

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

SPECIAL ECONOMY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Special Joint Meeting of the **Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 1A , County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 3 November 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Moist (Chair)

Members of the Joint Committee:

Councillors G Binney, B Coult, R Crute, J Elmer, P Heaviside, G Hutchinson, C Lines, R Manchester, I Roberts, K Robson, K Shaw, A Simpson and D Sutton-Lloyd

Co-opted Members:

Mrs R Morris and Mr P Walton

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E Adam, L Brown, M Currah, D Nicholls, D Oliver, A Reed, M Stead and S Townsend.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from co-opted Members or interested parties.

5 Overview of County Durham's Visitor Economy

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration Economy and Growth and presentation which set out the purpose and process of the draft Destination Management Plan 2023-2030 (DMP) and sought feedback and endorsement from Economy and Enterprise, and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees (for copy of report, draft DMP and presentation slides, see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy provided a detailed presentation that focused on:-

- Refresh and timing of the Destination Management Plan 2016-2020;
- Development of the draft plan and consultation undertaken;
- Five priority pillars used to build the plan;
- Visitor focused outcomes;
- Commitment to Sustainability;
- Logic model used in the development of the plan;
- Inclusive Economic Strategy Delivery Plan and the Destination Management Plan aims and objectives;
- Global Destination Sustainability Index 2023;
- Future monitoring and evaluation plan.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy provided details of the DMP and explained that the plan was the equivalent to a strategy and action plan for sustainable tourism development in a destination and was a shared statement of intent to manage the visitor economy in the county for 2023-2030. The plan articulated the roles of the different stakeholders and identified clear actions to take with the apportionment resources. County Durham has had a DMP since 2006 which was compiled by Visit County Durham (VCD) in collaboration with the county's tourism industry and a broad range of stakeholders and partners at national and local level. The plan was a blueprint for the growth and development of the visitor economy in the county.

The policy context and strategic framework for the DMP was set at the national level by Government, VisitEngland, VisitBritain and regionally via the pilot Destination Development Partnership and North East Devolution Deal. At a local level, the plan was aligned with the County Durham Inclusive Economic Strategy and County Durham Plan and was monitored by the Visit County Durham Board and reviewed annually and refreshed as needed in collaboration with key stakeholders and partners.

The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy highlighted that it was appropriate for the plan to be refreshed as the political, funding and stakeholder environment had changed, some of the ambitions in the 2016 plan had been

realised, stakeholders had changed and more were now supporting the visitor economy and the national framework had been refreshed.

Members were informed that the plan had been developed using the VERB model (Visitor, Environment, Resident and Business) and that the process to refresh the plan had engaged a wide range of partners and stakeholders including one to one sessions and working group events. To ensure that residents voices were included within the refresh process surveys were used including the Big Econ-versation. In addition, the draft DMP reflected the 8 priorities from the 2016-2020 DMP including: lengthen the amount of time that visitors spend in the county; improve the quality of the visitor experience post arrival; differentiate Durham for external audiences; attract new staying visitors; retain existing visitors; address seasonality, develop new product and support existing products strengths and improve SME and micro business performance. It was also confirmed that an extensive document review was undertaken to ensure that the draft plan aligned with the aims and objectives of various key documents and strategies such as the Inclusive Economic Strategy.

The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy confirmed that the draft plan had been built on five key pillars or direct outcomes so that County Durham: provides an end-to end experience which is high quality, welcoming and inclusive; is better promoted with a compelling narrative for external audiences; offers extended season products and experiences; offers eye-catching authentic product that meets the needs of consumers and businesses are supported to develop performance, resilience and profit.

In relation to the approach undertaken in developing the draft plan, Members were informed that this included a logic model to articulate the logic that underpins the intervention: how the proposed inputs and activities and outputs will lead to the intended stakeholder benefits with target outcomes derived from the consultation exercises and the previous 8 priorities from the 2016-2020 plan.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy highlighted that in developing the draft plan it was recognised that a visitor may be a local or regional resident, travelling from another part of the UK or an international traveller therefore the outcomes are visitor focused with the intermediate outcomes focusing on: Visitor retention, visitor attraction and visitor acquisition.

In relation to sustainability, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that a commitment to sustainability now comes as standard for all places that wish to attract tourism. It was confirmed that sustainability influences everything we do currently, working with partners to ensure that assets are managed correctly, supporting and promoting responsible transport and travel choices, promoting authentic products and services, supporting local talent; supporting entrepreneurship and involving communities in decision making and delivery.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that work had been undertaken with DCC's Sustainability and Climate Change officer and the Low Carbon Economy Team on an appraisal of the 2016-2020 DMP and the recommendations from the appraisal report have been used to develop the draft plan. In addition, as part of the government's Destination Development Partnership Pilot the Global Destination Sustainability Movement (GDS Movement) were commissioned to support the region with a strategy for sustainable development. As part of this work the regions larger destinations are participating in the global Destination Sustainability Index with Durham, Newcastle/Gateshead signing up for three years for 2023 with Sunderland joining next year. The GDS movement works with 100 plus municipalities, national and regional destination management organisations and convention bureaux to create tourism and event strategies, benchmark and improve sustainability performance. It was confirmed that Durham had participated in the benchmarking index for the first time this year with an overall score of 42% across the four categories and a full report had been received that identifies where we are performing well and where we need to improve with work already being undertaken with partners and businesses to improve the score for 2024.

Concerning monitoring and evaluation, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that VCD has an established system to monitor tourism performance indicators and that the plan once approved would be monitored by VCD Board in collaboration with key partners and stakeholders. An annual evaluation of the plan will be undertaken to review the progress against the objectives with adjustments undertaken based on feedback and data. In addition, as part of VCD's national recognition and accreditation as a local visitor Economy partnership progress will be monitored through Visit England's Growth Plan process. It was confirmed that work is being undertaken to develop a measure for environmental sustainability.

Mrs Morris referred to the structure and development of the draft plan and questioned whether there was a need for eight groups to be involved and whether they were effective. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that the groups were necessary and an important part of the role as a destination management organisation was to ensure that VCD was a convenor of different elements that made up the visitor economy. She added that designated members of the team focused on collaboration with regional groups and engagement with business partnerships.

Responding to a further query from Mrs Morris regarding devolution, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that the number of groups would decrease and would be absorbed into the Combined Authority.

It was noted that Councillor L Brown was unable to attend the meeting, however Councillor L Brown had requested that Councillor B Coult raise suggestions on her behalf. Councillor L Brown suggested there was a need for a Tourism Information

Centre in Durham City, and to capitalise on the success of films and TV shows that showcase the county. She also suggested the Cathedral bus service be extended to include other major tourism and visitor attractions within Durham City including The Story, DLI, the Oriental Museum, Crook Hall and gardens and Ushaw College.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy responded that County Durham Tourism Information Centres underwent a comprehensive review in 2011 and it found that less than 3% of visitors to the county had meaningful interaction with the centres and they were costly to run. It was decided to modernise visitor information provision and established an award winning information network with digital and face to face provisions located at eighteen points around the county in key locations which would be supported by VCD.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that the team were exploring options for a tourist bus around the city and other attractions linking the city with rural areas of the county. In relation to capitalising on films and TV programmes showcasing the county, it was confirmed that VCD promoted the county link to Harry Potter films on the VCD and Visit England and Visit Britain websites and the team worked with Durham Cathedral to promote their Harry Potter experience. In addition, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that Durham County Council had signed an agreement to develop film tourism within the county.

Councillor B Coult was pleased to see that VCD had signed up to the Global Destination Sustainability Movement. She requested that the draft Sustainability Plan be brought back to Committee for consideration and comment together with the second draft of the DMP. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that they were in the process of writing the draft Sustainability Plan and she would be updating the draft DMP to reflect the consultation feedback, with the revised draft being presented to the Visit County Durham Board in January 2024 for approval.

Councillor K Robson asked if VCD worked with national travel companies to promote holidays in the county and whether they had developed offers for visitors based on themes such as castles and railways in the county. He added that the Locomotion was part of County Durham's history and felt there would be worldwide interest in the story. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that VCD worked with group travel on a national and international level and encouraged the Group Travel Forum to include Durham in itineraries and provided a list of visitor attractions and hotels that could accommodate groups. She confirmed that themed itineraries were provided, however she would review and include the castle theme. In relation to railways, it was noted that promotion of the bicentennial celebrations in 2025 was ongoing and would increase next year. It was confirmed that Locomotion 1 was open at the National Railway Museum and it would spend time in Darlington and Shildon. As part of the levelling up bid, it was

mentioned that a major walking and cycling development from Shildon to Stockton would progress over the next couple of years.

Councillor K Robson added that he had contacted the local MP regarding the Locomotion Pub which was for sale and highlighted that the story of the pub's connection to Locomotion 1 was important. The Head of Culture Sport and Tourism commented that the cost of bringing the pub back into use and the ongoing revenue cost was substantial and was not found to be viable proposition. She confirmed that the story of Locomotion 1 and the link to the pub would be told as part of the interpretation along the route for the bicentennial celebrations.

Councillor J Elmer commented that the action plans were a key part of the DMP, however they were currently hidden in small print at the back of the document. He suggested that the action plans be made more prominent within the draft plan and that more detail be provided. He highlighted the disconnect of the public transport network across the county and felt that engagement with transport providers should be included to ensure a joined up public transport network. In addition, he suggested there was a need to consider the proper signposting of public transport and other options for sustainable travel within the county. He highlighted that the Global Destination Sustainability Index was a key action and guided decision making, therefore felt it was imperative that the necessary skills to develop the Sustainability Plan were within the Visit County Durham Team or that the skills be accessed by working with Durham County Council's Ecologists to minimise the impact of increased tourism in the county. He referred to carbon emissions and noted that transport was the hardest sector to reduce emissions. With increased tourism there was a risk of attracting more vehicles to the area and he suggested that they contact colleagues in the Carbon Reduction Team who produced the Climate Emergency Response Plan for their expertise regarding options to reduce car usage and engaging public transport providers. He concluded by commenting on the need to consider countryside resources and the nature offer and suggested that countryside walks, Northern Saints Trails and the Heritage 100 walks be promoted as a story providing detail of the history of the area.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy agreed that the layout of the plan would need to change and advised that the action plans in the next draft would be more prominent and that the draft plan would be updated following the consultation feedback. It was confirmed that in relation to the development of the DMP, the team were reliant on colleagues from Durham County Council including the Carbon Reduction Team and would be collaborating more going forward with regards to the Global Destination Sustainability Index and development of the Sustainability Plan to address challenges. In relation to carbon emissions and car dependency, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that the challenge faced the whole sector, worldwide down to local level and required a collective approach to manage the impact and look at new solutions to influence alternative modes of transport, with the team working with both national and regional groups and forums to focus on the issue. She concluded by confirming that

walking and cycling was a core offer and long distance walking routes were being developed within the county with the Northern Saints Trail aimed at encouraging visitors to the county to stay longer and contribute to the local economy.

Councillor D Sutton-Lloyd highlighted that in order to encourage people to stay longer, there was a need to establish links to towns and rural communities in the county. In relation to the bicentenary celebrations route, it was noted that the route would go through a number of villages in the county and he suggested that they link in the history of the villages and involve local organisations. He then queried if Central Government had provided extra funding to promote tourism. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that there was no extra funding for promotion, however she confirmed that the North East Region was piloting a strategic Destination Development Partnership as part of new structures which comes with recognition and provided a platform to network with various groups and organisations. She added that government had allocated £750,000 per year for a three-year period for the pilot with the aim of demonstrating that you can make a change to the sector with any initiatives having to align to government's agenda including sustainability, accessibility, inclusion and rural conferencing.

Councillor B Moist was pleased to see the good work that had been undertaken, however commented that the DMP was a strategic plan and therefore he wanted to see more actions included rather than a vision of priorities to be achieved. He continued that the preamble needs to be moved to later in the draft plan with an emphasis on the future of the county rather than the county's history. In addition, the plan concentrated on priorities and should focus on actions and what was being done to develop and improve the tourism offer and achieve the priorities in both the short term and long term. He was pleased to see customer focused outcomes however there needed to be more detail included on the various attractions in the county and activity to pursue more sporting events. He highlighted that more actions needed to be included in the draft plan and more detail in relation to monitoring, together with clarity as to who would be responsible for delivering those actions and for the plan to be reordered so that priorities and actions sit next to each other for easier reference. He concluded by asking that the points raised in the Chairs and Vice-Chairs briefing meeting be included in the response to the Service Grouping.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy agreed that the plan needed more work and confirmed that priorities together with the related actions were identified in the plan. In relation to priority delivery, she explained that some priority areas were in the remit of VCD however other areas were in the remit of partners. She advised that they were currently refreshing the business plan and would provide details on who would be responsible for each priority and agreed that there was a need to reorder the plan so that priorities and actions sit next to each other for easier reference and confirmed that collated evidence data relating to the visitor economy and partner evidence and intelligence would also be reflected in the plan. She advised that attracting events to the county was not a role for VCD, however they supported events in ensuring that the county was represented at those events.

She added that in relation to monitoring and evaluation, specific groups would be established through the Visit County Durham Board to take a lead on progressing key priorities within the plan.

Councillor C Lines commented on the need to differentiate County Durham to the external audiences which was important and challenging to align regionally as well as keeping County Durham distinct. He noted there was a new 'Place' brand being developed and highlighted the need to ensure that the new 'Place' brand wins the 'hearts and minds' of County Durham residents and businesses, this was crucial to its success and suggested extensive market testing to provide local views and feedback before the launch. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism was leading on developing the 'Place' brand and confirmed that the external perception research process had just been completed which gathered thoughts about the county from various groups including businesses, potential and existing visitors, students and investors and confirmed that VCD was awaiting the final report which would be presented to stakeholders. In addition, she advised that a design agency would be commissioned to produce a range of branding narratives which would be tested with Durham County Council service areas, residents and stakeholders.

Resolved:

- (i) That the comments made by Members during the meeting be captured and formulated into an Overview and Scrutiny response, which would be shared with the Service Grouping to further develop the draft Destination Management Plan;
- (ii) That arrangements be made for a Joint meeting to be held for members to consider the second draft of the Destination Management Plan and the Sustainability Plan once they have been developed.

6 Any Other Business

The Chair reminded Members that the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee was hosting an informal information session on the 27 November 2023 at 1.30pm focusing on Fuel Poverty, the session would be held via Teams and Members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be invited.