Opening address by Chairperson of Tourism Recovery Oversight Group to Members

Good Afternoon and thank you all sincerely for agreeing to join the Tourism Recovery Oversight Group and to lend your individual skills and talents to the job at hand. Your expertise is warmly welcomed and I look forward to working with you all in the coming months and years, in our role overseeing the implementation of the recommendations set out in the Tourism Recovery Plan.

I want to pay tribute to the fantastic work done by the Tourism Recovery Taskforce, chaired by Ruth Andrews, who we are lucky to have in this group as well. We begin our task with well researched and considered recommendations. I know both Niall Gibbons and Paul Kelly were part of that group too and we will be relying on their expertise again.

I don't need to tell you all that this has been the most challenging year ever in Irish tourism history, and we are still in the eye of the unpredictable Covid-19 pandemic. We are emerging from our second wave of lockdowns bruised and battered. The impact on the tourism sector has been devastating with an 84% drop in overseas visitors in 2020 compared to 2019. And of 260,000 jobs in the sector, 180,000 have been lost this year or are considered to be vulnerable.

The uncertainty of 2020 is not over, and 2021 will surely bring more challenges. Although we face the future tentatively and with caution, we also have reasons for great optimism and we need to continue the work preparing this sector to be ready to meet the new demands when travel returns.

It is vital for Ireland's tourism sector that a strong Recovery Oversight Group vigorously takes on the challenge of monitoring, measuring and helping to manage tourism's response in survival, stabilization and recovery modes. By ensuring that the recommendations made are delivered to

and that we identify the right responses to rebuild and reimagine tourism, I believe Irish tourism can come through this crisis with a better and more sustainable offering when consumer demand returns. And it will return when it is safe to travel.

Tús maith leath na hoibre, a good start is half the work, and we are fortunate that Ministers Ross and Griffin reacted swiftly to events back in February as they unfolded. The TRT worked diligently and at a very rapid rate to produce the Tourism Recovery Plan 2020-23 by September. I want to thank Minister Martin for her trust in me to chair this group as we take on the challenge began by the TRT.

Good progress has been made on the TRT's immediate priority recommendations for survival and I welcome the extension of the Employee Wage Support Scheme (EWSS) as well as the delivery of business continuity grants, an extension of the tax warehousing scheme, funding for training and digitalisation support as well as additional funding for aviation and airports. The VAT rate reduction to 9% until December 2021 is also to be welcomed.

I look forward to reporting to the minister on our progress as an independent group and I thank her for her commitment to measures she introduced in the July stimulus, Budget 2021 and National Economic Plan as well as her stated intention to push hard for more support for the tourism sector.

The effects of Covid-19 on the industry are deeply impactful and will be long lasting. Our challenge now is to ensure the recommendations, devised after significant consultation and consideration, are implemented. But also to review as we go due to the evolving situation and to ensure that we arrive at the best and most useful revised or consequential recommendations to the Minister. Education, sustainable jobs and digitalisation are also key priorities for us as we look to the future.

We will be relying on up-to-the-minute data to monitor the recovery of the tourism sector and while we look forward to that recovery with optimism, I am also acutely aware that setbacks and limited visibility mean that difficult times continue and will continue into 2021 and beyond.

Our work will be influenced by the Covid-19 vaccination strategy and implementation plan which will be presented to government in December. A comprehensive roll out of an immunisation programme for the country in 2021, as well as appropriate test and trace measures, is critical to tourism recovery. It will be our job to identify how the reopening and regeneration of tourism in Ireland, especially the 75% of business that comes from international visitors, can operate hand in hand with the new safety assurances.

Recovery Oversight Group

We all share a common goal of seeing Ireland rebuild and grow stronger and more sustainably into the future. Tourism is a critical component of our country's economic success. Saving businesses and preserving jobs in this sector is possible and we can already see the benefit of supports introduced thus far.

We will get to our task as a matter of urgency and bring to it our dedication and expertise. Again I thank you all for your commitment and I look forward to working with you.

We have a short meeting today, but we will reconvene again in early January to begin our work. I'm conscious that the situation is constantly evolving and is likely to do so again after the Christmas break.