



Report to Communities & Localism and Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committees

Date:	13 July – Joint meeting of Communities & Localism and Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committees
Title:	Visitor Economy Update
Cabinet Member(s):	CLlr Martin Tett, CLlr Clive Harriss
Contact officer:	Matt Broadbent, Senior Economic Development Officer (matthew.broadbent@buckinghamshire.gov.uk)
Ward(s) affected:	None specific
Recommendations:	To agree to the development of a Visitor Economy Strategy that takes stock of growth opportunities in Buckinghamshire and outlines an action plan to capitalise on these.
Reason for decision:	For Members to be informed of the work being undertaken to support the Visitor Economy and development of Buckinghamshire’s cultural and heritage attractions.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Buckinghamshire is a beautiful county with many natural and heritage assets. While it does not benefit from major visitor attractions such as nationally recognised museums, it is still an attractive place for visitors who come to enjoy the stunning surroundings, world class restaurants, and historic and cultural locations. In addition to the potential for visitors, many locations in the county are ideal venues for business events such as conferences. Although only a short distance from London,

our county has the natural setting that businesses are looking for to host away days and corporate retreats.

- 1.2 The visitor economy sector already plays a significant role in economic activity for Buckinghamshire, however there is potential for growing this sector. In addition, recent trends towards a growth in 'staycation' and domestic tourism has shown Buckinghamshire's strength in this part of the market.
- 1.3 As the country comes out of the pandemic, the Council and its partners are undertaking a review of the visitor economy strategy, considering new opportunities for growth in the county, and the best way to position and promote Buckinghamshire as a great place to visit.

2. Content of report

Background

- 2.1 With 20 million people living within 90 minutes of Aylesbury, the County has the opportunity to capitalise on a large captive market. Visitor patterns are seeing a growth in near-to-home and short stay visits, there is a significant market for Buckinghamshire to tap into.
- 2.2 Tourism and hospitality have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic but there are opportunities to capitalise on the growth that has been seen with visitors making more day visits or overnight stays close to home and rediscovering their local area. However further efforts are needed to continue this and to attract more day and stay visitors and increase dwell time and therefore spend in our local economy. The experience of businesses throughout the pandemic will give us an opportunity to incorporate the lessons learned into our strategic approach.
- 2.3 A new unitary authority gives us an opportunity to develop a Buckinghamshire wide visitor economy strategy that is more reflective of Buckinghamshire as a whole but can still build on its diverse places to create a more competitive offer compared with neighbouring counties.

Destination Management Organisation

- 2.4 There are a number of activities already in place to support tourism in the county. Buckinghamshire has an official Destination Management Organisation (DMO) in Visit Buckinghamshire and the Chilterns, which has been running since 2016. It is facilitated by Buckinghamshire Business First in partnership with Buckinghamshire Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP).
- 2.5 The current objectives for the DMO are: supporting the growth and effectiveness of the Visit Buckinghamshire and the Chilterns website, leveraging additional funding

for the sector locally, increasing visitor numbers, overnight stays and spend in the local economy and creating jobs and increasing sectoral skills.

- 2.6 The DMO has limited capacity with its current set up, employing two staff part-time. It does not receive any public funding and receives a small amount of funding from membership subscriptions, including £15,000 from Buckinghamshire Council. Areas of this size would ordinarily have a larger resource.
- 2.7 Historically, the local tourism sector in Buckinghamshire has been fragmented into a series of 'place based' campaigns for individual towns or parts of the County (such as the Chilterns). Buckinghamshire has been less successful in marketing the whole of the County as a destination with a brand that encompasses the various visitor experiences. This challenge underpinned the decision to develop a Destination Management Plan in 2013, the findings of which led to the creation of the DMO. However this has not been updated and does not incorporate current post COVID trends for the sector.
- 2.8 Alongside the DMO, partners such as Chilterns Tourism Network and Buckinghamshire Regional Tourism Steering Group (RTSG) also operate with a view to building stronger ties between businesses and from business to visitor. The Chilterns Tourism Network is a group of 200+ businesses representing a broad range of products and services from the sector. They work collaboratively to promote the Chilterns as a visitor destination.
- 2.9 On top of this a number of Community Boards also look at the role of the visitor economy in their towns and villages and have used funding to support organisations with projects such as events which boosts visitor numbers and footfall to our town centres. Currently the North West Chilterns Community Board are working in partnership with Visit Buckinghamshire and have developed an initiative which aims to work with sector businesses to help the recovery and rebuilding of the local visitor economy post-Covid.
- 2.10 Clarifying and promoting the unique offer for Buckinghamshire's visitor economy will give the DMO and other visitor economy partners the opportunity to focus more directly on Buckinghamshire's strategic strengths. A clearer ambition will also allow partners to coalesce around shared objectives and aims.

Pandemic Response and recent activities

- 2.11 The Council invested heavily to support this sector during the various lockdowns. Through the Welcome Back Fund we worked closely with communities across Buckinghamshire to identify dozens of public realm interventions around improving the visitor experience to our high streets and attracting residents and visitors back to support those businesses and restaurants. The Welcome Back Fund also provided

the opportunity to begin specific place promotion work to raise awareness of Buckinghamshire. A suite of geographic and thematic videos have been curated and shared on social media by Visit Bucks which reached over 112,000 views in the month of March 2022 alone. We now have access to a rich variety of film, drone and photography footage that can be pivoted to use in future work.

- 2.12 The Council supported businesses in this sector throughout the pandemic including through the Local Restrictions Support Grant and Additional Restrictions Grant. Buckinghamshire Council distributed over £22 million to businesses through the Additional Restrictions Grant scheme.
- 2.13 With restrictions being put in place from March 2020, the sector was severely impacted during the pandemic. The Government put in place various programmes with a view to supporting businesses, such as the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme, business grants, the Welcome Back Fund, as well as broader packages such as the Job Retention Scheme. While we did see businesses close during the pandemic, the sector has shown its ability to adapt and innovate.
- 2.14 Visit Buckinghamshire, Buckinghamshire Business First and Buckinghamshire Council are also currently delivering the Visit Buckinghamshire: Boost project funded through the UK Community Renewal Fund. The project offers direct support to visitor economy businesses in upskilling, innovating and creating new products and services boosting businesses' green credentials, accessibility, digital skills and growth.
- 2.15 In addition to this, the Future Tourism Summit recently took place bringing together businesses from Buckinghamshire's wider visitor sector to understand the role tourism businesses can play in local and the national economy.

The visitor economy and economic development

- 2.16 The visitor economy can be seen as a strategic opportunity for Buckinghamshire. Business growth in the sector can lead to benefits in terms of greater turnover, strengthening local supply chains, better place management, resilient places, and job creation with tourism being a ready source of entry level jobs.
- 2.17 Buckinghamshire has clear strengths as a domestic, day-visitor destination which represented 93 per cent of total visits in 2019. There is still however scope to reach our potential with other markets, such as overnight stays which only represent 7 per cent of total visits while contributing to around 34 per cent of total expenditure.
- 2.18 The visitor economy is worth circa £900 million to Buckinghamshire, providing between 11,000 and 13,000 jobs, many of which provide good, entry-level opportunities to young people, according to [Visit Britain data](#) from 2019.
- 2.19 Day visitors dominate Buckinghamshire's visitor profile. Most visits are short with 40 per cent of day visitors staying for four hours or less.

- 2.20 An important factor in improving the average length of stay for visitor is ensuring that there is an adequate offer for overnight accommodation. Currently, there are around 1000 accommodation units in Buckinghamshire, many of which are smaller properties focused on leisure around the Chilterns. Further developing the accommodation offer would give us an opportunity to tap into the overnight visitor market.
- 2.21 In 2019, figures showed that the average spend per staying visitor in Buckinghamshire was £211.93, compared with a national average of £311.75 and a regional average of £280.18. Had expenditure per night for visitors to Buckinghamshire grown at the same 10-year rate as the rest of the South East, Buckinghamshire would have seen an additional £25.8 million in 2019. Research also estimates that, over the same period, 430 more jobs would have been created over this time.

Culture and heritage tourism

- 2.22 Tourism in Buckinghamshire is built around vibrant historic creative and cultural sectors providing attractions, events and opportunities for visitors and residents to spend money in the local area. Culture and heritage tourism plays an important role in Buckinghamshire's visitor economy but a more holistic understanding of how this interacts with other aspects of the visitor economy, such as accommodation and events, is key to developing a strategy which can deliver economic growth. We have a wide-ranging and high-quality cultural offer, but we can do more to connect it.
- 2.23 Buckinghamshire's strengths in its visitor economy offer include our history and heritage, vibrant market towns, National Trust properties, children's' visitor attractions, literary connections from Milton to Dahl, TV and film locations, its sports and Paralympics legacy, our food and drink offer, arts and crafts, independent retailers, the high-quality rural landscape and travel accessibility from London and Oxford.
- 2.24 Taking the countryside as an example: the Council's county parks saw c1.4 million visitors during 2021/22, with Black Park in particular a destination venue for people from neighbouring areas; the Chilterns are quick to reach by rail or by road, with the Chiltern Way and the Chilterns Cycleway both taking in some of the finest scenery in the country; and the Chilterns Walking Festival features a host of locations, landscapes and lifestyles with hikes, guided tours and special events taking place across the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- 2.25 The larger towns throughout the county offer theatres, galleries and museums, with a range of arts, crafts and studios open to the public. There are also a great range of summer festivals including Penn Fest music festival, events at Waddesdon, and the WhizzFizzFest children's arts and literary festival.

- 2.26 Screen tourism is also important in Buckinghamshire as the most filmed county in England, as is anticipated to develop alongside the continuing growth in the sector and the expansion of studio facilities in and around the county. The newly established Buckinghamshire Film Office will support the county to maximise the economic and social benefits of filming.
- 2.27 Buckinghamshire Culture (the county's Cultural Partnership) highlight within the Cultural Strategy the potential for further development of Buckinghamshire as a recognised destination for leisure, heritage and arts – setting out the importance of a cohesive plan based on a shared narrative and stronger sector networks which encourage knowledge exchange and shared approaches to programming and marketing; and the opportunities to develop innovative, accessible and sustainable cultural activities which more effectively attract visitors. The partnership's Open Weekend initiative, now in its second year, is a good example of collaboration to showcase the range and breadth of creative events, activities and initiatives taking place across the county and collectively amplify their reach.
- 2.28 The contribution made by Buckinghamshire's culture and heritage assets to the broader visitor economy means the development of a more joined-up approach can be a considerable opportunity for the strengthening of places and creation of economic growth in the county.

3. Other options considered

- 3.1 While we could continue with our existing approach, this would make it difficult to deliver a coordinated and strategic approach to the visitor economy which is why a Visitor Economy Strategy can provide more longer term and considered approach to this agenda.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 There are no legal or financial implications at this stage.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 The development of a more strategic approach to supporting Buckinghamshire's visitor economy will contribute to the Corporate Plan priority 'Increasing Prosperity'.

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 6.1 No further consultation is needed at this stage.



7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 The Culture, Sports and Leisure Service has been consulted in advance of the writing of this report. Buckinghamshire Business First, Visit Buckinghamshire and Buckinghamshire Culture have also been consulted. Further engagement will take place once scoping for a Visitor Economy Strategy gets underway.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 The Council will deliver an ambitious strategy for Buckinghamshire's visitor economy, bringing together key partners and stakeholders from the tourism sector, with a view to outlining a clear vision for how the visitor economy should look and how we can deliver it for 2030.
- 8.2 The strategy will set out our post-pandemic operating context, key objectives for the coming period and key partners to drive delivery and support to the visitor economy as a whole.
- 8.3 The Economic Growth & Regeneration service area is uniquely placed to drive the Council's visitor economy work given its direct engagement with businesses, many of which deliver services in the visitor economy. The Service's existing relationships with the key stakeholders outlined previously also mean it would be able to more immediately deliver support to Buckinghamshire businesses in the tourism sector alongside other partners.
- 8.4 The Culture, Sport and Leisure Service will continue its partnership work with Buckinghamshire Culture to support the delivery of the Cultural Strategy action plan and alignment with the emerging visitor economy piece.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 Visit Britain (2019), *Destination-specific Research*.
<https://www.visitbritain.org/destination-specific-research>

10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

