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To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee – 3 July 2020

Subject: Tourism sector reopening

Key Decision: No

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Paper: None

Electoral Division: Countywide

Summary: This paper provides an overview of progress towards reopening of the tourism sector and work to support these preparations in Kent. It highlights issues to be addressed and reports on cross-Channel discussions to rebuild the international visitor market.

NB: The issues highlighted in this paper had yet to be addressed at time of writing. If, however, the Government maintains the 4th July reopening date, it is likely that a number of these are resolved by the time the Committee meets on 3rd July.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is invited to note the contents of this paper.

1. The Government’s Covid-19 recovery strategy

- 1.1** On 26 March 2020, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 came into force, imposing restrictions on people’s movements and gatherings, and requiring the closure of certain retail and public premises. As a result, Kent and Medway’s visitor economy closed down almost completely.
- 1.2** The Government’s Covid-19 recovery strategy, published on 11th May, foresaw the progressive easing of restrictions on people’s movements and the reopening of the economy in three phases. The tourism sector formed the third stage with 4th July being the earliest date when hospitality – including food service providers, pubs, accommodation providers - public places and leisure facilities such as cinemas would be allowed to open. Reopening would, however, be dependent on people continuing to meet social distancing guidance and on meeting the five tests the Government has set: these are protecting the NHS; a falling death rate; a virus reproduction rate (R rate) of less than one; testing and personal protective equipment (PPE) in place; and no risk of a second peak.
- 1.3** Since the launch of the strategy, modest easements have allowed greater access to the Kent countryside and certain attractions to reopen. Increased social contact and use of outdoor space was permitted from the end of May. Changes to advice on accessing green space meant ticketed gardens could

reopen from 6th June and, following industry lobbying, zoos (outdoor areas) reopened alongside non-essential retail on 15th June. Howletts and Port Lymne reserves and Wingham wildlife park were amongst the Kent zoos and animal parks that reopened on 15th June.

2. Issues affecting the reopening of the tourism sector

- 2.1 Certainty that tourism and hospitality can reopen on 4th July:** Government has not yet confirmed that tourism will reopen on 4th July and further delay will reduce the ability of the sector to generate income necessary for survival. The lack of a confirmed date also creates a financial risk for the tourism supply chain as it has to invest in advance to supply the sector at the time of reopening.
- 2.2 Operating guidelines:** Cross-governmental taskforces were set up in May to develop guidelines on how to operate in a Covid-secure way. At time of writing, these had still not been shared, delaying business preparations for reopening. If 4th July is confirmed as the reopening date, it is expected that the guidance will be released around the same time as the confirmation of this date.
- 2.3 Social distancing:** Adapting operations to respect social distancing is essential but the tourism sector has been urging the Government to consider reducing the distancing to one metre, the distance in use in France. This would allow businesses to operate closer to normal operating capacity. Government has said that the guidance is under review and, at time of writing, an announcement is expected on 23rd June.
- 2.4 International travel restrictions:** The Government confirmed on 8th June a compulsory 2-week quarantine on all travellers arriving in the UK as a measure to control the spread of the virus. To help facilitate international tourism, the Cabinet Member for Economic Development has discussed with Ministers the possibility of “airbridges” – air corridors between the UK and specific countries that would be exempt from the quarantine: the Government is currently negotiating such arrangements with a number of countries.

3. Helping the sector to recover in Kent: the work of Visit Kent

- 3.1** Since the outbreak of the crisis, Visit Kent, Kent’s destination management organisation, has worked hard to support the sector, focussing efforts on four areas of activity: business support and recovery; Covid-19 impact monitoring; sector representation to Government; and consumer engagement.
- 3.2** Extensive, business support information on government guidance and support for the sector from central and local government has been made available on Visit Kent’s Covid-19 business support webpages. Visit Kent has also carried out extensive surveying and monitoring with intelligence gathered fed into Government departments and representative bodies.
- 3.3** In preparation for reopening, Visit Kent have run a series of themed, online roundtables where businesses can learn how their peers are preparing, share tips and good practice. A series of further training webinars will also be launched once the Government operating guidance is published. All events and training have been made freely accessible online.

3.4 Market outlook: Perception audits suggest some 36% of the UK population are feeling confident that the public health situation will allow them to take a holiday in July and August, and this figure rises to over 60% in September. Coastal and countryside destinations appear favoured with camping, caravanning and self-catering accommodation options expected to prove particularly popular initially.

3.5 There will, however, be intense competition for the staycation market and effective marketing of all there is to do in Kent will be important. Visit Kent is preparing a new marketing campaign that will highlight the “Secret garden of England” and its hidden gems. Customers will also want reassurance on safety and businesses will need to ensure high visibility is given to hygiene regimes.

4. Rebuilding cross-Channel travel

4.1 While the immediate focus remains on the domestic tourism market, Kent has a long tradition of receiving international visitors, particularly from near and neighbouring regions on the continent. With anxiety around long-haul travel and flying expected to outlast the crisis, destinations closer to home and accessible by other transport, means Kent may become increasingly attractive to visitors from our near neighbours across the channel.

4.2 Both Visit Kent and Kent County Council have longstanding connections with counterpart organisations on the continent and have been working through the Straits Committee, a new, voluntary partnership between Kent and neighbouring Belgian, Dutch and French local authorities, to explore the potential for working together to promote each other’s markets.

4.3 Executives from the main destination management organisations in the Straits area met virtually in early June to discuss possible future joint initiatives and further proposals for an outline programme of work will now be developed.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The coronavirus crisis has hit Kent and Medway’s large visitor economy severely and the report shows the continued uncertainties the sector has had to face as it prepares for reopening. Even if the impacts of the crisis may not be fully offset this year, the report highlights the intensive work Visit Kent has been undertaking to ensure Kent recovers as much as is possible as soon as reopening is allowed.

6. Recommendation

The Cabinet Committee is invited to note the contents of this paper.

8. Background Documents - None

9. Contact Details

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