

From: David Smith - Director, Economic Development

To: Cabinet Members Meeting (CMM)

Date: 4 January 2021

Subject: Response to Scrutiny Committee's Short Focused Inquiry on Kent's Visitor Economy

Classification: Unrestricted

Electoral divisions: All

Summary:

Scrutiny Committee's Report on the impact of Covid-19 on Kent's Visitor Economy acknowledges that KCC has worked hard to support the sector throughout the crisis; the Report makes eleven specific recommendations to help the sector's reopening and recovery. This paper reproduces each of those recommendations and suggests how we should respond.

Recommendation:

Cabinet Members are asked to endorse a very positive response to the Scrutiny Committee's Report on the Visitor and its recommendations.

1 Background to the Scrutiny Committee's Report

During summer 2020, after the first lock-down, Scrutiny Committee conducted a short, focused inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on Kent's hospitality and tourism industry. The Committee took evidence from businesses and organisations, including Visit Kent, affected by the pandemic. Its Report described the importance to Kent of the visitor economy and provided evidence showing how the sector was badly affected by the pandemic. The Committee acknowledged the support offered by Government and the actions being taken by KCC implementing the Economic Renewal and Resilience Plan. The Committee's Report made eleven recommendations intended to support the sector's reopening and recovery.

The Committee agreed its Report in August before the second lock-down and was therefore not able to take into account subsequent measures of assistance announced by the Chancellor of the

Exchequer (such as the extension of furlough and the offer of grants to pub landlords), the financial support offered by Arts Council England to many of Kent's visitor attractions, nor initiatives from KCC such as the offer of interest free loans to small and medium sized enterprises affected by Covid-19 and the actions stemming from Kent's Employment Task Force.

The Scrutiny Committee's 31-page Report is available on the web-link:

<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/documents/s100489/VisitorEconomySFIRReportFINAL.pdf>

2 Scrutiny Committee's Eleven Recommendations

The Committee set out its eleven recommendations under five headings:

Promotion and Marketing

Recommendation 1:

"KCC should look for opportunities to act as an ambassador, and should promote and reinforce the message that Kent is a safe visitor destination and is open for business."

Recommendation 2:

"KCC and partner organisations should consider the use of television advertising to promote Kent as a safe and attractive visitor destination".

Recommendation 3:

"KCC should suggest to Visit Kent that:1)Its website should be updated more regularly to reflect the current, local visitor economy offer more accurately.2)Its use of social media could be pitched to reach the younger section of the population more effectively, and to attract their custom in local hospitality and tourism."

Recommendation 4:

"KCC should promote the establishment of a regularly - occurring international marathon which involves neighbouring countries across the

Channel. This event would cement international relationships and provide an additional platform to advertise Kent, as well as promoting the benefits of sport and fitness.”

Recommendation 5

KCC should use the momentum of Straits Committee meetings and other international links to strengthen the relationship with partner local authorities across the Channel and to promote Kent’s coastal communities’ heritage, attractiveness and tourism.

Advisory and Financial Support

Recommendation 6

“The Committee endorses the aims and activities proposed by KCC’s Economic Recovery Plan as the basis for KCC’s support for local businesses. With regard to the visitor economy, the Committee recommends that KCC focuses its efforts on supporting the recovery of smaller businesses.”

The Tourism Sector Deal

Recommendation 7

“KCC should support Visit Kent in developing a county or LEP-wide bid to become one of the five pilot Tourism Zones that will drive the Tourism Sector Deal.”

Open Spaces, High Street and Transport

Recommendation 8

“KCC should work with partner organisations to regenerate Kent’s high streets and open spaces in order to encourage footfall, boost the local visitor economy and rebuild communities.”

Recommendation 9

“KCC should work with transport providers and tourism businesses to overcome “last mile” transport challenges and promote environmental sustainability.”

Skilled workforce and Training

Recommendation 10

“KCC should work closely with local businesses and educators to stimulate employment and skills development opportunities in Kent’s hospitality and tourism sectors, in response to the impact of COVID-19.”

Recommendation 11

“KCC should suggest that Visit Kent works with Locate in Kent to attract skilled workers to Kent by developing a joint destination pitch focusing on the quality of life that the county can offer.”

3 Suggested response to the Report

The Report’s analysis and recommendations were based on evidence collected during the Committee’s hearings and submissions from a wide range of interested parties. Subsequent events have not contradicted the Committee’s observations. The impact on Kent’s hospitality and tourism sector has been devastating, and nearly 90 percent of businesses in that sector have had to close, a higher percentage than any other sector.

The Committee’s Report should be welcomed as making a significant contribution to the shaping of KCC’s actions to help Kent’s hospitality and tourism sector.

Taking the groups of recommendations in turn:

- Promotion and Marketing: Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

All these recommendations can be accepted in principle.

KCC already looks for opportunities to reinforce the message that Kent is a world-beating visitor destination (recommendation 1) and we shall be discussing with Visit Kent recommendations 2 and 3.

We can particularly welcome the Committee's support for Kent's international relations in recommendation 4, and we will share the Committee's findings with the Straits Committee. This is the new, voluntary partnership that Kent County Council has created with neighbouring continental authorities from Zeeland in the Netherlands, through East and West Flanders in Belgium, to the Nord and the Pas-de-Calais départements in the French Hauts-de-France region.

A Straits tourism working group, bringing together the area's destination management organisations, is exploring creating new cross-Channel cycling trails, and we shall also suggest marathons on the lines suggested by the Scrutiny Committee.

We can support the Committee's recommendation 5. The Straits Executive Committee, made up of Cabinet members from each participating authority, meets up to four times a year to set the direction for joint working. Tourism recovery was identified as a priority at the inaugural meeting in the Spring of 2020 and a cross-Channel working group was set up to explore where closer working could support recovery. The Executive Committee is now developing a package in line with recommendation 4 that will include a focus on rebuilding cross-Channel travel once restrictions are lifted. Kent's heritage, natural and coastal assets will place it at an advantage here as emerging travel trends suggest visitors will increasingly favour nearby destinations where they can be active and feel safe and well.

The Scrutiny Committee's report notes the importance of educational tourism: the Straits tourism working group is considering measures to relaunch educational tourism as soon as the health situation allows. Beyond education, the Straits Committee is also encouraging greater involvement in each other's festivals and events, once travel restrictions between the UK and European Union are relaxed. This will involve fostering links between equivalent bodies and developing a forward calendar of opportunities.

The Report also suggests that twinning links can foster social and economic relations. The Straits Committee is actively considering how to give greater visibility to such connections including the

establishment of a competitive fund that would support the best ideas for small, grassroots initiatives.

- Advisory and Financial Support: Recommendation 6.

Since the outbreak of the crisis Kent County Council has worked hard to support the visitor economy and quickly put in place measures to support businesses seeking help. We have funded the Covid-19 Business Helpline which was launched last March and run by Kent Chamber of Commerce: it has taken over 13,000 calls with the largest number coming from businesses in the hospitality and leisure sector.

The Kent and Medway Economic Partnership highlighted the needs of the sector in its Economic Renewal and Resilience Plan and the County Council with its District and Borough partners have put in place a range of measures to help.

To supplement the Government's announcements of government-backed loans, business rates relief, and tourism and hospitality grants, Kent County Council offered its own interest-free loans to eligible small businesses. This has meant that tourism businesses across Kent have been eligible to apply for loans with a zero percent interest rate from the Kent and Medway Business Fund (KMBF). Details of an extended offer of interest-free loans will be published on the Kent County Council website later this month.

- The Tourism Sector Deal: Recommendation 7.

Visit Kent is continuing to pursue the possibility of establishing a tourism Sector deal for Kent.

- Open Spaces, High Street and Transport: Recommendations 8 and 9.

The Government has confirmed financial grants for Dover and Ramsgate and, at the invitation of MHCLG and with KCC's support, Margate has submitted a bid for £29 million for a Town Deal. KCC will also continue to discuss environmental sustainability with transport providers and tourism businesses.

- Skilled Workforce and Training: Recommendations 10 and 11.

The Employment Task Force is already addressing the issues raised in recommendation 10, and Locate in Kent is working alongside Visit Kent with a “destination pitch” that focuses on the quality of life that Kent’s visitors and inward investors can enjoy (recommendation 11).

4 Recommendation

Cabinet Members are asked to endorse a very positive response to the Scrutiny Committee’s Report on the Visitor Economy and its recommendations.

Contact details

Relevant Director

David Smith, Director Economic Development

03000 414176

david.smith2@kent.gov.uk