

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 the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 12 April 2024 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Moist (Chair)

Members of the Joint Committee:

Councillors A Batey, R Crute, P Heaviside, G Hutchinson, C Lines, K Shaw, E Adam, J Elmer, D Nicholls, J Purvis, A Reed, D Sutton-Lloyd and P Jopling (substitute for M Currah)

Co-opted Members:

Mrs R Morris

Also Present:

Councillor M Wilkes

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Abley, P Atkinson, G Binney, L Brown, B Coult, M Currah, C Kay, J Miller, P Sexton, A Simpson, A Sterling and Mr E Simons.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor P Jopling was substitute for Councillor M Currah.

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 County Durham's Visitor Economy

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration Economy and Growth and presentation which provided an overview of tourism services and the visitor economy in County Durham and future opportunities (for copy of report and presentation slides, see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy provided a detailed presentation which focused on the visitor economy overview, destination performance, regional comparisons and new product for 2024.

It was highlighted that Visit County Durham had been accredited as a Local Visitor Economy Partnership for County Durham and were recognised by Visit England and Government as one of the thirty nationally supported strategic bodies that provided strong local leadership in the visitor and tourism economy which was important and provided an opportunity to influence what Visit England do and the support they received.

The destination management plan (DMP) converts local, regional, and national market research and strategies into a county-based plan to grow the county's visitor economy. The plan was aligned to and embedded within the aims of County Durham's Inclusive Economic Strategy.

In 2022, 17.91 million visitors contributed £1.04 billion to the local economy, of which 91% were day visitors contributing 52% of spend (£544.75m) and 9% stayed overnight which had increased by 1% contributing 48% of all spend (£493.96m) which supported 11,724 jobs in the area. The Strategic Manager highlighted there were less visitors than in 2019 pre covid, but current visitors were spending more.

A breakdown of visitor spend and performance was provided which detailed 37% of visitor spend related to food and drink and 25% related to indirect spends. It was highlighted that the attraction breakdown list only showed the attractions that provided performance figures. Performance information indicated that the Dales had the highest number of overnight stays with the area having more camping and lodge locations.

Information was given on visitors to attractions within the county, but the Strategic Manager highlighted that this was not comparative data but only to understand where people were going. There were a high proportion of visitors from the North East, and those visitor who stayed overnight were from outside of the region but unfortunately definitive figures were not available.

Members were advised that the North East had a low proportion of international visitors and there were policies to drive visits into the region but this would take time.

County Durham did provide a quality accommodation offer with a number of 3* and 4* hotels, there were no 1* or 2* accommodation in County Durham. However, there was still not enough accommodation and there was a need to develop more. There was progress in the planning process, but this was developing slowly. The Visit County Durham (VCD) team responded to all planning applications.

The North East of England compares poorly to other regions in the Country but there was a massive opportunity with the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA) to shift the position and to benefit the county more.

Members learned of the support given to young people to develop Durham Mustard which was now being sold in outlets such as farm shops throughout the county. The Team was committed to supporting local produce.

New products for 2024 were presented which included The Rising at Raby Castle, the new hall at Locomotion, the Faith Museum, Beamish developments, The Story and Northern Saints Trails. It was noted that new products take time to embed and workshops were arranged with stakeholders to amplify products.

A partnership approach was adopted for all work undertaken. Members learned there were 926 tourism businesses in the county with a further 500 businesses that contribute to tourism. The Strategic Manager highlighted that there were three people who supported partners giving them skills to market and develop their business; they also provided the most up to date legislation, and worked with travel partners such as Newcastle Airport; Port of Tyne.

Funding was received from government to develop and research but this funding was not for marketing. The Visit Britain/Visit England International Marketing team amplify messages in key markets. Information was given as to how Durham used national and local media sources such as the Manchester Evening News and the Times to highlight attractions in the county such as Raby Estate; Auckland Castle or Beamish. Publications such as Staycation with a readership of 250,000 highlighted festivals and events and encouraged people to visit the county.

The Strategic Manager advised that the team were in the final year of delivery of the Destination Development Partnership the funding received was used for co-ordinating improvements and proposed activity was discussed with regional partners such as the Campervan Strategy.

The devolution work was progressing and the Head of Culture Sport and Leisure at DCC was the lead officer. However, portfolio holder themes had not been identified as yet as there was work still to be done but the Strategic Manager expressed delight that County Durham was leading this portfolio.

Councillor R Crute referred to the area performance figures and noted the considerable contrast between day visitors and staying visitors. He believed that the lack of accommodation was a contributing factor and asked if they worked with self-catering units and holiday companies to promote their offer. He highlighted the conflict with regards to promoting coastal and other areas of the county as a tourist destination and the pressures relating to the local nature recovery strategy which needed to be resolved to achieve the right balance in promoting tourism and preserving nature. He suggested that Overview and Scrutiny look at the issue further and add to the work programme later in the year.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy agreed that there was limited coastal development and there was a number of empty buildings that could be brought back into use. She confirmed that the team looked at accommodation developments that would be suitable and not impact the coastal areas and continued to approach holiday companies and business annually. With regards to the local nature recovery strategy, she added that a meeting had been arranged with the strategy lead to discuss the impact on the visitor economy and they were currently involved with the development of a regenerative tourism framework for the North East and the local nature recovery strategy would be considered as part of that framework. The team had involvement with internal and external bodies such as North Pennines, Heritage Coast, National Landscape and the Seascape Project to ensure that proposals take into account environmental conditions.

Councillor J Elmer added that nature in County Durham provided opportunities for tourism, however the impact needed to be managed. The income from tourism was focused on overnight stays therefore more accommodation was needed especially on the east coast. He highlighted the constraints in relation to new accommodation and the planning process and applicants seeking to create accommodation, early engagement with the planning team and Visit County Durham who were consultees in the planning process was essential. With regards to the local nature recovery strategy, he noted that this was still work in progress and it would provide a long term guide and create opportunities to improve and expand nature areas, therefore it was vital that it was connected with the planning process and coordination with developers would provide opportunities to create accommodation to attract visitors who enjoy nature.

Councillor P Jopling agreed with Councillor J Elmer's comments regarding the difficulties in relation to planning matters. She referred to the new Combined Authority and queried whether funds would be available to work together as a region and produce televised advertisement campaigns as they had proven to be very successful and would showcase County Durham. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that portfolio details were being worked through and was confident that there would be opportunities for close collaboration around marketing and promoting the visitor economy in the region. She added that funds were available to develop the Place Brand for County Durham programme that was

currently being developed to attract inward investment and visitors into the county, ensuring alignment and promoting County Durham in the regional context.

Councillor D Sutton-Lloyd commented that he would like to see future presentations focus more on what was being done currently and less about the history. In response to queries with regards to the work being carried out to obtain the feedback data and local engagement, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that a visitor survey was conducted every three years specific to County Durham, however this was very expensive and time consuming therefore the team were researching other cost-effective ways in obtaining visitor feedback on an annual basis. In terms of local engagement, various network events with local businesses were held to support collaborations and delivery of future ambitions.

Councillor D Nicholls commented on funding, data sharing and campervan infrastructure. He was stunned that Central Government did not provide funding for place branding and queried whether they gave a reason why funding was not allocated. With regards to data collecting, he noted that some organisations did not share data and queried whether they provided any reasons and what could be done to encourage data sharing. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy explained that the main reason why funding was not provided was that the programme was more about supporting and developing the industry and product as apposed to marketing. The majority of marketing investment was provided to Visit Britain which assisted in supporting the place brand programme. Protocols and criteria were very difficult to work through and they were currently in discussions with Visit Britain to ascertain what was acceptable in terms of image. With regards to collecting data, it was explained that some businesses were unable to share data due to sensitivity/confidentiality issues, data software and capacity issues. With regards to the campervan industry, she advised that this was a growing market and provided opportunities that would benefit the County and make use of facilities such as Park and Ride areas to offer overnight stays. The team had also approached pubs and hotels in the County to see if they would be willing to work with the motorhome club and offer overnight parking. It was noted that regulations in England were different to Scotland and other countries, however the strategy would encourage motor homes and improve the offer.

Councillor C Lines agreed that campervan tourism was something that needed to be looked at, however he was mindful that becoming too successful could put other tourists off so it would need to be carefully managed. He referred to Passionate People, Passionate Places and advised that he was involved in the launch to promote the North East which featured Stanhope and Durham City centre in the national TV advertisement. He was excited about the possible opportunity with the Combined Authority to campaign and showcase County Durham. He highlighted the sustainable value of internal tourism within the county and the North East with existing products and events and new initiatives and provided examples of park runs, heritage 100 walks which attracted hundreds of people and extra income for the parks and business in the County. He suggested there was an opportunity for

Visit County Durham to help secure one-off national events which attracted thousands of people and would showcase the region and boost tourism from further afield which could then lead to return visits to other areas of the County. Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that they supported internal campaigns aimed at local residents and provided content for County Durham News. Festivals and events were hosted on the Visit County Durham website which provided a platform. It was noted that Visit County Durham had supported sports initiatives, however they were reliant on people informing them of the events which they would be happy to support.

Responding to questions from Mrs R Morris in relation to targeted tourist groups, international transport and strategy plans with regards to Devolution, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that the largest tourist groups visiting County Durham were couples over 45, who were also the largest spending group and the target market was to attract families. A lot of work had been done successfully as they were starting to see a balance in visitor profiles. With regards to international tourism, she was mindful that air travel had a major impact with regards to the environmental conversation and they supported the airport to be more sustainable and meet their net zero targets. The nearest gateway to USA was Manchester, which was challenging, however they worked with airlines and central government to try and secure more routes to the region. With regards to Devolution, Visit County Durham had always collaborated with Northumberland, North Tyneside, NewcastleGateshead Initiative, Sunderland and South Tyneside. It was noted that Durham had more visitor numbers than Northumberland, however visitors tended to stay longer in Northumberland.

Councillor J Elmer commented on accessibility across the transport networks in the county and noted there would be an opportunity for better transport planning integration with the new Combined Authority. He referred to the rights of way network and highlighted the poor quality of some footpaths that were not accessible which were really important to tourists visiting the countryside. He commented that styles should be replaced with kissing gates so that footpaths were accessible to people of all abilities to enjoy the countryside which would take little but vital investment. He noted that the Council had received a contribution of £73 million from the abandoned HS2 programme to be used on public transport and needed careful consideration on how the funding would be best used to be more attractive to tourists. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy provided an example of fully accessible footpaths at Derwent Reservoir. She then referred to the North Pennines Outdoor Mobility that offers five Trumper sites which hire mobility scooters to explore the North Pennines National Landscape, this allows people with accessibility issues to visit places which were not accessible in places and agreed that more investment in that area was required.

The Chair referred to the percentage of overnight stays and commented if that could be increased from 9% to 20% it would boost the tourist economy and County Durham's economy as a whole. He acknowledged that Visit County Durham only

has a small team, however asked if there could be a real drive with regards to the outstanding accommodation in County that were also attractions in themselves. He asked that the breakdown on visitor data be clearer as he was concerned that the information could be lifted and used by others. He noted that some of the data was not robust and agreed that in relation to the rights of way network footpaths needed to be upkept. He picked up on Councillor D Nicholls point with regards to the campervan infrastructure and advised that locations across the county should be considered and suggested the Riverside at Chester-le-Street already had the infrastructure in place close to the A1 motorway, cricket ground, restaurants, leisure facilities and the Northern Saints Trail and queried whether this was something that could be achieved internally.

Councillor A Batey was proud that the highest visitor attraction, Beamish Museum was in the area she represented, however was disappointed that the Riverside Park at Chester-le-Street did not feature on the list of attractions as a destination park in the north of the County and presumed that this was down to being unable to capture the data as Durham County Council no longer manage the car parks. She noted that park run visitor numbers were not being collated and highlighted that Riverside Park hosted an activity week in August 2023, that was joint funded with last years recorded figures totalling 33,000 visitors to that event alone. She was concerned that when searching the top 20 visitor destination in County Durham, Chester-le-Street did not feature at all and queried whether funding was directed differently to other attractions and reiterated her disappointed that data was not being captured in and around Chester-le-Street Riverside Park. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that they would revisit the data that was collected, however they would be unable to capture data of visitor numbers using parks. She suggested that they could look at events such as cricket test matches depending on whether the cricket club were capturing and willing to share data. She agreed that the attractions data should have been presented in a different format, however assured Members that Chester-le-Street was a priority destination and had a dedication page on the Visit County Durham website which listed hotel accommodation, attractions and places to eat.

Councillor K Shaw was concerned that attractions such as the DLI Collection which attracted over 30,000 visitors a year had been omitted as an attraction and there was no reference to The Story in the narrative detailing that the DLI Collection and DLI archives were brought together for the first time since 1969. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy explained that the figures were for 2022 and advised that DLI Collection figures were not provided and only figures that were received could be published. It was noted that The Story was a new product opening in June 2024 and visitor numbers would be shared and published.

Councillor G Hutchinson referred to the Heritage 100 walks and highlighted that many residents were not aware of the walks and felt that better promotion was needed. He agreed that accommodation, connectivity in the County and international travel routes were a big issues as tourists would then visit other parts

of the Country and County Durham were losing out. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that extensive promotion for all County Durham products were provided on dedicated channels and support County Durham News with content, however it was difficult to know where people receive their information. In terms of connectivity around the County, a transport report had been commissioned to look at connectivity from airports and public transport services to detail the length of time and level of difficulty to get to different parts of the County. It was noted that some areas of the County would be more challenging to resolve.

Councillor C Lines hoped that the newly elected Mayor of the Combined Authority would be successful in tackling the transport connectivity issues. With regards to the Heritage 100 walks, he clarified that all Councillors were invited to a workshop before the walks were rolled out, however there was a very low attendance and suggested that the Walk and Talk Trust update the presentation and circulate to all Members and share with the Visit County Durham Team. He also advised that park run statistics were available on the park run website for each location and the Riverside Park had listed 152,000 finishes over the 10-year period.

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer referred to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and advised that the Scrutiny Team had spoken to the consultation Lead Officers and were arranging for the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees to be presented with the consultation findings and provide Members with an opportunity to feed into the consultation as part of the work programme for the next municipal year.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

6 Any Other Business

The Chair reminded Members that a workshop for Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee was being held on 17 April at 1.00pm to focus on the Place Brand Survey.