

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET – TUESDAY, 1 FEBRUARY 2022



Title of Report	NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE VISITOR ECONOMY PLAN	
Presented by	Councillor Tony Gillard Business And Regeneration Portfolio Holder	
Background Papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Leicester And Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan 2019 2) NWL Draft Tourism Strategy Scrutiny Report 20th November 2019 3) Appendix to NWL Draft Tourism Strategy Scrutiny Report 20th November 2019 4) STEAM Report for NWL 2009 to 2020 5) NWL Review Of Cultural Services 2021 – Fathom Consulting 6) North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan – Paper to Corporate Scrutiny Committee 5th January 2022. 7) Minutes Of Corporate Scrutiny Meeting 5th January 2022 	<p>Public Report: Yes</p> <hr/> <p>Key Decision : No</p>
Financial Implications	The proposals can be delivered within existing allocated resource.	
	Signed off by the Section 151 Officer: Yes/No	
Legal Implications	Tourism and Visitor Economy Activities are a discretionary function	
	Signed off by the Monitoring Officer: Yes	
Staffing and Corporate Implications	All staffing implications will be dealt with under the authority of the Head of Paid Service and in line with the Employment Stability Policy.	
	Signed off by the Head of Paid Service: Yes/No	
Purpose of Report	<p>To seek reaffirmation of the council’s desire to grow the North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy sector.</p> <p>To present evidence of how businesses, partners and stakeholders in the district’s visitor economy sector would like</p>	

	<p>NWLDC to support them to achieve sector growth. To propose four new priority activities to be delivered by NWLDC's Cultural Services Team which will boost sector growth To identify existing activities that will need to be delivered in alternative ways in order to provide the capacity to deliver the new priority activities</p>
Reason for Decision	<p><i>The Council Delivery Plan sets out clear targets for the visitor economy. Current performance Statistics gathered in the NWL STEAM report indicate that we are unlikely to achieve the targets set. Remedial action is required.</i></p>
Recommendations	<p>1) THAT CABINET REAFFIRM THE NEED TO DELIVER MORE IMPACTFUL SUPPORT TO THE DISTRICT'S VISITOR ECONOMY.</p> <p>2) THAT THE FOUR PRIORITY ACTIVITIES SET OUT IN THIS REPORT BE ADOPTED AS THE CORE OF THE COUNCIL'S VISITOR ECONOMY WORK PLAN.</p> <p>3) THAT CABINET CONFIRM SUPPORT FOR OPTION ONE AS SET OUT IN APPENDIX 1 AS THE PREFERRED MODEL FOR THE FUTURE PROVISION OF TIC SERVICES IN ASHBY AND GRANT DELEGATED POWERS TO THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR FOR PLACE (IN CONSULTATION WITH THE PORTFOLIOHOLDER FOR BUSINESS AND REGENERATION) TO AGREE TERMS FOR THE FUTURE OPERATION.</p>

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 This Local Authority has a proud tradition of supporting tourism in the district, which stretches back more than 25 years and includes being instrumental in the development of attractions of regional importance such as Conkers, Moira Furnace, Snibston Pitheads and Ashby Canal.

1.2 Support to the tourism industry (now usually referred to as the Visitor Economy) is delivered by the council's Cultural Services Team. Annual expenditure on this activity by the council is £367,000 net and includes staff costs, expenses associated with operating the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) cost of running events and grants and support to third party organisations such as the National Forest.

1.3 Following the publication of a 2019 report entitled "Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan" this council has committed to growing the North West Leicestershire visitor economy setting a series of targets in the Council Delivery Plan, namely to:

- Develop our "visitor economy" offer to encourage dwell time, local spend and investment in new and improved attractions.
- Increase the number of jobs in the tourism sector in the District by 2% per annum.
- Increase annual visitor spend by 2% per annum

- Increase the number of overnight stays in NWL year on year by 2%

1.4 Delivery against these targets is monitored and data collected through the annual STEAM Report for North West Leicestershire. This is then used as evidence of performance. Evidence gathered over the three years prior to the Covid Pandemic (which is seen as an anomalous year) indicates a gradual decline in the growth of our visitor economy sector. There is therefore a need to review our interventions and if necessary propose a new plan of activities.

1.5 The visitor economy services that have traditionally been delivered by this council can be summarised as:

- To promote our attractions and events to our residents and their visitors, with only very limited efforts to promote beyond our district borders.
- To provide some support to a few of our attractions to grow by providing small amounts of core funding to the operators.
- To organise and run “events” which provide something to do for local residents.
- To provide grants to support arts organisations to overcome operational deficits.
- To provide a small amount of advice to start up visitor economy businesses

1.6 The 2019 “Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan” by LPL set out ambitions to boost growth of the Leicestershire Visitor Economy sector and bring greater wealth and prosperity across the county.

1.7 Alongside the other district, borough and city councils in Leicestershire, NWLDC commissioned a report from LPL to follow on from the Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan. This report specifically examined tourism growth potential in North West Leicestershire and formed the basis of a paper to Community Scrutiny Committee on 20th November 2019 in the form of a draft tourism strategy.

1.8 This draft strategy was supported by the committee, but it was recognised that further work was required with our sector partners and stakeholders to understand what it would mean for the day to day Cultural Services activities the council would undertake. Fathom Consulting were commissioned to undertake this further stakeholder engagement work.

1.9 Unfortunately, meaningful contact with stakeholder businesses and organisations was frustrated throughout 2020 and through into early 2021 by the Covid pandemic. Many tourism businesses had all staff furloughed and were in effect “hibernating” making it impossible for our consultants to speak with them and gain views.

1.10 Ultimately our consultants were able to contact around half the stakeholders they attempted to reach. Those that did engage with the exercise, did so fully and provided substantive answers to the questions posed. This enabled the consultants to cross reference responses and pull out commonly held key

themes, messages or opinions.

- 1.11** Fathom's draft report was received in summer 2021. Given the difficulties that had been experienced in contacting stakeholders during the engagement exercise, a suitable pause was left before the final version of the report was published in December 2021. This allowed some further useful intelligence to be gathered through dialogue with businesses, for inclusion in the final iteration.
- 1.12** The findings contained within the Fathom Consulting report both at the initial report stage and following further stakeholder input to the final draft demonstrate that there is strong agreement with the earlier conclusions of the 2019 report by LPL. As a high-level summary what Visitor Economy stakeholders want from NWLDC is strategic Leadership and the delivery of a small number of important growth enablers.
- 1.13** There is a clear Golden Thread that runs from the Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan to the NWL specific version of this document and then through to the conclusions of the Fathom consulting report and links to the Tourism and visitor economy outputs set in the Councils delivery plan. Officers have used this information to develop four priority activities that the council needs to deliver if the potential sector growth highlighted in the Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan is to be unlocked in NWL and our Council Delivery Plan Targets delivered. The specific activity priorities are set out in more detail in section 2 of this report
- 1.14** A paper entitled "NW Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan" which set out the proposed visitor economy priority activities for this council was presented to Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 5th January. There was broad support for the priorities set out in that report and a recognition that delivery would require some choices to be made with regard to allocation of resources. Further narrative on this is provided in section 3 of this report.

2.0 PROPOSED PRIORITY ACTIVITIES

- 2.2** Flowing initially from the Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan and feeding into the Draft Tourism Strategy document, supported by Community Scrutiny Committee in November 2019 and further built upon through the work of Fathom Consulting, it is proposed that the work of the council's Cultural Services Team in future should concentrate on the following four priorities as an activity plan.

Priority One

Provide leadership for the local visitor economy by championing it at the regional level and joining with neighbouring districts to raise opportunities and issues at the national level.

Stakeholders indicated that there was little awareness of what our visitor economy offer was as part of the Leicestershire, East Midlands or national tourism offer. NWLDC have the connections to positively address this and prioritisation of resource on defining "Our Place" along with the other actions below would be welcomed.

Priority Two

Increase the amount of officer time invested in working with local attractions and tourism businesses to create a better connected and more knowledgeable network.

The goal would be to establish and sustain a collective of visitor economy businesses which can signpost and cross sell. Ultimately it would be hoped that by working together some natural “packaging” would occur which would lead to an increased length of visitor stay and increased spend locally. As an example, there is strong evidence that at present our visitors come for one attraction and then go home again afterwards. Where the attraction visited has a long dwell time (i.e. a full day attraction) this isn’t an issue as ancillary spend on food etc. will be high. However, most of our attractions currently have a dwell time of less than half a day and therefore there is often a failure to capture that ancillary spend. Packaging of attractions e.g. visiting Moira Furnace in the morning and then popping into Ashby for lunch before visiting the castle in the afternoon would deliver a longer stay and increased local spend.

Priority Three

Prioritise resource on working with stakeholders and delivering projects which create the infrastructure and attractions to support a greater number of visitors, staying longer.

North West Leicestershire has a number of quality attractions within its borders however, with the exception of Donington Race Circuit and Conkers, none offer the breadth of things to do to retain visitors for more than half a day and many have relatively low visitor capacity.

The greatest financial benefit to the local economy comes from visits which involve an overnight stay (as a result of spend on meals and accommodation), full day stays bring the next level of benefit (spend on lunches) with half day stays being least positive. Through the recent engagement exercise those stakeholders who operated attractions expressed a desire to grow their attractions to accommodate more people staying longer but pointed to a number of barriers such as lack of supporting infrastructure (particularly a lack of places to stay overnight) and lack of access to finance. NWLDC was viewed by stakeholders as “best placed” to address this by providing support to access grant funding e.g. from LLEP and through its inward investment promotion activity which was seen as a way of bringing new investment into attractions and infrastructure.

Priority Four

Lead the promotion of North West Leicestershire as a place to visit to an audience beyond our district borders, particularly by use of digital marketing channels.

We can only expect our visitor economy businesses to grow and create more wealth and employment if their customer base grows. At present there is little awareness (beyond North West Leicestershire) of North West Leicestershire or its offer and this keeps our customer base small. Resetting the balance between inward and outward focussed marketing activities would provide us with the means to attract visitors from

a wider catchment area bringing new spend into the district.

3.0 Resource Implications

3.1 It is recognised that in the current financial climate the challenge to officers is to deliver the new priority activities within currently allocated resources. It is believed that this can be achieved if some existing activities are stopped, reduced, done differently or combined with other similar activities (remove partial duplication or gain efficiencies from scale).

3.2 Officers have examined in detail the current activities undertaken by the Cultural Services Team to examine where either expenditure reductions or officer time savings can be found. We have particularly looked for:

- Those current activities that have overlap with and could be delivered alongside other council services.
- Those current activities that could be delivered through a different means.
- Those current activities that only make a marginal contribution to performance targets.
- Those current activities which are not valued by our businesses, partners or stakeholders within the sector.

3.3 It is recommended that to create capacity to deliver new Visitor Economy Activity Plan actions the following be supported:

- The responsibility for supporting new start up businesses operating within the visitor economy sector is passed to the Economic Regeneration Team who currently fulfil this function for new start businesses in all other sectors.
- That the council becomes a commissioner rather than deliverer of events.
- That visitor economy promotional activity moves towards a more digital offer using messages that are relevant to both intra and extra – district audiences, with Cultural services offices being supported by the Corporate Communications team.
- That the Council reviews the way in which it provides a Tourist Information Facility in Ashby seeking if possible, to reduce resource input by working with others. See Options proposals set out in Appendix 1.

3.4 It should be noted that recommending closure of the TIC was considered by officers, but following receipt of a public petition against this and after testing the idea at Scrutiny Committee on 5th January (where members expressed a desire to retain the TIC facility) this is no longer being proposed.

3.5 This paper to Cabinet has been amended to reflect the view provided by Scrutiny Committee that they wished for a series of options (to retain the TIC facility) to be

presented to Cabinet for consideration.

3.6 Appendix 1 to this report sets out the options appraisal for the future of the TIC and articulates a preferred way forward. Delegated power to continue to develop that option is sought as part of this report (Recommendation 3).

4.0 CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE COMMENTS

4.1 The minutes of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee as they apply to this item are reproduced below.

42. NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE VISITOR ECONOMY PLAN

The Head of Property and Regeneration presented the report to Members.

The reporting timeline for the item was questioned as it was noted that the Visitor Economy Plan had initially been considered by Cabinet in November 2019 but had been taken no further until now. The Head of Property and Regeneration explained that Covid-19 concerns were starting to rise at the end of 2019 and then lockdown measures introduced early 2020 meant that emergency plans were put into place, and reports such as this therefore had to be paused.

In response to a question, the Head of Property and Regeneration explained that the consultants had suggested the closure of the Ashby Tourist Information Centre as a result of responses received from the stakeholder engagement process.

A statement was made by a Member on the diminishing tourist interest in Ashby over the last 20 years and it was felt that this was down to the lack of investment in the town by the District Council. Comments were made that little marketing was done to publicise the town and there was not enough on offer for the public if they did visit. Reference was made to the thriving market town it used to be and the fact that there would be a stronger need for a tourist information centre if more was done to attract tourists. The Head of Property and Regeneration acknowledged that visitor numbers were currently low and agreed there was more to be done to improve that, which was the aim of the plan before Members. However, it was noted that there were other ways for people to get information now, such as on their mobile phones, and this had to be considered moving forward.

Members were reminded that the report set out four priorities which would inform the plan and the recommendation was to make comment on these prior to consideration at Cabinet.

In relation to the Fathom Consultation report, a comment was made on the very little data available as although the report referred to significant engagement, this was in fact only 10 people. It was felt there was a lack of partnership working with organisations such as Leicestershire County Council, the museum service, and libraries. It was pointed out that the tourist information service was more than just a site at the library, staff were very active on social media and had attended Hermitage FM on a weekly basis to publicise events. The suggestion within the report of cross district working to promote the district was supported but it was felt that it had lost sight of what was needed and community venues such as libraries to work from should be considered. There was also some concern that the resource required to achieve the proposals may not be available.

Members felt that the staff at the Ashby Tourist Information Centre did much more than sit and wait for people to come in asking for information. It seemed that there was an intention to redeploy the staff within the same service area and savings being made were minimal in relation to the cost of running the premises. Therefore, it was felt that the staff should stay based at the Ashby premises as it was a useful and central location.

Chairman's initials

The questions asked as part of the engagement process were queried and it was pointed out there was little engagement with the Ashby business community or the Heritage Society. The Head of Property and Regeneration referred Members to paragraph 4 of the Fathom consultation report where the consultation questions were detailed.

In response to a query from a Member, the Head of Property and Regeneration assured the Committee that Ashby Town Council had and would be consulted on any further options going forward and that meetings had already been arranged for the near future.

In relation to the four priorities set out in the report, a comment was made that although good priorities, credibility was lost by the proposal to close the Ashby Tourist Information Centre which was the main way that the service was delivered.

Following further discussion about the Ashby Tourist Information Centre, clear opinions were shared, and it was agreed that the committee were unanimously opposed to the proposals to close the centre. Therefore, it was moved by Councillor S Sheahan that Cabinet be asked to request officers to look at alternative options that did not include the closure of Ashby Tourist Information Centre. It was seconded by Councillor D Bigby and was put to the vote. The motion was AGREED.

The Chair thanked Members for their contributions and confirmed that the motion as approved during discussion, and comments made would be presented to cabinet when it considered the report.

4.2 Councillors may wish to note that a question was put to Scrutiny Committee by a member of the public regarding the future of the TIC in Ashby. A copy of the question and response as recorded in the meeting minutes has been included in the list of background papers at the top of this report.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 Businesses and stakeholders active in the NWL Visitor Economy sector have made it clear that they support the finding of the Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Growth Plan and the NWL Specific sub report produced by LPL.

5.2 Through the work of Fathom Consulting they have gone further and provided clear commentary on how they would like North West Leicestershire District Council to support them. This would involve the council in focusing its Cultural Services work around four new priority activities.

5.3 The council can deliver against these priority activities for its stakeholders but to do so will require some reallocation of resources as detailed in the paper.

5.4 Officers believe that resourcing these priority activities is necessary if visitor economy growth targets in the Council Delivery Plan are to be achieved.

Policies and other considerations, as appropriate	
Council Priorities:	Support for businesses and helping people into local jobs
Policy Considerations:	Tourism and Visitor Economy Activities are a discretionary function
Safeguarding:	None

Equalities/Diversity:	The proposed changes to the delivery of visitor economy promotion are designed to broaden the reach of the service and therefore should have positive equality and diversity impacts.
Customer Impact:	The proposed changes are designed to improve the quality of the service offered. Changes to the delivery of visitor economy promotion should increase the number of customers who can access the service
Economic and Social Impact:	Improved performance of our visitor economy sector is expected to lead to increased local employment opportunities.
Environment and Climate Change:	None
Consultation/Community Engagement:	Local businesses, partners and stakeholders operating in the visitor economy sector have been heavily engaged in helping shape the proposed priorities and activities.
Risks:	The proposed changes may not lead to the desired improvements. However performance is being regularly monitored and would enable additional remedial actions to be developed if necessary.
Officer Contact	Paul Wheatley Head of Property And Regeneration paul.wheatley@nwleicestershire.gov.uk