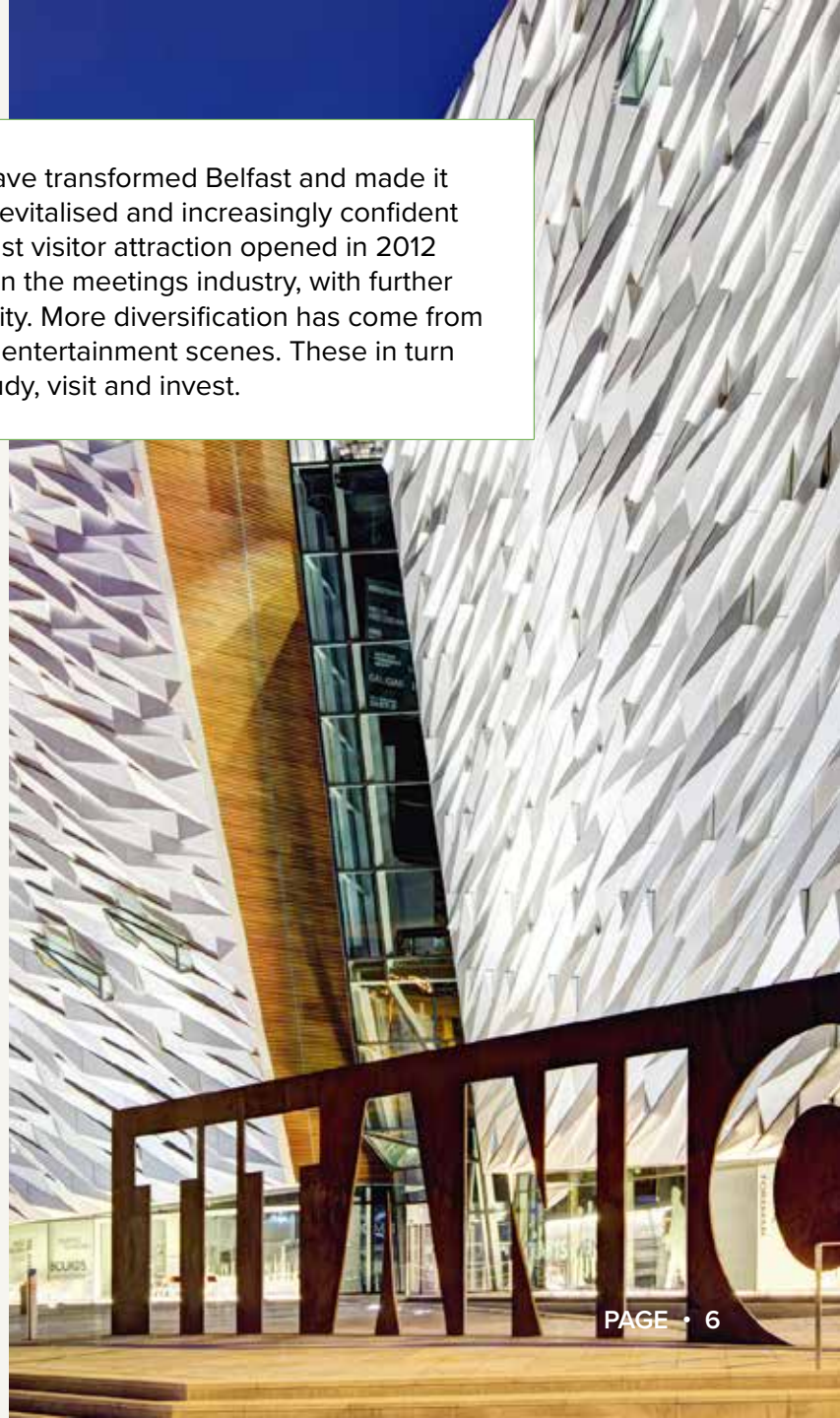
Since 2000, millions of pounds of investment in tourism have transformed Belfast and made it the gateway to visitation to Northern Ireland, as well as a revitalised and increasingly confident and forward looking city economy. The iconic Titanic Belfast visitor attraction opened in 2012 and ICC Belfast in 2016, reinforcing Belfast's premier role in the meetings industry, with further substantial hotel and retail investments elsewhere in the city. More diversification has come from burgeoning food, culture and heritage, music, festival and entertainment scenes. These in turn have added to Belfast's appeal as a place to live, work, study, visit and invest.

With a population of nearly 350,000[7], Belfast is the largest city in Northern Ireland and, after Dublin, the second largest city on the island of Ireland. Belfast is a reinvented 21st century capital city, it's tourism generates 40% of Northern Ireland's tourism spend. 88% of Belfast's tourism revenue is generated from out of state visitors compared to the Northern Ireland average of 71%. 18,600 jobs are supported in the tourism sector in Belfast, which is 30% of all tourism jobs in Northern Ireland.[8]

Tourism has become a catalyst for economic growth and regeneration in Belfast, establishing hundreds of new business enterprises, and with that, many thousands of job opportunities which have supported livelihoods across the city and region over the last twenty years.

The value of tourism to Belfast was £417m in 2019, pre COVID, and it has been steadily increasing post COVID. Visit Belfast's role and contribution is that of a DMMO and lies in helping determine new product and market opportunities, encouraging investment and business growth, working with stakeholders, including industry partners and travel trade, to market the city and its experiences.

COVID lockdowns created the opportunity for Visit Belfast to pause, re-evaluate and rethink how recovery could be aligned with sustainable and low or zero carbon tourism and how the 450+ members could be motivated to contribute. The development and implementation of the Rebuilding City Tourism 2021-24 recovery strategy was the start of that process[9].



7 2021 Census: 345,418; 20.8% population increase on 2011

8 Submission by Belfast City Council to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, May 2019 - TNI0021 - Evidence on Tourism in Northern Ireland (parliament.uk)

9 Rebuilding City Tourism 2021-24; VB-BP_2022-23-Shortened.pdf (visitbelfastpartners.com)

Belfast's Route Map

Belfast City Council and Visit Belfast's decision to integrate sustainability into its way forward required, firstly, the management of significant internal processes:

1. Belfast launched its Resilience Strategy, the city's first climate plan in December 2020. It sets out 30 transformational programmes to transition Belfast to an inclusive, zero-emissions, climate-resilient economy within a generation
2. Visit Belfast agreeing the continued prioritisation of sustainability and low carbon actions while incorporating other corporate objectives of COVID recovery, marketing, stakeholder support, digital enhancements etc.
3. Belfast joining the Global Destinations Sustainability Index[10] to facilitate external benchmarking across 69 environmental, social, destination management and supplier criteria, providing robust evidence to develop its first sustainability action plan
4. Putting sustainability at the heart of its new 3 year business plan (2021-2024) and communicating and generating agreement of public and private sector partners to the direction of travel
5. Developing an ambitious sustainability action plan focusing on high impact, quick wins that Visit Belfast could help influence

From here, the process for delivery was quite clear:

1. Drafting and launch of Visit Belfast's sustainability policy (2021) setting out 10 commitments to guide the sustainability journey, aligned to 8 of the 17 UN SDGs[11]
2. Generating member companies' commitment to actions to accelerate their sustainability journey
3. Delivering the action plan tasks for Visit Belfast as a (more sustainable) organisation, with the commitment and integral role of staff
4. Investment by Belfast City Council, supported by Visit Belfast, to develop a certification scheme, appointing Green Tourism as the leading programme in UK

10 The Global Destination Sustainability Index (gds.earth)

11 Visit Belfast's commitment to the UN SDGs focus and amplify the positive role that Visit Belfast plays as the city's destination marketing and management organisation to drive inclusive and sustainable growth

Belfast's Key Steps

Belfast's journey to being a zero carbon community emanates from the City Council declaring a climate crisis in 2019, launching a resilience strategy (the city's first climate plan) with partners across the City in late 2020 and agreeing actions across 30 transformational programmes to support transition to an inclusive, zero-emissions, climate-resilient economy within a generation.

The Belfast Climate Commission developed the Net Zero Carbon Roadmap for Belfast and the carbon targets were adopted by the city in 2022. A Local Area Energy Plan is currently being developed for the city.

Belfast has created a Sustainable Food Partnership with the aim of co-designing an action plan. This action plan will help the city secure the initial Bronze Sustainable Food Place award and work towards silver and gold accreditations.

International dimensions are important. As well as joining the Global Destinations Sustainability Index, Belfast has become a "Tier A" city under the Carbon Disclosure Project Framework. This signals Belfast's statement of intent on climate, public disclosure of carbon outputs, a city-wide emissions inventory and a published climate action plan. Belfast now joins 122 Tier A cities around the world that are considered leaders in environmental action and transparency.

The Global Destination Sustainability Movement and Index

In 2020 Belfast and Visit Belfast joined the GDS-Movement and Index to understand and address the challenges of transiting to a zero carbon and circular tourism and hospitality industry.

The Global Destination Sustainability Movement brings together sustainability pioneers of business and leisure tourism and works with destinations[12] to co-create their tourism and events strategies, benchmark and improve their sustainability performance, and transform value chains in order to catalyse regeneration. Originating from the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) Scandinavian chapter and MCI, 15 pioneering cities created the Scandinavian Destination Sustainability Index in 2010. In 2016 this was expanded to become the Global Destination Sustainability Index, which, in 2023, 104 cities participated in.

The GDS-Index is a benchmark that ranks global destinations based on their sustainability performance in the tourism and events industry. The GDS-Movement is the organisation under which all services are grouped, including the index.

The GDS-Movement worked with Belfast City Council and Visit Belfast to collect data on 69 quantitative and qualitative areas covering the Council's social and environmental strategy and performance, the tourism supply chain, and Visit Belfast's destination management approach. This information was independently assessed and benchmarked with 73 other cities in 2020, providing a baseline, and input into the development of a sustainability action and performance improvement plan for Belfast.

The leadership team and entire staff at Visit Belfast were supported with sustainability and regenerative tourism training by GDS-Movement with stakeholder engagement sessions facilitated with key city partners and expert advice provided to contribute to Belfast 3-year tourism strategy.

The Global Destinations Sustainability Index allows Visit Belfast and Belfast City Council to identify where the destination and the marketing organisation are doing well and where action needs to be prioritised across tourism, across the city. Year on year monitoring of disaggregated performance areas allows for a deep understanding of where the action plan should focus next. Without an independent monitoring mechanism, it would be much harder for a destination to determine its priorities, to engage with and communicate performance to stakeholders.

GLOBAL
DESTINATION
SUSTAINABILITY
MOVEMENT

12 Destination participants range from small cities to megacities, from tiny regions to large ones, and national/regional destination management organisations and convention bureaux

Visit Belfast's destination achievements

GLOBAL DESTINATIONS SUSTAINABILITY INDEX RANKING

2020 47 ▸ 2022 8

THE ONLY DESTINATION ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND AND ONE OF TWO CITIES IN THE UK TO MAKE THE TOP 10 POSITION IN 2022

HOTEL BEDROOMS WITH A SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATION

THEN 25% ▸ NOW 75%

BUSINESSES COMMITTED TO GREEN TOURISM

THEN 5 ▸ NOW 98

VOLUNTEER HOURS DELIVERED FROM WITHIN VISIT BELFAST **700**

ECONOMIC IMPACT GENERATED **£110M**

ECONOMIC IMPACT TARGET BEATEN BY **+14%**

LAUNCH OF CRUISE BELFAST SUSTAINABILITY ACTION PLAN

100%

VISIT BELFAST EMPLOYEES TRAINED IN SUSTAINABILITY AND INCLUSION: VOLUNTEERING, WELLBEING, SOCIAL AND ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

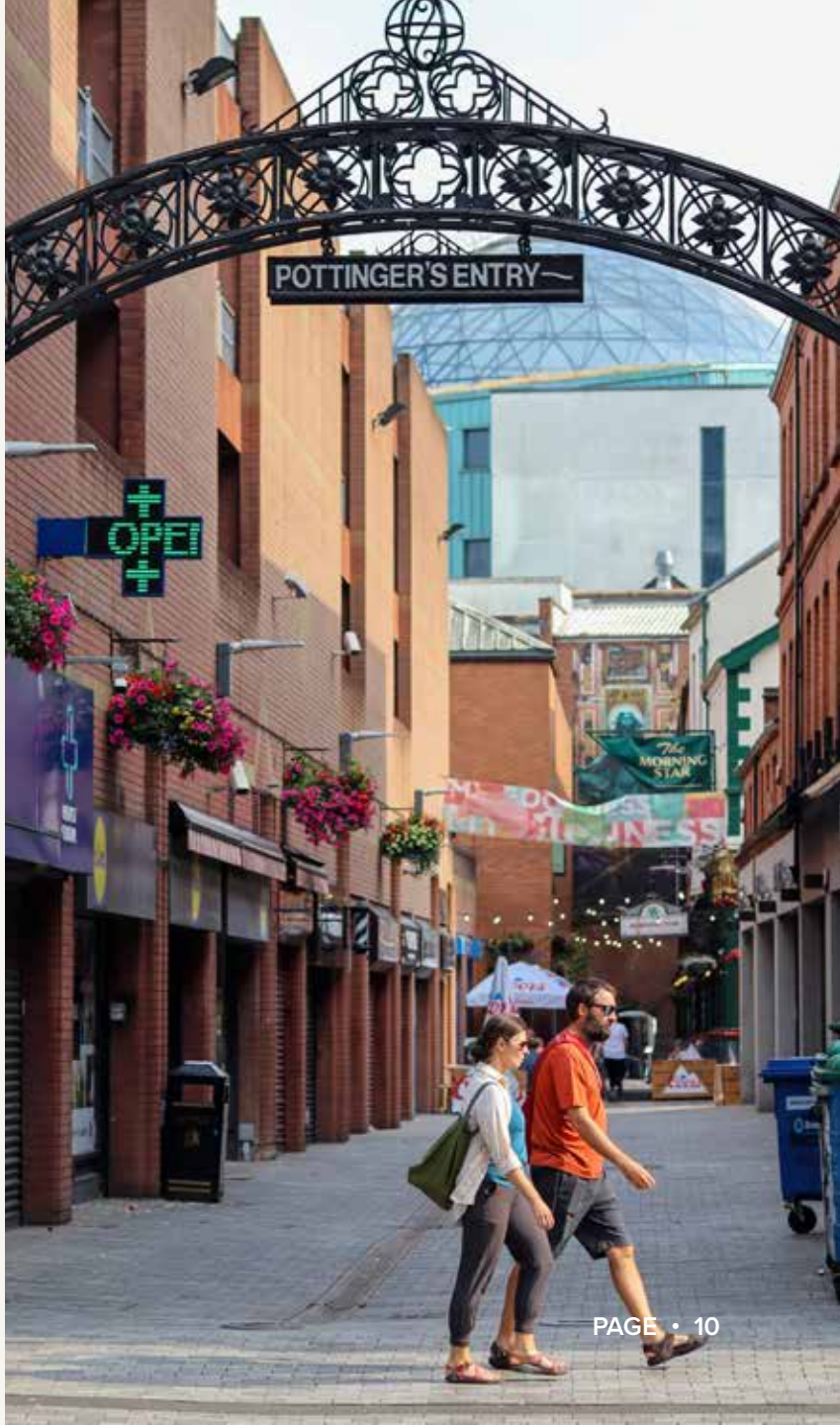
CHANGING THE MENU. FOR GOOD

A PIONEERING SOCIAL IMPACT PROJECT TO HELP TACKLE FOOD POVERTY IN BELFAST THROUGH BUSINESS EVENTS. SECURED A GLOBAL INNOVATION AWARD.

Achievements

Visit Belfast is the first to acknowledge that achieving a low carbon destination is work in progress. But since 2021, achievements are significant[13]:

- From an original ranking of 47th, Belfast was ranked 8th of 73 participating destinations in 2022 in the Global Destinations Sustainability Index - the only destination on the island of Ireland and one of two cities in the UK to make the top 10 position in 2022
- 75% of Belfast hotel bedrooms now hold a sustainability certification - up significantly from 25% in 2021. This has been driven by the Green Tourism programme led by Visit Belfast and Belfast City Council[14]
- 98 businesses committed to Green Tourism with 41 and a further 10 venues certified already, up from an original baseline of 5 having 3rd party sustainability certification
- 700 volunteer hours delivered from within Visit Belfast (up from 250 in 2021/22)
- £110m in economic impact generated (+14% ahead of target) and £26m ahead of 2021/22
- Developing the city's first Cruise Sustainability Action Plan with Belfast Harbour
- Established an employee committee to help shape volunteering, wellbeing, social and engagement activities at Visit Belfast and ensured 100% of employees are sustainability and inclusion trained
- Secured the GDS-Movement's Global innovation Award for a pioneering social impact project – "Changing the Menu. For Good" to help tackle food poverty in Belfast through business events
- Secured a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion award by ABPCO[15] for its work on the Harkin Summit, developing inclusion training for nearly 300 front of house tourism and hospitality staff



13 Sources: Visit Belfast - Rebuilding City Tourism, Business & Operational Plan 2022-23 Year 2 of Three-Year Recovery Strategy; Sustainability Action Plan, Performance and Impact report, 2022-2023, June 2023

14 Amongst Green Tourism accreditation criteria are: internal management, social responsibility and equality, energy, water and effluents, procurement, waste, travel, innovation and benchmarking. Awards, dependent on scoring are Bronze, Silver and Gold

15 Association of British Professional Conference Organisers

Green Tourism and Visit Belfast Campaign Plan

1 Pre-Launch Preparation
APRIL & MAY 2021

- Personalised Belfast Landing page on GT website
- Sign up verification as part of the process
- Tailored Sustainability presentation for Belfast businesses
- Campaign marketing pack distributed by Belfast City Council

2 Visit Belfast Achieve Green Tourism Award
MAY 2021

- Leading by example, Visit Belfast achieve Green Tourism award
- One to one assessor support provided by Green Tourism

3 Year 1: Business Engagement
JUNE 2021 ONWARDS

- Instructional series of webinars and masterclasses
- Campaign launched in April produces positive response and GT manages the process, supporting early adopter businesses
- Green Tourism Board in regular one to one meetings with Visit Belfast to assess progress and determine future action

4 Extension Incentive for Businesses
JULY 2022

- Motivational incentives to attract completion by end of July
- Response and results were significant

5 Developing Insights – Calling Campaign
FEB & MARCH 2022

- Green Tourism client management team led the calling campaign to hear views and support assessment

6 Quarterly Meeting & Reporting
AUG 2021

- Partners produce quarterly status reports
- Partners collaborated to use intel to evolve and direct action plans, designed to support and motivate businesses to maximise their input to support accreditation

7 Further Investment by Belfast City Council
APRIL 2023 – MARCH 2024

- The Council extended the funding to allow businesses to benefit from the growing tribe of accredited businesses

8 2nd Extension Incentive for Businesses
SEP 2023

- Green Tourism partnering with BCC, committed to membership extension period to keep engagement and motivation high

9 Sharing Experiences
SEP 2023

- Belfast City Council and Green Tourism collaborate to produce evidence based white paper on best practice and lessons learned

10 Annual Re-assessment
DEC 2023

- Knowledge based intervention marketing campaign planned to review and improve accreditation of all Belfast accredited businesses

PARTNERS: Belfast City Council, Visit Belfast, Green Tourism, Global Destination Sustainability Movement

Lessons and Learnings from the Green Tourism Programme

Industry sustainability certification

The initial GDS-Index assessment highlighted low levels of sustainability certification by hotels, venues and event suppliers, demonstrating limited evidence of collective efforts/ ambitions for a more sustainable destination. Visit Belfast's and Green Tourism's collaboration made the difference to the number of businesses being certified (with benefits for the businesses themselves and the destination.) The 2021 GDS-Index assessment achieved a remarkable 69% increase in overall sustainable destination performance (with a further 18% improvement in 2022), largely attributable to the improvement in supply chain certification, with all that entailed.

Collaboration and partnership

It was important to generate member businesses' commitment to the programme and this could only be done effectively with Visit Belfast taking the lead and endorsing the contractor, Green Tourism. Complementing this arrangement, it was crucial to have a Green Tourism delivery partner that knew how to engage with and take the individual businesses through the process of identifying environmental and low carbon actions, calculating costs and savings to the business and transiting through the accreditation process in a painless manner.

Fully funded certification

A clear offer to participating businesses, to generate their engagement and commitment. In Belfast, this comprised a fully funded certification process with defined steps for the businesses to follow, from launch and introduction through to participation in the audit (or "Greencheck") process and ultimately to certification. The offer showed how participating businesses could make savings (e.g. LED lighting, enhanced insultation, reduced food waste, recycling, renewable energy or better tariffs, dual flush toilets, reduced chemical products etc.) to demonstrate their environmental and sustainability credentials and respond to increasing visitor preferences aligned to the environment.



16 Amongst GDS key performance areas are: Air quality (e.g. air pollution, emissions), Credibility/transparency (accountability, integration, innovation, organizational processes), Environmental Performance, Waste Management, Supply Chain, Water & Energy, Work Environment (staff involvement and management)

Strong marketing visibility

Complementing the certification offer with local promotional incentives was important to show businesses how their involvement in Green Tourism would be promoted in and by the destination, to be seen by visitors. Certification gave an extra presence in Visit Belfast's marketing – giving stronger visitor visibility for those which achieved the Green Tourism award. These add-ons included prominent sustainable business listings on the Visit Belfast homepage of their website, including strong wordsearch links to sustainability searches and promotional opportunities in the Visit Belfast Annual Suppliers Brochure.

Continuous communication with industry players.

It's tempting to think that an offer to tourism and hospitality businesses will be immediately successful (and in Belfast the cost barrier of certification was removed). The reality is that businesses face many daily challenges that inhibit immediate responses to "offers," however attractive these may seem to be. The need is for multiple forms of communication to be designed from the outset, from newsletters, peer recommendations, introductory workshops and especially account management – the one-to-one, resource intensive, relationship with potential participants to support them to commit and then work their way through to certification.

Partnership

In Belfast the collaboration of Visit Belfast, Belfast City Council, Green Tourism and The GDS-Movement resulted in the deep integration of sustainability criteria and actions into Belfast's tourism industry, driving environmental and social performance, and innovation. Going it alone is an option that is likely to lessen skills, experience and resources available to achieve positive results.

Monitoring and learning

External benchmarking through the Global Destinations Sustainability Index allows Visit Belfast and Belfast to identify where the destination and the marketing organisation are doing well and where action needs to be prioritised. Year on year monitoring of disaggregated performance areas allows a detailed breakdown of where the action plan should focus next, to address weaknesses[16]. The absence of an independent monitoring mechanism will make it harder for a destination to determine its priorities.



16 Amongst GDS key performance areas are: Air quality (e.g. air pollution, emissions), Credibility/transparency (accountability, integration, innovation, organizational processes), Environmental Performance, Waste Management, Supply Chain, Water & Energy, Work Environment (staff involvement and management)

Making a Difference in your Area

Many destinations across the world are taking action to respond to the climate crisis.

The 2020 IMEX Natureworks Research Survey[17] identified that 90% of tourism and events industry professionals consider sustainability “important” or “extremely important” and one reason for this is steady growth in client demand for green practices.

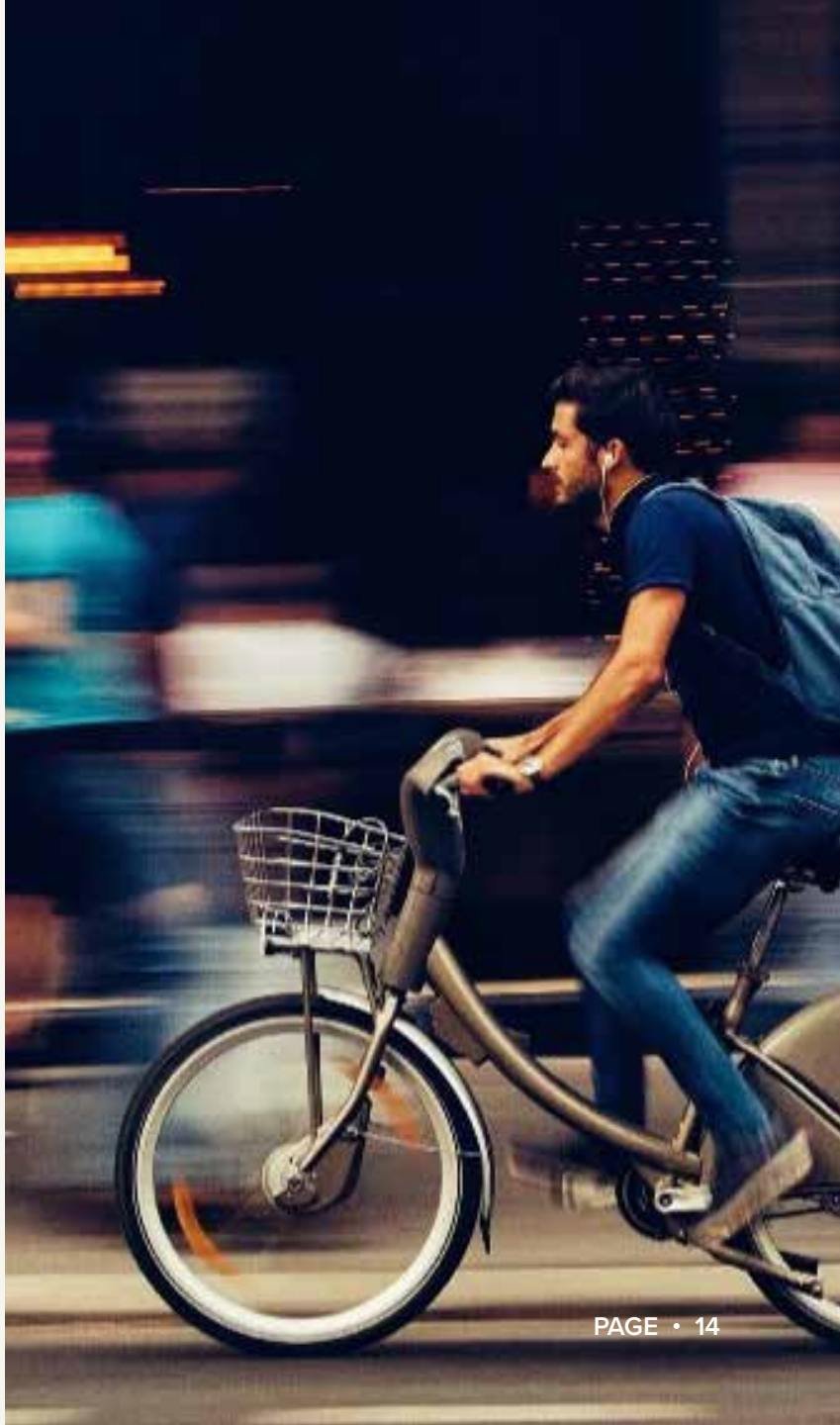
The urgency of acting is reinforced through the UN’s Climate Change Conference, COP26:

> *Transforming tourism for climate action requires embracing a low carbon pathway with awareness and optimization as key elements.*

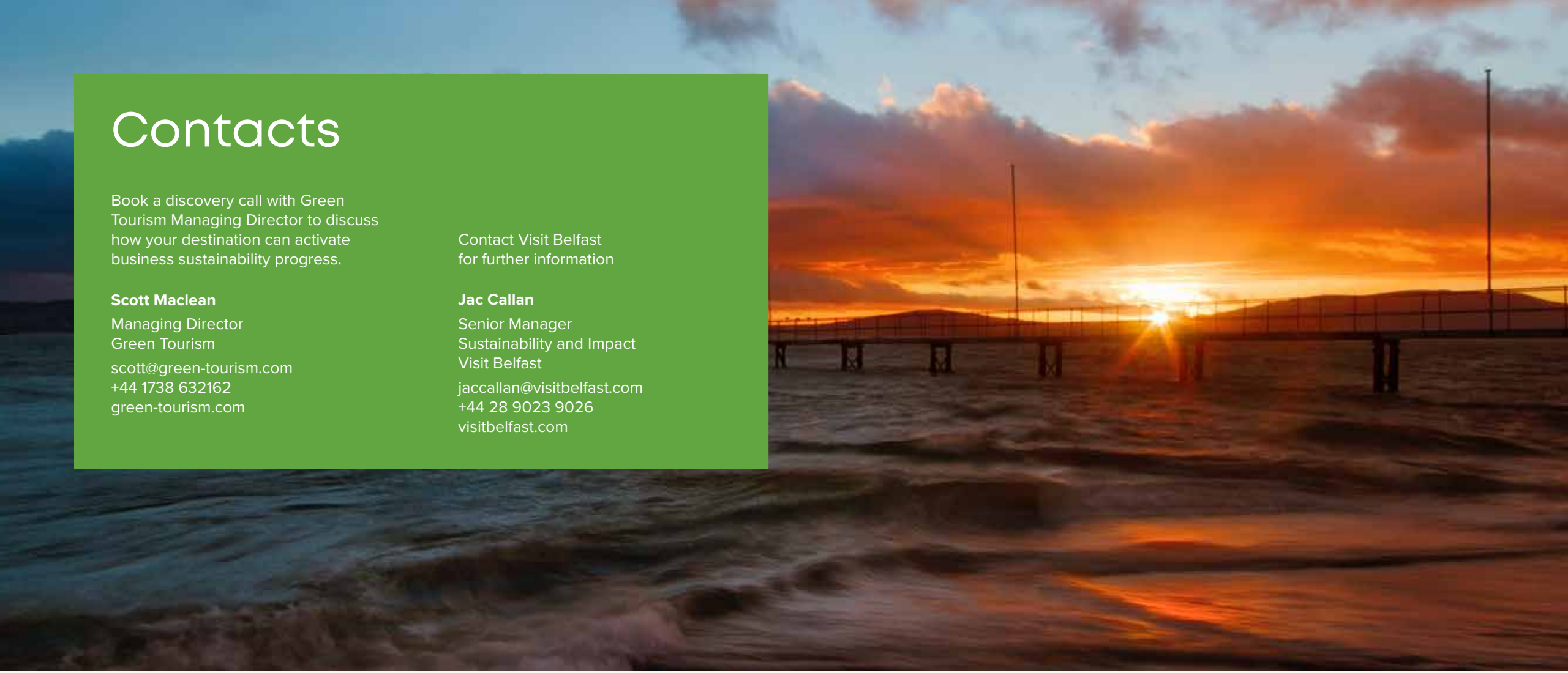
- *Awareness: through measurement and disclosure of the emissions related to tourism activities and the setting of evidence-based targets.*
- *Optimization: through instruments and strategies to scale-up mitigation and adaptation in the tourism sector with all stakeholders having to play a role*[18]

There are many interventions evidenced by destinations - from managing the timing of festivals and events, encouraging better recycling, educating visitors, championing authentic and indigenous experiences, banning cruise ships or the car, promoting eco-friendly experiences or volunteering, promoting local food, reducing food miles and wastage, banning single use plastics, being more energy efficient and using renewable energy sources, etc.

Critically, having a plan, defining the direction of travel and ensuring community, stakeholders’ and industry members’ commitment are important first steps. From the experience of Belfast, the Global Destination Sustainability Movement and Green Tourism, we learn that individual tourism and hospitality operators will act and have demonstrable beneficial impacts both on their businesses and on the destination. Strategic imperatives are thus translated into tactical and real change. The next step is to communicate these to the market and to visitors.



17 Source: GDS: Certifications for Sustainability a Guide for Regenerative Destinations
18 Climate Action | Transforming tourism for climate action | UNWTO



Contacts

Book a discovery call with Green Tourism Managing Director to discuss how your destination can activate business sustainability progress.

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