

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

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

At a **Special Joint Meeting** of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 14 April 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult in the Chair

Members of the Committees:

Councillors E Adam, J Charlton, J Elmer, C Kay, R Manchester, C Martin, B Moist, D Nicholls, R Ormerod, J Purvis, J Quinn, A Reed, K Robson (Vice-Chair), D Sutton-Lloyd and S Townsend

Co-opted Members:

Mrs R Morris, Mr E Simons and Mr P Walton

Also in attendance:

Councillor E Scott – Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economy and Partnerships

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors L Brown, L Fenwick, G Hutchinson and Mr T Cramond.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were in attendance.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Items from Co-opted Members and other Interested Parties

There were no items reported.

5 County Durham's Visitor Economy

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

The Chair welcomed Alison Clark, Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism, and Michelle Gorman, Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy to the meeting. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism introduced the presentation and highlighted recent significant strategic opportunities including the development of a new Destination Management Plan and the launch of the Inclusive Economic Strategy for County Durham.

The Committee noted that Visit County Durham (VCD) is part of the Culture, Sport and Tourism Service of Durham County Council and that VCD is the destination management organisation for County Durham. A recent review of destination management organisations resulted in the development of a new accreditation scheme for destination management organisations to become Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEPs). Visit County Durham, Newcastle Gateshead Initiative and Visit Northumberland were accredited by VisitEngland as LVEPs and in November 2022 the north east region (LA7 area) was selected for a new destination development partnership pilot with Newcastle Gateshead Initiative as the accountable body. The aim of the pilot is to develop new initiatives to attract visitors and investment into the visitor economy.

County Durham's Inclusive Economic strategy was adopted by the Council in December 2022. Key priorities of the strategy include the development of a clear brand and place marketing to attract inward investment, to grow the visitor economy and enhance the cultural and creative infrastructure. Work is currently underway to develop delivery plans to underpin the strategy which will be adopted later this year. The Destination Management Plan for 2023-2026 seeks to embed the aims of County Durham's Inclusive Economic Strategy.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism explained how the culture and heritage offer in County Durham is one of its most powerful assets and she illustrated how culture aligns with the visitor economy. The Committee heard that the Council directly delivers events and festivals such as Lumiere and the Bishop Auckland and Seaham food festivals. The Council manages its own theatre provision and it is increasing theatre productions in indoor and outdoor venues, casting local actors, writers and directors where possible.

Museums and heritage buildings are enjoyed by residents and visitors alike and the officer provided details of developments and new ways of working to attract more visitors and improve the quality of the existing visitor experience. The county also benefits from a unique landscape which supports the health and wellbeing of residents and the visitor economy.

Information was presented to the Committee on a Visitor Survey which gathered views of 1,200 visitors to Durham during the summer of 2022. The survey found that an increasing number of people use social media, with 50% of those surveyed finding information for their visit on Instagram. The most frequently listed attractions included Beamish Museum, Durham Cathedral and Castle and High and Low Force. In terms of visitor experience, respondents liked the peaceful nature of the county, the variety of things to do and the friendliness of the people. The availability of public toilets and the shopping experience were areas of dissatisfaction. All respondents said they would recommend the destination and 96% said they would visit again.

The Chair thanked officers for the informative report and presentation and invited comments and questions from Members.

Councillor Reed observed the importance of the transport system with regard to the visitor and tourism economy and asked what was being done to improve travel connectivity across the county and how information on travel options is provided to visitors. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy highlighted that transport links across the county are a challenge however there is a dedicated Information Team which provide advice both pre and post visit and visitor information outlets are located at approximately 300 locations throughout the county. Councillor Reed spoke of the increase in holiday bookings by app, which also allow the user to book excursions and asked whether the Council has plans to introduce this. The officer explained that there were no plans to introduce an app and she explained that travel regulations require those offering packages, as would be the case with an app, to become bonded and by default, they would then become responsible for service providers. The officer confirmed that platforms are used, such as that provided by the National Tourist Board, on which itineraries and excursions are promoted.

Councillor Martin commented on the success of the regular events such as the food festivals and Lumiere and he referred to the popularity of walking and cycling and asked what action is taken to fill gaps in provision, at a local level.

Officers responded that there is regular dialogue with tourism businesses to encourage them to provide services, for example, to encourage cafés and bicycle shop start-up businesses in areas where there are walking and cycling routes. Business Durham is proactive in providing advice and guidance to small businesses, including advice on funding streams.

Councillor Ormerod pointed out that the North Riding of Yorkshire is represented in County Durham and he suggested that more could be done to promote the link. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy responded that County Durham is promoted as the gateway to the Yorkshire Dales, however it is important to maintain the County Durham identity. Officers agreed to look into the suggestion in greater detail and referred to the attendance of Visit County Durham representation at the Yorkshire County show which aimed to further promote County Durham as a visitor destination.

Councillor Adam acknowledged the importance of a high level strategy and requested further detail on LVEPs. Councillor Adam also highlighted that smaller towns and villages are an important aspect of the cultural identity as they often have small heritage sites, parks and walking routes, using the example of Brightwater, which has a number of walking routes in the county and town and parish councils which host local events. He suggested that expanding the local offer may be key to achieving the aim of encouraging visitors to stay in the county for longer. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism confirmed that the Destination Management Plan covers the full range of County Durham's assets and continued that one of the aims of LVEPs is to develop local economic growth and she recognised the role that small towns and villages play in developing the sense of place. She explained that the LVEP accreditation process was robust and focused on developing the visitor economy on all levels. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism confirmed that VCD's website contains a great deal of detail about various towns and villages within the county and that the VCD Team work with AAPs, parish and town councils and other partners to promote local attractions and events.

The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy confirmed that her team would be getting in touch with AAPs to gather feedback on the current pages on VCD's website and in addition, the team would continue to work with Brightwater and promote walking routes within the county.

Referring to resources, Councillor Adam asked whether a figure was available as to how much investment would be required to make a significant impact on the visitor economy in the county.

The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy replied the figure was infinite however she recognised the limitations with regard to public sector funding and gave example of sources of private sector funding including the Arts Council and National Lottery funding.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy and Partnerships, Councillor Scott, spoke of the steps that had been taken to enhance the economic strategy and commented that the newly appointed Head of Economic Development will work with strategic asset partners to maximise resources.

Councillor Charlton expressed concern that the report omitted to mention important local heritage sites such as the Causey Arch, Tanfield Railway and the C2C cycle route. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism responded that they are at the heart of the county's heritage and whilst they were not featured in the report and presentation, they are an essential part of the offer on the website. She referred to the emerging plans for the celebration of the bicentenary of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 2025 and the hope that events and celebrations across communities along the route will attract funding. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy highlighted that Tanfield Railway is a VCD partner and she added that the C2C cycle route and Causey Arch are significant assets. She informed the Committee that a great deal of work had been done in the Derwentside area to encourage small businesses to provide associated services for the walking and cycle routes.

Councillor Charlton observed that the visitor survey sample of 1,200 visitors was small compared to the number of visitors the county typically attracts and she suggested that liaising with hotels to ask their customers to complete a short questionnaire may have resulted in gaining a broader perspective. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy replied that 1,200 was considered a sufficient sample to reflect visitors' views, however, she agreed to consider the suggestion for future surveys.

Councillor Moist expressed the view that the information presented did not reflect the 'asks' in the work programme and he commented that he would like to see detail on how the tourism sector is performing within the county's economy as a whole; how success is measured and an analysis of where improvements are required. He also questioned what action was being taken to keep pace with societal change and offer new activities. Councillor Moist also asked for information on how the county is taking advantage of the amount of people who are 'staycating' following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Officers highlighted information at paragraph 55 showing continued growth since the pandemic and that the draft Destination Management Plan will include projections over a 5 year period. A robust reporting system is in place with information on work with the business community, including jobs created and supported, being reported quarterly, through the Council's performance monitoring framework.

Councillor Moist requested that an update on the emerging Destination Management Plan be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee and he added that he would like to see how Visit County Durham measures its success. In response to a suggestion from Councillor Moist that a working group be set up to explore Members' suggestions for future work, the Chair pointed out that Members were at liberty to contact Visit County Durham to put forward their suggestions.

Councillor Quinn asked whether a recent newspaper report that the comedian Roy Chubby Brown was asked not to return to the Empire Theatre was correct. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism clarified that when the reporter asked whether the theatre planned to book the act, the response to that question was no. Councillor Quinn then asked whether information on ticket sales for the comedian's previous performance was available and the officer responded that she could provide that information following the meeting however previous events had not been sold out. Councillor Quinn stated that he would be concerned if the Council was no longer offering alternative / adult comedy and the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism clarified that the Council has a duty to produce a varied programme. She added comedy is an important part of the programme and noted that the Comedy Store will appear at the Empire Theatre in May.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd welcomed the engagement with strategic partners and the work done at a grass roots level. He spoke of the county's vast array of assets including the landscape, natural habitats and walking and cycling routes and agreed with the suggestion by Councillor Moist that a discussion with Visit County Durham to develop ideas would be useful. The Chair commented that if Members were agreed that they would like to pursue this, the matter could be explored further.

Rosemary Morris requested further information on the emerging Destination Management Plan, in particular in relation to visitor profiles, including which demographics were being targeted and what the offer is for different age categories of visitors. She raised concern at the lack of hotel / overnight stay accommodation in the smaller towns and villages.

Officers explained that the Destination Management Plan aims to encourage more people to visit, to engage in a greater range of activities and to stay in the county for longer. Analysis of data from previous years indicates a gap in the family product and officers confirmed that the target audience includes the family market and plans are being developed with a view to visitors of the future.

In response to a question from Rosemary Morris as to the offer provided for the cruise market, the Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy highlighted work carried out with the Port of Tyne, Newcastle Airport and private sector partners to develop products specifically for the cruise market. In response to a question as to whether coach tours of the county are offered, officers replied that the majority of coach tours take visitors to destinations out of the county, however, an increasing number of tour guides are offering guided walks within the county.

Councillor Elmer observed the lack of a distinctive shopping experience and remarked that the county has a culture of food production through allotments, breweries and farms and many producers would like to sell their products in shops but find the cost of rents prohibitive. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy replied that evidence suggests that Durham is not known for a distinctive shopping experience. A number of Community Interest Companies have collaborated to use premises in the city as a 'shop-window' from which to sell their products. In addition, the county's attractions are encouraged to sell locally produced products.

Councillor Elmer also remarked on the negative impact of encouraging more tourists into the county on fragile ecosystems. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy stressed that the negative impact of tourism is a consideration; the aim is for slow and steady growth and the Destination Management Plan is being developed with the principles of sustainability. In addition, tourism planning applications are assessed for their impact on the environment.

Councillor Robson referred to the county's international student population and asked what is done to encourage students to venture out of the city centre. He suggested that the production of a publication similar to Durham County News to promote tourist and visitor attractions may be useful and he added that he would like to see the county promoted internationally; noting that the smaller towns and villages often have stories to tell. Officers informed the Committee of the engagement work done with Durham University students during open days and freshers' week and the distribution of the Durham Pocket Guide.

The Committee heard that social media influencers are encouraged to visit the county's 'hidden gems'. Officers pointed out that advertising can be costly, however, government funding had been used in previous years to advertise County Durham on the London Underground and in King's Cross Station.

The Committee noted the 2025 Stockton and Darlington Railway bicentenary celebrations will provide an opportunity to promote Durham nationally and internationally. Councillor Robson referred to the links with the Locomotion No 1 historic pub near Newton Aycliffe and the interest that could be generated with railway enthusiasts in the USA. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy spoke of the bicentenary being a topic for discussion during the recent trade missions to America, which is an important target market for the county.

Councillor Nicholls commended the Council's increased social media presence on Instagram. He spoke of the difficulties that tourists may encounter when arriving in the county in relation to public transport, with its disconnected public transport system.

Councillor Nicholls expressed his concern to see well established high street businesses closing and he questioned how new independent traders would be able to afford business premises, particularly in city centres. He asked officers what action could be taken to reduce rents, repurpose the high street and to improve the Park and Ride. The Strategic Manager for Tourism and the Visitor Economy informed the Committee that colleagues in Regeneration, Economy and Growth are working with businesses, consultants and private developers to reduce rents and encourage investment and it is hoped that there will be signs of improvement in Durham City in the near future.

In addition, there are plans for more experience-led high streets, where leisure facilities and shops sit alongside each other. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism added that the LVEP will consider various approaches to deliver economic growth and create opportunities.

Following the discussion, the Chair proposed an amendment to the recommendation contained in the report which was agreed. The Committee therefore

Resolved:

- a) That members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the information provided in the report and during the presentation.

In addition, following a proposal from the Chair, the Committee agreed an additional recommendation:

- b) That a further update report on County Durham's Visitor Economy be included in the proposed 2023/24 work programme of both Committees which will be considered and discussed by Members at the July meeting of the respective Committee.

6 Such other business

Members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee were reminded that a visit to various parks, open spaces and nature reserves within the county will take place on Wednesday 10 May 2023 and they were requested to confirm their attendance by responding to the email from Diane Close, Overview and Scrutiny Officer.