

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

24 MARCH 2021

VISITOR ECONOMY RECOVERY PLANS FOR 2021

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide the Economic Development Committee with an update on plans to support the recovery of the district's visitor economy in 2021.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 Members approved a refresh of the Visitor Economy Strategy 2020-23 presented to the Economic Development Committee in November 2020.
- 2.2 After sustained annual growth in the value of the economic impact of the district's visitor economy, including +3.7% in 2018 and +6% in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic made 2020 the most challenging year on record for the UK's tourism and hospitality sectors. Latest growth forecasts indicate a significant negative impact of **-62%** on the value of the economic impact of the district's visitor economy and with the ongoing impact on early-mid 2021, the impact is already forecast to be a further **-33%** this year.
- 2.3 In the face of this disruption and the ongoing uncertainty associated with COVID-19 that continues to severely challenge the tourism and hospitality sectors, we need to be proactive and competitive in our plans to support the district's visitor economy in its recovery to increase its economic impact, achieve the vision in our [Community Plan](#) ("...encouraging more visitors to enjoy all that Newark & Sherwood has to offer"), and the objective to "Deliver inclusive and sustainable economic growth".
- 2.4 In doing so, we can maximise the emerging opportunities for recovery. A recent consumer poll by Visit England indicates that 63% of people are confident of booking overnight trips in the UK from July 2021 onwards. With many people avoiding foreign travel, whether due to current or potential travel restrictions, the UK 'staycation' is widely expected to enjoy a welcome resurgence. Furthermore, less crowded UK destinations that are away from the traditional 'hot spots' and are considered 'rural', 'seaside' or 'small town', are perceived as 'safer' and therefore will experience a competitive advantage. Visitors within our main age category (56+ years) may be more wary of travelling and exposing themselves to increased risks of viral infection. However, they are also significantly more likely to have been vaccinated within forthcoming months and to seek 'safer' destinations such as ours. Finally, this demographic segment is also likely to include 'empty nesters' with more potential spending power than younger segments during economic recovery from the pandemic.

3.0 Proposals

- 3.1 Our plans to support the tourism and hospitality sector in recovery will be focussed on four main pillars of operation:
- Relationship building with sector partners/stakeholders
 - Destination development

- Destination marketing
- Visitor insight, knowledge and research

3.2 Relationship building with sector partners/stakeholders

- 3.2.1 We will continue to build multiple external relationships and develop our reputation as recognised and trusted place ambassadors at different levels. At district level, we will continue to lead and facilitate the district-wide Tourism Action Group (TAG) to bring together attractions and businesses from the district's tourism and hospitality sector to share news, insight, ideas, good practice, campaigns, offers and promotional materials. As soon as we are able to do so in a safe manner, we will recommence TAG meetings at attractions in different locations around the district in order to provide familiarisation and networking opportunities. In the meantime, meetings will take place online via MS Teams. We will continue to facilitate and develop the TAG Facebook group, enabling members of the group to engage with each other outside of the schedule of meetings. We will also engage with key strategic and community partners through membership of the Sherwood Strategic Management Group, Southwell Tourism Partnership and a new group to develop the Newark Cultural Heart project as part of the Town Investment Plan. We will link in with a number of other groups that contribute strongly to developing and promoting the visitor offer such as Newark Heritage Forum, Newark Business Club and Shop Southwell.
- 3.2.2 The district's Tourism database of attractions and businesses will be reviewed and updated to enable us to continue to engage effectively with the wider sector beyond those who are represented in the above groups. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have provided timely information, updates and advice to businesses across the tourism and hospitality sector, including signposting to important financial support packages and trusted sources of further information and guidance. The feedback we have received indicates that this service has been greatly valued and importantly helped to strengthen our relations with the sector. Drawing on a range of recognised sources, we will continue to provide such timely and accurate information and advice throughout the forthcoming period of recovery and beyond.
- 3.2.3 We will also work with colleagues in Economic Growth to deliver resilience support from our £300,000 Business Resilience & Growth Programme to the district's accommodation providers – a sector that has been particularly impacted by the past 12 months. Through our appointed consultants, accommodation businesses will be able to apply for grant funding of up to £2,000 each to grow through a programme that is enabled and supported by business advice. Those eligible will receive specialist business advice and support from industry experts in the sector. This advice and guidance will support them in adapting and developing new business or marketing plans. It will include advice on optimising e-commerce solutions, search engine optimisation and implementing new methods of transactional payment mechanisms which will assist them in developing new or enhanced online functionalities.
- 3.2.4 We will also continue to develop our external relationships at regional and national level. Through regular contact with bodies such as Visit England, Visit Notts, Nottinghamshire County Council and D2N2, we will be well-placed to align our activities with strategic initiatives, to raise our destinations' profiles as part of wider visitor campaigns and to take advantage of opportunities including grant funding bids. For example, we are actively encouraging the district's Tourism database of attractions and businesses to sign up to Visit

England's '[Good To Go](#)' accreditation scheme which builds customer trust by demonstrating that they are adhering to the respective Government and public health guidance, have carried out a COVID-19 risk assessment and have the required processes in place. Our attractions and businesses will be promoted at national and international level through our participation in [The Explorer's Road](#) project, a 300 mile, self-guided touring route of the East of England, which will be publicly relaunched by Visit England at the end of March 2021. Other national initiatives that we will seek to maximise include Heritage Open Days and English Tourism Week, and through our membership of professional bodies such as the Tourism Management Institute and Tourism Alliance, we will continually 'horizon scan' for other high profile opportunities.

3.2.5 One area of the tourism sector that has been impacted negatively even more than most by COVID-19 is group travel. It is still unclear when operations such as group coach tours will be able to resume in a manner that is both publicly safe and economically viable for them to do so. However, through our membership of the Association of Group Travel Organisers (AGTO) and relationships with the sector's specialist media, we will remain closely informed of developments and, in turn, liaise with our attractions and businesses about the development and promotion of their group offers to the trade.

3.3 Destination Development

3.3.1 Destination Management Plans (DMPs) for Newark, Southwell and Sherwood Forest were produced for NSDC by a destination management consultant in 2018/19. The methodology included extensive engagement with key landowners/managers, partners and stakeholders, and the DMPs provide us with SWOT analysis; an audit of visitor attractions, events and businesses; place narratives / thematics; and recommendations for action across each of the three destinations to enhance the visitor experience, increase satisfaction and improve reputation.

3.3.2 On account of the strengthened relationships summarised at para 3.2 above, we will use our influence to help progress the recommendations of the DMPs alongside other initiatives to develop our destinations. NSDC is in the rare and privileged position of having a number of different, coexisting place-shaping roles including as leader, facilitator/coordinator, partner/stakeholder, commissioner, investor, asset owner/manager and informed expert. This year, for example, we will use our role as leader to shape and commission a new programme of events and experiences to enhance the cultural presence of Newark town centre and drive increased footfall, dwell time and spend to it. We will continue to lead the Forest Corner masterplanning project, working closely with multiple partners and stakeholders to develop a deliverable new vision for this unique and popular area. As the accountable body, we will secure Places To Ride grant funding from Sport England / British Cycling for a new community cycling hub at Thoresby Vale which aligns perfectly with our brand proposition for Sherwood Forest as a 'green and active family experience (outdoor activities, connect with natural environment)' and the 'Aspirational Family Fun' audience described as 'regularly take breaks where they can indulge in active, family-friendly pursuits, sporting events and festivals.'

3.3.3 Much of our influencing role will draw on our ability as 'informed expert' to provide insight, knowledge and research that is relevant to the visitor experience. This will continue to help colleagues, partners and stakeholders to shape proposals and develop effective business cases. This area of operation is explained further at para 3.5 below.

3.4 Destination Marketing

3.4.1 By its nature, our destination marketing plan is a 'living document' that will change throughout the course of the year as new promotional opportunities arise and messages adapt to align with the roadmap out of COVID-19 restrictions. The current iteration of this document is at **Appendix A**. It shows that much of our destination marketing activity in the earlier part of the 2021 will maintain the current 'stay local' messaging including an emphasis on outdoor exercise and wellbeing. This will evolve into 'days out' promotion, encouraging people to visit to discover our attractions through day trip itineraries, before progressing into ['staycation' campaigns](#), very much along the lines of the successful campaign we ran in October 2020, providing that roadmap conditions are met and it is safe for accommodation providers to reopen. In taking this cautious approach, we can ensure that our messaging aligns responsibly with the directives and advice being issued publicly by local and central government and Public Health England while maximising visitor demand when possible for the much-needed benefit of our visitor economy. However, throughout this period, we will have the flexibility of approach to be able to 'speed up' or 'slow down' the development of our messaging and activity as necessary.

3.4.2 By providing visitors and potential visitors with a more engaging and user-friendly web and social media presence, we will be better-placed to influence their online choice of destination. Stronger digital marketing across search engine optimisation (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC), social media, online advertising and email marketing will help to improve our websites' rankings in search engine results. We will monitor and review performance through the following measures:

- Unique visits to the three tourism websites
- Social media impressions
- Social media engagements
- Video views
- Social media followers

Geographically, in order to maximise the return on investment, our marketing activity will be concentrated largely on East Midlands, West Midlands, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Lancashire and parts of East Anglia (subject to COVID-19 restrictions on non-essential travel). We will closely monitor geographic response, including area-specific uptake of our printed leaflets as well as online traffic, and adjust our plans accordingly.

3.5 Visitor Insight, Knowledge and Research

3.5.1 To have reliable metrics by which we can measure progress over the course of this year and subsequent years, we will continue to commission annual impact data based on the Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor (STEAM) which is widely acknowledged as the industry standard with high levels of accuracy down to district level. As well as being the source used for the value of our economic impact of the visitor economy figures, it also provides us with a wide range of other data sets including visitor numbers, visitor days, visitor types, employment and sectoral distribution of economic impact at district and also town (Newark only) level.

3.5.2 We will also commission qualitative visitor market research in 2021 after we were unable to do so in 2020 due to the pandemic. Restrictions permitting, we will undertake face-to-face interviews with visitors at events, attractions, public spaces and travel hubs throughout the district in late summer and autumn. This will ensure that we continue to improve our knowledge of the visitor experience, develop an understanding of who visitors are and what they feel about their experiences, in order to inform strategic decisions around destination development and destination marketing by ourselves and our partners/stakeholders.

3.5.3 Through our multiple external relationships and memberships, we will continue to ‘horizon scan’ and source sector insight, knowledge and research that is relevant to the visitor experience and share it with colleagues, partners and stakeholders. We will also proactively share statistics on the performance of our destination marketing campaigns and activities. This ‘informed expert’ role will help to reinforce our position as a valuable and trusted partner.

3.6 How Will We Know If We Are Successful?

3.6.1 We have identified 16 performance indicators that will be monitored for progress. 11 of these relate to the quantitative and qualitative data that we commission from independent, external organisations annually (one is actually biennial but will apply to 2021). The remaining five performance indicators relate to statistics drawn from our own analytics data which will be compiled and reported on corporately each quarter.

3.6.2 Although more subjective and less tangible, we will also measure progress in light of feedback received from our wide range of partners and stakeholders including attractions and businesses from the district’s tourism and hospitality sector. This will help us to gauge initial reaction to our activities and to develop or adjust our plans according to ever-changing needs and expectations.

4.0 Equalities Implications

4.1 Delivery of our visitor economy recovery plans will always consider equalities to ensure that visitors and potential visitors with protected characteristics are not disadvantaged in their experiences. For example, our visitor websites have recently been developed to make them more accessible and compliant with new public sector website accessibility regulations.

5.0 Digital Implications

5.1 The majority of our destination digital marketing services are currently outsourced to third party agencies. We will review this arrangement with ICT Services to consider whether any of these services can be brought in-house as part of NSDC’s commitment to work towards being a Digital Council.

6.0 Financial Implications (FIN20-21/8384)

6.1 None. The costs of delivering our visitor economy recovery plans will be met via an annual review of the allocated Promotion of Tourism budget.

7.0 Community Plan – Alignment to Objectives

7.1 The aims of our visitor economy recovery plans align clearly with the vision in our Community Plan (“...encouraging more visitors to enjoy all that Newark & Sherwood has to offer”) and the objective to “Deliver inclusive and sustainable economic growth”.

8.0 RECOMMENDATION

That Members note and support our plans to support the recovery of the district’s visitor economy in 2021 and beyond.

Reason for Recommendation

To enable Officers to continue to deliver strategic and operational support to the district’s visitor economy as an important asset for economic recovery.

Background Papers

[NSDC Visitor Economy Strategy 2020-23](#)

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