

**Special Joint Meeting of Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee**



**3 November 2023**

**Overview of County Durham's Visitor Economy**

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**Report of Amy Harhoff, Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth**

**Purpose of the Report**

- 1 This report sets out the purpose and process of the draft Destination Management Plan 2023-2030 and seeks feedback and endorsement from Environment and Sustainable Communities, and Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

**Executive summary**

- 2 County Durham has had a Destination Management Plan (DMP) since 2006, it is compiled by Visit County Durham in collaboration with the county's tourism industry and a broad range of stakeholders and partners. The destination management plan is the blueprint for the growth and development of the visitor economy in the county.
- 3 This Destination Management Plan is equivalent to a strategy and action plan for sustainable tourism development in a destination. It is a shared statement of intent to manage the visitor economy in the county over a stated period of time, articulating the roles of the different stakeholders and identifying clear actions that they will take and the apportionment of resources.
- 4 The DMP clearly identifies challenges, gaps and opportunities for a successful, sustainable visitor economy, setting a strategic direction for County Durham with prioritised actions within an annual rolling programme.
- 5 The objective of the plan is to ensure that the tourism sector and broader visitor economy performs to its maximum capacity and brings sustainable benefits to the county and its' residents in the form of opportunity and job creation. It identifies how challenges can be overcome, product gaps and future opportunities for growth, enabling us to set out an evidence based approach for development and investment in the visitor economy product.

- 6 A destination management plan converts local, regional, and national market research and strategies into a county-based plan to grow the county's visitor economy. The plan is for all organisations and individuals in County Durham, and, where relevant, national bodies to help them understand what is being done, what needs to be done and how they can contribute to Durham's success.
- 7 The plan is based on a series of studies that provide intelligence about the county's product, its customers and its competitive position in England, the UK and internationally. It clearly describes what all organisations, businesses, and individuals in and external to the county, with an interest in the success of the visitor economy, need to focus on for future success.
- 8 The DMP will in turn shape and determine the priorities for Visit County Durham's own business plan. The priorities which emerge from developing the DMP will be shared across the destination and focus activity in developing the county as a visitor destination.
- 9 The policy context and strategic framework for the DMP is set at the national level by Government and VisitEngland / VisitBritain. Regionally via the pilot Destination Development Partnership and North East Devolution Deal, a 10-year regional visitor economy strategy will be developed within the next year, and at a county level through the County Durham Inclusive Economic Strategy and County Durham Plan.
- 10 The DMP is the detailed visitor economy plan of the County Durham Inclusive Economic Strategy setting out the aims and objectives for tourism's contribution to an inclusive, green, sustainable economy.
- 11 The DMP will inform priorities for development at a regional level via the pilot Destination Development Partnership (DDP) as set out in the North East Devolution Deal. County Durham's priorities will feed in to a 10-year regional tourism strategy which will be developed in partnership and approved by the DDP Board which has representation from the Chairs of the region's three destination management organisations and LA7 Chief Executive Officers.
- 12 Working with key partners and stakeholders the plan is refreshed annually to reflect new developments and intelligence including visitor surveys, annual economic impact surveys, benchmarking reports and major one-off studies such as perception research or visitor accommodation studies.
- 13 Final sign-off and adoption of the Destination Management Plan 2023-2030 will be by the board of Visit County Durham and the Durham County Council.

- 14 Monitoring progress and the impacts of the plan will be assessed annually by the Visit County Durham board, results will be reported to Durham County Council and to partners and stakeholders.

### **Recommendation(s)**

- 15 Members of the Joint Special Economy and Enterprise and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny committee are asked to consider the report and provide feedback on the draft Destination Management Plan in Appendix 2.

### **Background**

- 16 In March 2020 Visit County Durham embarked on a programme of work designed to refresh and track progress against the Destination Management Plan 2016–2020. The process would test the existing objectives and the approach to each to see if they were still valid and to discover if any new priorities had emerged since the plan was first developed. The aim was to produce the next iteration of the management plan covering the period 2021 to 2025.
- 17 The initial consultation took the form of an industry conference workshop in early March 2020 that was attended by more than 120 delegates representing businesses and organisations from across the county. In summary, attendees were asked to comment on current priorities and identify future priorities.
- 18 However, three weeks later the Prime Minister announced the first UK lockdown ordering people to stay at home, this was followed by further lockdowns and the restricted movement of people, meaning limited or no travel for leisure and for work, which had serious repercussions for the global visitor economy.
- 19 Work to update the DMP was paused, until the UK reached a position of relative stability, entering in to the 'living with Covid' phase. This was followed by a period of recovery, the VCD team focus was on supporting the industry to get back to business. Work to produce a new destination management plan restarted in early 2023.
- 20 As part of Visit County Durham's national recognition and accreditation as a Local Visitor Economy Partnership, annual Growth Plans are produced in collaboration with the national tourist authority Visit England and a Destination management Plan is an essential requirement for all destinations hoping to achieve accreditation.
- 21 This new programme and national structure have been designed to enable and deliver closer collaboration between Visit England and destinations that are well integrated and delivering in partnership with all

key public and private sector partners, and who clearly provide strong local leadership and governance in their destination.

22 A copy of the draft plan has been shared with the Visit England team.

## Destination Management Plan Development

23 The Destination Management Plan is developed using the principles of a sustainable development model known as VERB (**V**isitor, **E**nvironment, **R**esident, **B**usiness) a simple but effective framework around which to consider the long-term sustainability and impacts of the visitor economy and destination planning. The needs of each element of the VERB model are taken in to account during the decision-making process for priority setting, development, and promotion.

The DCC Visit County Durham team and the VCD advisory board lead the development of the plan. The Visit County Durham executive team are part of the Regeneration Economy & Growth directorate. The Visit County Durham board is led by a private sector Chair, who also represents visitor economy interests on the County Durham Economic Partnership board. Durham County Council has a right of two places on the VCD board – these are held by the Portfolio Holder for Economy & Partnerships and the Corporate Director for Regeneration Economy & Growth. Remaining board places are drawn from the private sector.

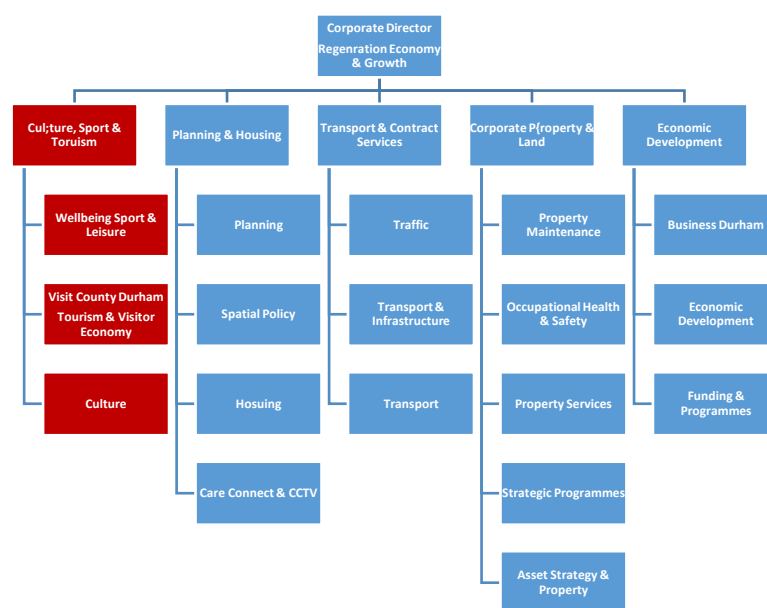


Figure 1 Regeneration Economy & Growth Structure

24 Figure 1. Regeneration Economy & Growth Structure shows Visit County Durham within the Culture, Sport & Tourism service and gives a visual representation of how multidisciplinary teams work together across the directorate.

25 The process to refresh the plan has engaged DCC and a broad range of partners representing businesses, education providers, and third sector

organisations, which has resulted in a plan that is coordinated, connected with an agreed approach, and set of priorities. The process also included an extensive strategic document review and an analysis of current and future trends affecting the visitor economy.

- 26 To support delivery of the DMP priorities a cross directorate Durham County Council Tourism Internal Working Group was established which meets quarterly. Appropriate representation from DCC form the group, which assists in the co-ordination of activity to ensure a primary focus on the delivery of the key actions outlined in the DMP. This group were consulted in the initial stages of development and will be a consultee on the draft plan prior to adoption and publication.
- 27 Other consultees on the draft DMP prior to adoption and publication include the Visit County Durham Board, VCD Strategic Partners, Regeneration, Economy and Growth Management Team, Environment and Sustainable Communities, and Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the Tourism Internal Working Group.
- 28 Using the results from the industry conference held in March 2020 as a baseline for questions, we surveyed visitor economy business partners to identify shifts in priorities. The survey was distributed to our partner database of c1,200 contacts. A series of presentations and discussions with relevant organisations and forums was undertaken. We also engaged with regional partners and Visit England to ensure the plan and priorities aligned.
- 29 The strategy has been informed by DCC resident consultations for the development of the County Durham Plan and Inclusive Economic Strategy gathered during the Big Econ-versation, we have used feedback to inform the DMP development from a resident perspective, ensuring that the voice of our communities will be reflected in the final plan.
- 30 The plan is built on 5 key pillars or direct outcomes so that County Durham:
  - a) provides an end-to-end experience which is high quality welcoming and inclusive.
  - b) is better promoted with a compelling narrative for external audiences.
  - c) offers extended season products and experiences.
  - d) offers eye-catching authentic product that meets the needs of consumers.
  - e) businesses are supported to develop performance, resilience and profit.
- 31 The approach we have taken to develop the DMP includes 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 (outcomes and impacts), with target outcomes derived from the consultation exercises and the 8 priorities from the Destination Management Plan 2016-2020, which were deemed as still relevant by stakeholders and partners:

- a) Lengthen the amount of time visitors stay (DWELL TIME/SPEND)
- b) Improve the quality of the experience post-arrival (EXPERIENCE)
- c) Differentiate the county for external audiences (POSITIONING)
- d) Attract new staying visitors (VISITOR ATTRACTION)
- e) Retain existing day visitors (VISITOR RETENTION)
- f) Address seasonality (SEASONALITY)
- g) Develop new product/support existing product (PRODUCT)
- h) Improve SME and micro business performance (CAPACITY)

32 Recognising that a visitor may be a local or regional resident, travelling from another part of the UK or an international traveller, the intermediate outcomes focus on the visitor.

- a) Visitor retention
- b) Visitor attraction
- c) Visitor acquisition

33 The activities, outputs and outcomes are designed to support the achievement of the overall vision leading to sustainable growth that balances the needs of visitors, businesses, communities, and the environment.

## **Sustainability and Regenerative Tourism**

34 The Destination Management Plan helps us to better understand our county as a visitor destination, setting out where we are now, where we aim to be and how we are making progress. The DMP also sets out the path for action during the lifetime of the plan. It helps us to attract the kind of tourism that we want to have. It also helps to ensure that our actions for development lead to positive progress for our communities and the environment.

35 There is still plenty of room across our county and across the year for growth, but we are only marketing what we can manage successfully. A commitment to sustainability now comes as standard for all places that wish to attract tourism but in a county with a heritage city and heritage story at its core and protected landscapes from countryside to coast this is a genuine differentiator for us.

36 Our commitment to sustainability influences everything we do: working with partners to ensure our assets are managed sensitively, supporting and promoting responsible transport and travel choices, promoting and supporting authentic products and services, buying food, services and

supplies locally, supporting the development of local talent, celebrating local entrepreneurship, improving digital connectivity, providing year-round economic opportunities and involving communities in decision making and delivery.

- 37 In October 2020 we worked with a DCC Sustainability and Climate Change Officer from the Low Carbon Economy Team, who completed a sustainability appraisal of the Destination Management Plan 2016-2020. The appraisal report recommendations, where feasible, have been used in the development of the current draft plan.
- 38 As part of government's Destination Development Partnership Pilot we have commissioned Global Destination Sustainability Movement (GDS-Movement) to support the region with a strategy for sustainable development over the next couple of years. As part of this work the region's larger destinations are participating in the Global Destination Sustainability Index, Durham and Newcastle/Gateshead have signed up for three years from 2023, Sunderland will join next year.
- 39 The GDS-Movement unites and enables destination management professionals to create flourishing and resilient places to visit, meet, and live in. Their mission is to co-create sustainable and circular strategies, mindsets, and skill sets that enable destinations of the future to thrive, and society and nature to regenerate.
- 40 GDS-Movement work with 100+ municipalities, national/regional destination management organisations, and convention bureaux, to co-create tourism and events strategies, benchmark, and improve sustainability performance, and transform their value chains to catalyse regeneration.
- 41 Durham participated in the benchmarking index for the first time this year with an overall score of 42% across four categories: DMO, Supplier, Social, Environmental. We have received a full report that clearly sets out where we are performing well and where there is room for improvement. Work with businesses and partners and is underway to implement recommendation and improve the score for 2024.

## **Monitoring and evaluation**

- 42 VCD has an established system to monitor tourism performance indicators, including visitor numbers, satisfaction levels, economic impacts, and environmental sustainability. But alongside high-level performance and economic data we will monitor and report the outcomes of projects and will work to find solutions for more closely integrating data from national and local sources.
- 43 An annual evaluation of the plan will be undertaken to assess the effectiveness and review progress against objectives. Necessary adjustments will be made based on feedback and data. Progress and

achievements will be shared with stakeholders and partners to maintain transparency and accountability.

- 44 As part of Visit County Durham's national recognition and accreditation as a Local Visitor Economy Partnership, progress will be monitored through Visit England's Growth Plan process.

## **Governance and Publication**

- 45 The Visit County Durham Board will continue to approve and oversee the Destination Management Plan and VCD partners will be encouraged to use the plan. To support partners in the delivery consideration will be given to creating focused sub-groups under each of priorities within the plan. Individual working groups or task groups will also be set-up to develop ideas into projects, which have well-defined resources, timescales, and outcomes.
- 46 E&SC/E&EOSC's will continue to be integrated into the process for the implementation and review of the DMP in the future. Scrutiny Committee's play an important role in representing the voices of local residents and organisations alongside other local consultation and partnership working. Regeneration Economy and Growth (REG) and Economic Development management team and Tourism Internal Working group will also continue to assess and review progress, making recommendations.
- 47 Visit England will continue to be integrated into the process for the implementation and review of the DMP in future, ensuring alignment with Government policy and national strategic objectives.

## **Conclusion**

- 48 Members of the committee are asked to consider the report and provide feedback on the draft Destination Management Plan in Appendix 2.

## **Background papers:**

- [Durham Tourism Management Plan 2016-2020](#)

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### **Contact:**

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

None.

### **Finance**

None.

### **Consultation**

The Destination Management Plan has been developed in partnership with Visit County Durham partners and DCC colleagues using evidence from tourism performance indicators, including visitor numbers, satisfaction levels, economic impacts, and an environmental sustainability appraisal. The Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee's provide a local voice for the development of the Delivery Plan. Feedback from resident surveys and consultation for the County Durham Plan and Inclusive Economic Strategy has been used.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

None.

### **Human Rights**

None.

### **Climate Change**

As part of our commitment and approach to regenerative tourism Visit County Durham is a member of the Global Destinations Sustainability Index to monitor and improve performance of the visitor economy. A sustainability appraisal will be undertaken by the DCC Climate Change team.

### **Crime and Disorder**

None.

### **Staffing**

None.

### **Accommodation**

None.

### **Risk**

None.

## **Procurement**

None.