WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL CABINET

16TH JANUARY 2024

CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION AND GROWTH – COUNCILLOR DANIEL LISTER

Report Title	**Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy**
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List of Appendices

Appendix A – Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy

1. Purpose of Report

1.1. This report introduces the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy for the whole county. It has been co-produced by West Northamptonshire Council & North Northamptonshire Council, as well as strategic partners & stakeholders from across the public, private and voluntary and community sectors.

1.2. The report also sets out the intention to develop a new private sector-led Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) to oversee and drive the delivery of the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy, in partnership with West Northamptonshire Council and North Northamptonshire Council.

2.   Executive Summary

2.1. The Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy sets out to establish an approach to nurturing and enhancing the visitor economy; currently one of Northamptonshire's unsung economic heroes. Developed over an 18-month period, and working closely with North Northamptonshire Council, this Strategy covers the whole county and has drawn on a wide range of evidence and insight, together with numerous contributions from across the public, private and voluntary and community sectors.

2.2. The Strategy has four principal goals. With a timeframe to 2030, these include a focus on:
- Visits and Value
- Great People
- Better Business
- Inspirational Places

2.3. As per the guidance and requirement from Visit England, it is also proposed to establish a LVEP, made up of a representative group of senior industry figures, drawn from both West and North Northamptonshire, to steer the delivery of the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy. The LVEP will focus on four clear objectives:
- Collaboration
- Dynamic & Tailored Marketing
- Planning for the Future, and
- Improving Quality & Skills

3.   Recommendations

3.1   It is recommended that the Cabinet:

3.1.1 Approves the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy attached at Appendix A;

3.1.2 Supports the proposal to continue to work closely with colleagues in North Northamptonshire, wider stakeholders and private sector representatives to begin to develop a LVEP. A future report will be brought to Cabinet which will set out detailed implementation plans and financial implications related to the development of the LVEP.

3.1.3 Delegates authority to the Director of Communities & Opportunities in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Town Centre Regeneration and Growth to undertake any activity to develop the plans for LVEP development, ahead of these being brought back to the Cabinet for approval.

4. Reason for Recommendations

4.1 To support the visitor economy enabling economic benefits for the entire County, resulting in increased Gross Value Added (GVA), pride in place, inward investment and jobs.

4.2 To strategically grow the tourism offer, working collaboratively with North Northamptonshire Council, businesses, education providers and other relevant stakeholders in order to further deliver beneficial economic growth as a result of increased visitors and spend.

4.3 To explore the County-wide benefits of having an accredited LVEP, which would include expert support to drive the visitor economy and the potential of future funding only available to LVEPs

5. Report Background

5.1 The support given by the former Councils across Northamptonshire to the county's visitor economy reduced after the abolition of the Regional Development Agencies 2010. There followed the subsequent merger of the Explore Northamptonshire Destination Management Organisation (DMO) into the Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership.

5.2 A 'DMO' plays a crucial role in promoting and marketing specific destinations within the country to attract tourists. Visit England, as the national tourism agency, focuses on showcasing the diverse attractions, cultural heritage, and experiences offered by different regions across England. These DMOs work on developing and implementing strategic marketing initiatives to boost tourism, support local businesses, and enhance the overall appeal of the destinations they represent. Their efforts contribute to the economic growth of regions by attracting visitors and fostering a positive image of the destination both domestically and internationally.

5.3 Since 2016 a private sector-led consortium has operated *Northamptonshire Surprise*, which has engaged with attractions/employers, delivered promotional activity and maintained a tourism website. This organisation has also run recent marketing campaigns on behalf of the two Councils and has been consulted in the preparation of the new Tourism Strategy. *Northamptonshire Surprise* is recognised by VisitEngland as operating as a DMO.

5.4 In March 2021, the government announced an independent review to assess how DMOs across England are funded and structured, and how they perform their roles, in order to establish whether there may be a more efficient and effective model for supporting English tourism at the regional level, and if so, what that model may be. Its report and consultation response analysis was published in September 2021.

5.5 The review was led by Nick de Bois, Chair of the VisitEngland Advisory Board, acting in an independent capacity. The review examined the extent to which the current DMO landscape:
- is economically efficient, effective and sustainable (with regard to funding, structure and performance)
- best enables the government to meet its leisure and business tourism policy objectives at a national, regional and local level

- engages within the wider local and regional economic landscape, and the current focus on English devolution and levelling up

5.6 With a view to making recommendations about:
- whether DMOs might be structured or funded differently, and if so how any proposals might maximise post-COVID recovery and long-term success
- what the role of DMOs should be, bearing in mind existing other local structures such as local enterprise partnerships, mayoral combined authorities, local authorities and other similar local/regional bodies; and where these might intersect
- how DMOs should best engage with, and be engaged by, VisitEngland, VisitBritain and DCMS, as well as wider government/public bodies where relevant

5.7 The review makes 12 recommendations in total, six of which are directed at the government, four at DMOs themselves and one each for local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and local authorities. This document sets out the government's response to the recommendations.

5.8 One of the key recommendations which was validated in the UK Government's response to the de Bois Review of destination management was the establishment of accredited Local Visitor Economy Partnerships. VisitEngland worked in close consultation with DMOs to develop the initiative, holding a series of round table discussions across England in autumn 2022 with more than 100 participants.

5.9 VisitEngland is creating a portfolio of nationally supported, strategic and high-performing LVEPs. These LVEPs will provide strong local leadership and governance in tourism destinations all over the country. The new LVEPs work in collaboration locally, regionally and nationally on shared priorities and targets. Their mission is to support and grow the visitor economy through robust destination management, strong stakeholder relationships and clear planning.

5.10 LVEPs will work closely with VisitEngland, with ongoing support from their team of five new Regional Development Leads. As well as having nationally recognised status, LVEPs provide strong leadership and management of their destinations. They will help to shape and deliver national strategy and activities. Their important role is promoted across government and national agencies, ensuring the local visitor economy is an active and valued contributor to Levelling Up and the wider economy. LVEPs are able to access expert advice, specialist toolkits and training programmes from VisitEngland in areas ranging from commercialisation, distribution, accessibility and sustainability to business support and marketing. An important strand of support will be highlighting available Government funding streams as well as developing and providing a 'toolkit' to help LVEPs with bids to those streams.

5.11 Both North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire Councils agreed that a new strategy would be required following the local government re-organisation. In January 2022, the procurement for this strategy took place and Tomorrow Tourism was successfully appointed and work commenced at the beginning of February 2022 to develop the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy.

5.12 It is recommended to adopt this strategy covering the entirety of Northamptonshire as a strategy covering a substantial geographical area is needed for a LVEP. This strategy is a tool to

work with VisitEngland and secure support and future Government funding for tourism, which Government have stated must be at a size larger than West or North Northamptonshire individually.

5.13   West Northamptonshire Council, the same as North Northamptonshire Council, will still deliver specific activities at a local level, but would work with wider partners for larger initiatives when appropriate and necessary, as set out within the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy.

5.14   The Strategy seeks to stem the recent and relative decline of the county's visitor economy. If Northamptonshire's visitor economy had grown at the same pace as our neighbours in Cambridgeshire over the past decade it would have resulted in £36m more spending by overnight visitors and some 660 jobs either safeguarded or created.

6.   Issues and Choices

6.1   The reason for collaborating with North Northamptonshire Council to develop a county-wide tourism strategy aligns with the requirements of the new LVEP's having to be across a certain sized geography, which neither local authority area would be large enough to apply for.

6.2   Furthermore, the evidence sourced to develop the strategy outlined the lack of awareness or differentiation between West and North Northamptonshire from a consumer/visitor perspective, meaning the offer is stronger and clearer as Northamptonshire. Given the similar identity, perception and offer, it is therefore logical to develop the strategy and the future LVEP.

6.3   However, this does not mean that neither West Northamptonshire Council or North Northamptonshire Council cannot and will not deliver local initiatives specific to West or North Northamptonshire.

6.4   The agreed aims for creating this strategy are:
- **Increased Visits and Value**: Increase the number of staying visitors from outside the county and encourage day visits from closer to home.
- **An Inspired & Skilled Workforce**: Develop local talent into a motivated workforce to fill vacancies, boost hospitality standards and increase pride in the place.
- **Business Growth & Collaboration**: Support and raise awareness of our visitor economy businesses, empowering them to collaborate locally and compete nationally.
- **Inspirational Places**: Promote the county as a destination for investment and tourism, attracting and expanding on our unique, diverse and contemporary offer.

6.5   A comprehensive evidence base has informed this strategy. This includes:
- A full audit of all visitor economy assets in the county including accommodation, visitor attractions, food & drink, event and retail;
- An assessment of demand, particularly relating to consumers, their perceptions of the county, propensity to visit and key drivers as well as a market review to identify broader trends and visitor insight;

- A range of workshops, surveys, consultations and presentations to ensure that businesses and other stakeholders have had ample; opportunity to contribute to the strategy along with a review of delivery models and governance structures.

6.6 A number of key factors and insight from the research have provided the basis on which the strategy is built:

- The county has a wide-ranging array of natural and built assets and a particularly strong visitor attractions base which can be a foundation for driving new and repeat business.

- However, there is also a need for new investment, in, for example, accommodation, with improved accessibility and better linkage through path networks and new travel options.

- Visitor perceptions of the County are generally positive but awareness is low.

- Partnership marketing is a key that can help unlock the potential; and stronger collaboration is critical to progressing all four strategic goals.

- Sustainability and accessibility are principles that must be woven into the strategy from the start, underpinned by the United Nations Sustainability Goals and best practice access principles.

- Improving the skills of our residents and helping the future workforce to secure employment within the tourism and visitor economy sectors is a fundamental cornerstone for future success.

- Support for businesses in their journey towards being ambassadors for the place will help ensure visitors return time and again.

6.7 A wide range of options have been debated to inform the development of this strategy. A series of Roundtable meetings were held with different stakeholders including those representing education, natural resources, town councils, the VCSE, culture, heritage and the tourism industry. As a result, the final strategy reflects these broader perspectives and can be seen to represent a consensus amongst the sectors.

6.8 The aims will be delivered with reference to four central objectives relating both to activities and to ways of working:

6.8.1 **Dynamic and tailored marketing** – this is fundamental to increasing visitor numbers and activity will naturally focus on attracting visitors from outside of the county particularly on short breaks for both leisure and business. Activity will also engage those that already live and work in Northamptonshire as there are many opportunities and benefits for residents to also enjoy what is on offer. Research indicated a major interest from residents to visit local tourism attractions, for example, and that helps to sustain an offer which is notable in both its quality and diversity.

6.8.2 **Improving Quality and Skills** – this remains a national challenge post-Brexit but is perhaps more pronounced in Northamptonshire due to intense competition from other growing sectors like logistics. Jobs in the visitor economy can lead to good prospects and rapid promotion for motivated local people. The county has an in-built advantage given its leadership on tourism

studies with over 25 course offered by the University, Northampton College and other providers. With these foundations, there is a real opportunity for the county to be a national exemplar that can support local people in receiving the skills they need and help growth businesses recruit staff. In addition to providing a pipeline of skilled recruits, our small businesses need support in key areas such as accessibility, action on net-zero and digital advancement. This part of the delivery programme will tackle these priorities to provide a boost to quality and productivity.

6.8.3 **Planning for the Future** - there is a lot already going on with major regeneration schemes reshaping our town centres and new green and blue routes providing compelling new leisure and tourism opportunities which businesses can get behind. These opportunities need be joined up and developed as part of the 'tourism product' on offer, connected to the travel trade and promoted by the new Northamptonshire LVEP. Without doubt there are other investments that can help raise the profile of the county and create additional reasons to visit. These opportunities may be leisure or business focussed, rural or urban-based, linked to existing regeneration schemes or completely new. For example, an increase in higher end hotel accommodation is one asset that would undoubtedly help the county grow its visitor economy.

6.8.4 **Collaboration** – this is also a key objective in its own right and is embedded across the Strategy. New and innovative ways of working will be developed, to embed the strategic leadership which has started to develop over the last 18 months, and also because the complexity of the sector which demands that effective partnerships are forged to guarantee longer term success. There is a need to develop and support a culture of high-quality organisations working in a connected way to favour of the visitor economy. While the LVEP will spearhead this endeavour, the two Councils will need to provide some early leadership in support of the wider objective.

6.9 This Strategy runs from 2023 to 2030 with the delivery of much of it to be coordinated by a LVEP for Northamptonshire. Anticipated outcomes following the adoption of this strategy and the associated action plan include the following:
- Increased value of staying leisure visitors
- Increased overall visitor spending
- Creation of new jobs
- Improved accommodation offer and standards
- Creation of new businesses
- Reduced carbon emissions
- Increased inward investment
- Increased pride in place
- Increased Gross Value Added

6.10 The alternative option would be to not have a Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy. However, this would not be a recommended approach as both councils wouldn't have a clear direction or plan to address the challenges faced by the declining visitor economy in Northamptonshire. Without a dedicated strategy, the county might miss out on valuable opportunities to attract more visitors, generate increased spending, and create jobs which can be realised by delivering county-wide initiatives.

6.11   Additionally, without a coordinated effort through a joint strategy, the potential for collaboration with industry, education, and other stakeholders may remain untapped. The alternative of not having a strategy could result in a fragmented approach, where each authority operates independently, possibly leading to duplicated efforts, inefficiencies, and a lack of a unified vision for the development of the visitor economy.

6.12   By not adopting the Tourism Strategy, Northamptonshire might also miss the chance to align itself with the national framework set by Visit England and the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. The absence of a strategic plan would prohibit the county's ability to establish a LVEP, which is crucial for implementing effective policies and initiatives at the local level.

6.13   **Next steps are as follows**:

6.13.1 Both local authorities to consider the Northamptonshire strategy at their respective Cabinet/Executive meetings with the intention to launch publicly, engaging with partners, stakeholders and local businesses

6.13.2 To begin working collaboratively with the private sector, with the support and guidance of Visit England, to develop a proposal for a Northamptonshire LVEP. Once developed, both local authorities to provide detailed plans and financial implications to be mutually agreed by the relevant bodies ahead of submitting to Visit England for LVEP accreditation.

7.   Implications (including financial implications)

7.1   **Resources and Financial**

7.1.1   The development of this strategy has been funded jointly between West and North Northamptonshire Councils. UK Shared Prosperity Funding has been utilised to offset most of the cost of this work, along with the Economic Growth budget.

7.1.2   At this stage the Strategy does not include any reference to future costs and there are no immediate resource or financial implications arising from the recommendations. This reflects the fact that it is a joint-Council initiative and that the delivery arrangements and the proposals for the LVEP are yet to be put in place.

7.1.3   Maximising the use of existing resource, such as both Councils' tourism assets and staff, and measures to support local businesses, will also play an important role.

7.2   **Legal**

7.2.1   There are no legal implications arising from the proposed recommendations in this report.

7.3   **Risk**

7.3.1   There are no significant risks arising from the proposed recommendations in this report.

7.4   **Consultation and Communications**

7.4.1 An extensive range of stakeholders have been engaged and consulted during the development of this strategy, from across the Visitor Economy sector including private, public and Voluntary sector organisations.

7.5 **Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny**

7.5.1 This report has not been considered by Scrutiny, but will be subject to call in.

7.6 **Climate Impact**

7.6.1 In shaping the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy, the UN Sustainability Development Goals have been integrated for a purpose approach. The initiatives align with economic growth (goal 8) and sustainable infrastructure (goal 9), while also emphasising the responsible tourism practices for community wellbeing (goal 11) and environmental stewardship (goals 12 and 13). By reducing carbon footprints and fostering inclusivity, this strategy not only enhances the region's appeal but reflects a commitment to global sustainability goals and responsible travel practices.

7.7 **Community Impact**

7.7.1 Delivery of this strategy will have many positive impacts for residents across Northamptonshire. It is a countywide approach designed to start us on a positive journey to managed growth, supported by both Councils working closely together, and seeking a strong and collaborative approach with the industry, key stakeholders and other public sector partners, taking account of a broader development agenda, encompassing innovation and best practice to make Northamptonshire stand out - not just as a great place to visit but also as a place to live, work, to run a business.

8. **Background Papers**

8.1 [The de Bois Review: an independent review of Destination Management Organisations in England](#)

8.2 [Government Response to the Independent Review of Destination Management Organisations in England](#)