

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **SPECIAL JOINT 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 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Monday 4 March 2024 at 11.00 am**

**Present:**

**Councillor B Moist (Chair)**

#### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors B Coult (**Vice Chair**) A Batey, D Freeman, P Heaviside, G Hutchinson, C Lines, R Manchester, K Robson, E Adam, P Atkinson, J Elmer, C Kay, D Nicholls, J Purvis, A Reed, A Simpson and D Sutton-Lloyd

#### **Co-opted Members:**

Mrs R Morris

Prior to the commencement of the meeting the Chair referred to the sad passing of Councillor Isabella Roberts and asked Members to stand for a moments silence.

#### **1 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Surtees, G Binney, M Currah, R Ormerod and M Stead.

#### **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 presented the second draft of the Destination Management Plan (DMP) 2023-2030 asking for feedback and endorsement. Reference was made to the Joint Special Meeting of the Economy and Enterprise, and Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committees held on 3 November 2023 where members considered and commented on the first draft of the DMP and requested that they have the opportunity to consider the second draft of the plan prior to the final DMP being considered by Cabinet (for copy of report and presentation slides, see file of minutes).

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

- Development of the draft plan and consultation undertaken;
- 2016-2020 priorities;
- Five priority pillars used to build the plan;
- Visitor focused outcomes;
- Inclusive Economic Strategy Ambition and detail of how the plan links to the Inclusive Economic Strategy;
- Monitoring and Evaluation of the DMP.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy highlighted that the draft DMP had been developed with the county's tourism industry and a broad range of stakeholders and partners at national and local level. She confirmed that the county has had a Destination Management Plan since 2006 with major revisions undertaken in 2012 and 2016. She continued 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. 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.

Members were informed that the plan had been developed using the principles of a sustainable tourism development model VERB (Visitor, Environment, Resident and

Business) and in partnership with key partners and stakeholders. It was noted that there had been some challenges and not all of the 2016-2020 priorities had been achieved, therefore they have been incorporated in the 2023-2030 DMP as they were still relevant to County Durham.

In terms of sustainable tourism development, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that a similar framework would be developed for a regenerative approach to tourism which would take into account the economy and social impacts. She continued that work had started on the development of a Sustainability Plan and that Visit County Durham were taking part in the northeast destination development partnership pilot with a world leader in sustainable development who would help develop a framework that was unique to County Durham and the rest of the region.

She confirmed that the monitoring and evaluation processes are in place which includes an annual evaluation of the plan to assess the effectiveness and review progress against objectives, ongoing monitoring by the VCD Board in collaboration with key stakeholders and partners. Visit England's Growth Plan process and the development of individual working groups or task groups to progress ideas and projects. She confirmed that the comments made by Overview and Scrutiny members at a Special Joint meeting on the 3 November 2023 focusing on the DMP which was followed by a workshop looking at promoting the tourism offer had been incorporated into the second draft of the DMP. She continued that comments were made in relation to the format and content of the plan and suggestions were made regarding developing the tourism offer and future sustainability of the offer which had been reflected in the revised plan for members further consideration. She confirmed that the plan was still in draft format and that members had a further opportunity to comment on the plan, with those comments used to inform the development of the final DMP for final signoff and consideration by Cabinet.

Mrs Morris commented that the second draft plan captured the comments made by Members at the previous Special meeting. She referred to the action plan and asked how improvement would be measured and suggested that it would be beneficial to articulate improvement using figures which would be more meaningful to the public and would assist when monitoring performance. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy agreed to review the actions within the plan and provide more detail using figures where appropriate to articulate improvement.

Councillor Elmer supported the work undertaken by the Service Grouping in developing the DMP, however he highlighted the need to manage the potential impact of increased tourism with systems of monitoring and evaluation in place to measure increased footfall and the resulting impact which was particularly important at countryside locations and historical sites. He referred to the Lake District and the impact of increased footfall with increased litter and a lack of toilets which had resulted in visitors being deterred from visiting the area. He highlighted that the systems need to be in place to ensure that Durham does not suffer from the

negative impacts of increased tourism footfall and suggested that businesses which benefit from the visitor economy pay into a fund to be used county wide to benefit the tourism sector.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that the Service worked with landowners and the Landscape Partnership in relation to World Heritage sites and had specific processes in place. She confirmed that through the Sustainability Plan the Service would be able to influence the systems in place to monitor and evaluate the impact of increased tourism. With regards to funding from businesses, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy added that Manchester had introduced a hotel tax, where hoteliers had voluntarily agreed to add £1 charge to the cost of a room per night to negate the impact of tourists to the area. The introduction of a tourism tax was under review with a number of local authorities interested in the outcome of this trial. She continued that the outcome of the trial would be monitored.

Councillor Nicholls commented that rail travel was a sustainable method of travel for visitors, however he was concerned that the 60% increase in rail fares had made this mode of transport unaffordable for most families. He asked if lobbying was taking place to address the issue of significantly increased rail fares. He also raised concerns with regards to local transport and the need to ensure that the public transport infrastructure was in place across the county for use by visitors to the county. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that she had been lobbying with regards to rail fares and advised that she sits on transport forums where she raises the issue as well as raising the issue at a national level through Visit Britain, Visit England and the Department for Culture and Sport. She agreed that the increase cost of rail fares was a real issue for families and would result in families more likely to visit by car which contradicted the approach to sustainable tourism. In addition, there was the challenge of the 'final mile' to get from a destination to other parts of the county. She added that she had commissioned a transport consultant to review all public transport provision in the county and confirmed that the report was due at the end of March 2024 which would include tangible comprehensive information identifying where there were gaps and challenges in current provision to then build a case to lobby transport providers. She continued that there was also a need to look at creative solutions to transport issues and referred to examples of volunteer bus services for local people and visitors in rural areas and confirmed that the consultant will be looking at this operating model and whether it would be suitable for the county.

Councillor Kay commented that the county has a number of cycling routes to promote to visitors coming to the county, however there was a disconnect in relation to the cycle route that runs along the railway path between Bishop Auckland and Shildon and he felt that this would dissuade users from cycling that particular route. He confirmed that he had raised the issue previously but was unsure who to contact to progress his concerns. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that she would feedback comments to the Public Rights of Way Team. In

addition, she would ask colleagues to raise the issue at the tourism working group meetings which includes representatives from various DCC service areas that focus on product development and she would ask that Councillor Kay was included in future conversations.

Councillor A Batey commented that she had previously mentioned the need to consider the introduction of a ticketing or voucher scheme offering discounts to attractions in the county. She noted that many people visit for the day not knowing what was on offer and suggested that by offering discount vouchers or tickets, this would encourage people to stay in the county longer to visit other attractions in the area. In addition, she suggested that a discounted ticket offer for public transport should be considered for visitors covering transport to various attractions in the county. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that prior to COVID, conversations with providers had started in relation to discounted tickets/vouchers to various attractions in the county. She confirmed that a meeting had been arranged for the following week with strategic partners to discuss joint ticketing and if given the go ahead, the scheme would be introduced at the start of the season.

Councillor Lines noted that Darlington had a frequent rail service, however there was no public transport from Darlington to some of the towns in the south of the county. It was confirmed that the commissioned review looking at public transport across the county would cover public transport provision in the south of the county.

Councillor Robson commented that the bicentenary of the Darlington to Stockton railway provided an opportunity to celebrate the role of the region and County Durham in the birth of railways as an international form of transport. He referred to a recent newspaper article featuring the restoration of the world's first railway station at Heighington and suggested that the restoration be publicised adding to the railway offer in the county. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that the Marketing Team would be promoting stories and themed activities as part of the Darlington and Stockton railway bicentennial celebrations in 2025.

Councillor Elmer referred to the need for appropriate public transport provision signposting and other options for sustainable travel within the county. Bespoke information on public transport and other various sustainable options should be easily accessible and easy to use and suggested the introduction of a bespoke App to help visitors navigate across the county. He added that interconnectivity was an issue and had been highlighted by candidates for the Combined Authority and suggested that Durham take advantage of the high level drive created by the Combined Authority.

With regards to Middridge Station, Councillor Sutton-Lloyd agreed that this was a great opportunity to link in with the bicentennial celebrations where investment had already been allocated to develop routes and initiatives. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that Visit England and Visit Britain were sited on the

bicentennial celebrations and were marketing the event to other countries, using the anniversary to package a lot of products in the county and North East region.

Councillor Freeman commented that railways were a big attraction within the county with North Road station, Weardale railway and Locomotion at Shildon. He added that the tourism offer had to be right in Durham City and then the offer could be dispersed to other areas of the county. He highlighted the lack of attractions in Durham City and the poor retail offer and questioned the measures that were in place to improve the current offer. He noted that The Story and the DLI Museum and Art Gallery were current projects in the Durham City area and would be included in the tourism offer in the next 18 months. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy responded that retail was a global challenge with the significant rise in on-line shopping and advised that DCC was looking at how the Durham City offer could be improved and use the coast and countryside to disperse the offer. She acknowledged that there was a lack of a nationally recognised headline visitor attraction for County Durham within the vicinity of Durham City. In addition, there was a need for more hotel accommodation within the city centre however this would require significant investment. She confirmed that details were in the DMP action plan and highlighted that the development of a headline attraction would result in the further hotel development and an improved retail offer would then follow.

Councillor Adam referred to the 2012-2016 management plans and commented that he found it difficult to see the improvement that had been made and questioned the improvement that was expected by 2030. He noted the lack of sufficient attractions to draw visitors to other parts of the county and asked what attractions could be developed or improved to attract visitors to other areas of the county and how we would attract the necessary funding.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy advised that some elements of the 2012 plan would be included in the draft DMP as they still needed to be resolved. She added that within the next six years there would be development and delivery of The Story, development of the former DLI site, Raby Estates are developing a world class visitor attraction, Auckland Castle attractions will move to the delivery stage, the worlds largest engine shed will be located at Locomotion at Shildon and visitor accommodation will be in the planning process. In addition, she highlighted that the Film and TV industry also drives consumers to visit the county and that the opening of studios at Sunderland would also benefit County Durham. It was noted that the presentation on the County Durham Visitor Economy on the 12 April 2024 would show the improvement in the tourism offer since 2012 in terms of visitor numbers and product.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism added that the Combined Authority and the Devolution Deal had a real commitment to tourism and County Durham was central to the visitor economy in the region. There would be investment opportunities with the Devolution Deal and confirmed that the VCD team are putting together our offer to then sell to the other members of the North East Combined Mayoral Authority.

In response to a query from Councillor Coult regarding engaging smaller stakeholders, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy explained that the VCD team take social influencers and tourism operators on visits to various providers. In addition, there was a business support newsletter that was circulated to over 1000 businesses weekly and there was a team that focused on partnership engagement with businesses, hold training sessions, conference events and peer to peer networking. She highlighted that not all tourism businesses want to engage and work with VCD.

Councillor Kay commented that County Durham had the oldest passenger railway line in the country which is a huge opportunity and referenced the Weardale railway. He continued that the development of this line had not progressed since discussions in 1993 to open the line from Bishop Auckland to Stanhope. He referred to Heighington Station and asked whether there had been any progress in relation to the pub which had closed and suggested that this would provide an opportunity for people to break their journey. The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy confirmed that the Weardale railway had been bought by the Auckland project and it provided both a commuter and a heritage offer with events and a regular service offer from Bishop Auckland to Stanhope for both residents and visitors. In relation to the Locomotion 1 pub, the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy did not have an update, however she would make enquiries after the meeting and could suggest that the site be used for investment activity by the private sector.

Councillor Adam added that he could provide an update in relation to Locomotion 1 pub and commented that there was a bicentenary group currently raising funds to redevelop the ticket office and platforms to bring them back into use, however it would take a lot of work for the pub to be back in operation.

Councillor A Batey added that a former member of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee had kept the committee members updated on the, Stockton and Darlington Railway bicentennial celebrations. She then referred to the new Art Gallery, conference facility and restaurant development on the former DLI site and asked that the Service Grouping identify a different, more appropriate title for the development. Referring to the proposed development as the DLI was confusing as the DLI collection is to be located at The Story.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy for the presentation and found the Overview and Scrutiny meetings focusing on the draft DMP of great value. He would like to see the suggestion from Councillor A Batey in relation to discounted tickets/vouchers being made available to visitors progressed. He then referred to the monitoring and evaluation slide in the presentation and the bullet point referencing the setting up of working groups or task groups to develop future ideas and projects and commented that Members would be happy to be involved and support these groups, if the theme of the group was an area of interest

for that particular member. Alternatively, Members could meet with VCD colleagues and feed into the groups accordingly.

The Strategic Manager, Tourism and Visitor Economy thanked Members for their contributions and valued feedback to help shape the draft DMP.

**Resolved:**

That the comments made by Members 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.

**6 Any Other Business**

The Chair reminded Members that a further Special Joint Committee scheduled for 12 April 2024 would be focusing on the County Durham Visitor Economy and a workshop on the 17 April 2024 would be focusing on the new Place Brand for County Durham.