

Overview and Scrutiny Report

Ward(s) affected: All

Report of Strategic Services Director

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## Review of Visitor Strategy

### Executive Summary

The Executive approved a Visitor Strategy 2014-2020 in October 2014. As requested by the Committee, this report presents the strategy and invites comment on its delivery. The report also discusses the next steps to develop a framework for supporting the visitor economy, including the production of a new economic strategy to direct our future approach.

### Recommendation to Committee

That the Committee be invited to comment on this report.

### Reason(s) for Recommendation:

The Committee has asked to review the Visitor Strategy 2014-2020 as part of its work programme.

**Is the report (or part of it) exempt from publication?** (delete as appropriate)

No

### 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report provides an opportunity to review the former Visitor Strategy 2014-2020 and action plan and consider future support for the visitor economy.

### 2. Strategic Priorities

- 2.1 Guildford draws in a broad spectrum of leisure and retail visitors, all contributing to the borough's economic vibrance and vitality. Prior to the pandemic, with around three million visitors each year, the visitor economy generated an estimated £340 million income, whilst also supporting around 6,300 jobs for local people.

2.2 The visitor economy, therefore, contributes to our objective of ensuring that residents have access to the jobs they need. Our corporate priorities also state that we will support our business community and attract new inward investment.

### **3. Visitor Strategy 2014-2020**

3.1 Guildford's beautiful countryside and heritage, together with its extensive retail cultural, sporting and leisure opportunities all help to attract visitors. This makes the visitor sector an important part of the local economy in terms of income, jobs and potential for growth.

3.2 In October 2014, the Executive approved a new Visitor Strategy 2014-2020 (attached as Appendix 1) to maximise the positive impacts of the visitor economy and increase visitor expenditure. The overall aim was to identify distinctive selling points for Guildford, build a clear brand and work with stakeholders and partners to deliver a co-ordinated marketing approach.

3.3 The strategy set out the following priorities:

- Improve the visitor experience to Guildford.
- Develop a Guildford visitor economy that is cost effective, long-lasting, potentially self-financing and beneficial to the borough.
- Raise the profile of Guildford to local, domestic and international visitors to attract a larger share of the tourism market.
- Celebrate a Guildford festival culture by developing a coordinated programme of events that strengthens the visitor economy.
- Ensure Guildford's visitor businesses are influencing other organisations' plans to attract investment and enhance the borough visitor economy.
- Develop the Council and town's heritage offer including development of the castle and museum site and creation of a heritage quarter.

3.4 During most of the timeframe of the strategy (2014-2020), the Council had dedicated tourism and economic development teams. Following various staffing reorganisations, these services are no longer provided in the same way and none of the staff involved with developing and implementing the strategy remain. An update on progress against the action plan was produced, but this was some time ago in 2016. However, the main activities in delivering the strategy and other achievements are noted below:

- (a) Development of "Visit Guildford" brand and website.
- (b) Production of regular promotional publications, including Visit Guildford Destination Guide, Venues Guide, Attractions Guide and Guildford Summer Festival Brochure.
- (c) Operation of the Tourist Information Centre.

- (d) Delivery, support and promotion of a wide range of events.
  - (e) Improvements to town centre signage.
  - (f) Support for local food producers, including through Farmers' Markets.
  - (g) Continued support for Guildford's Town Centre Guides.
  - (h) Maintaining Purple Flag accreditation and Green Flags for parks.
  - (i) Organising and hosting trips by group travel organisers and overseas delegations.
  - (j) Promotional advertising in many national and international travel publications and attendance at trade shows and forums.
- 3.5 From March 2020, the focus of our support for the local economy and businesses very much centred on our emergency response to the Coronavirus pandemic. This primarily involved promoting and administering several mandatory and discretionary business grant schemes. Having been most severely impacted by the pandemic, the leisure, entertainment, retail and catering sectors would have been amongst the most significant beneficiaries.
- 3.6 As lockdowns eased, we also implemented a wide range of safety and other measures to encourage visitors and shoppers back through government funded programmes such as the Reopening High Street Safely Fund and Welcome Back Fund. Practical measures and events were supported by communication campaigns, including Eat Out to Help Out, # I Support Guildford and Christmas 2020 and 2021. Working in partnership with Experience Guildford, the latest campaign to support the visitor economy, Celebrate Guildford, is running until September 2022 and promotes the wide range of events and activities taking place in the borough through the summer months.

#### **4. Future Support for the Visitor Economy**

- 4.1 During the lifetime of the former Visitor Strategy, the Visit Guildford brand has been promoted through several printed publications and advertisements. The most common requests received face-to-face at the Tourist Information Centre are for bus timetables and maps. There are opportunities to reach a wider audience in a more cost-effective way by providing improved support online.
- 4.2 Visitor economies have evolved and we need to change to support our own local sector. The internet boom from 2000 and then social media means that venues can market themselves cheaply online. Anyone with internet access can search a vast amount of information to help them make choices. People increasingly use smart phones to inform their purchases, they trust their peers with websites such as TripAdvisor and they navigate around with Google maps or equivalent.
- 4.3 There have also been changes in the way support to the visitor economy is provided by the Council. As part of Phase B of the Future Guildford

transformation programme, the tourism marketing function transferred to the Strategy and Communications Team. Operational management of the Tourist Information Centre became the responsibility of the Customer and Case Team. A new approach will be needed to provide a modern, digital and online visitor communications and marketing service and we will work closely with partners such as Experience Guildford, Visit Surrey and Surrey Hills Enterprises.

- 4.4 Work is progressing to commission a new longer-term economic strategy for Guildford. This will include chapters to cover important local issues, such as support for gaming and high-tech clusters, rural economy, training and skills and the visitor economy. This will provide the framework for our support of the visitor sector in the coming years. We are aiming for the strategy to be adopted before the end of 2022.
- 4.5 In the shorter-term, we are aligning more closely with Visit Surrey to capitalise on the visitor economy at county level as 'the jewel in Surrey's crown'. Our historic Visit Guildford website is now outdated and unfit for purpose. A new standalone website would cost around £25,000 to set up with further annual support costs. Therefore, we are developing a "site within a site" on the Visit Surrey website to provide greater exposure at reduced cost. The Visit Guildford brand will not be compromised.
- 4.6 Access for visitors, reduced congestion, improved public spaces and better signage will also be important for the future success of our visitor economy. The work on Shaping Guildford's Future will be crucial to supporting the town as a destination that people want to visit in the medium to longer term.

## **5. Consultations**

- 5.1 The Lead Councillors for Environment and Economy have been consulted on this report and approved its submission to the Committee.

## **6. Key Risks**

- 6.1 The visitor economy contributes towards providing residents with the jobs they need and our corporate priorities commit us to supporting our business community and attracting inward investment. Without effective support for the sector, there is a risk that its positive impact will not be maximised.
- 6.2 The internet, social media, smart phones and other technological advances have changed the way people access information. There is a risk that our support and promotion of the visitor economy does not adapt to complement these changes. We intend to outline our approach in a new economic strategy to ensure that we provide a modern, effective and efficient service.

## **7. Financial Implications**

- 7.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

## **8. Legal Implications**

8.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

## **9. Human Resource Implications**

9.1 There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

## **10. Equality and Diversity Implications**

10.1 There are no equality and diversity implications arising from this report. Any future changes to the service will have regard to the aims of the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010) and may be subject to an equalities impact assessment.

## **11. Climate Change/Sustainability Implications**

11.1 There are no climate change or sustainability implications arising from this report.

## **12. Suggested issues for overview and scrutiny**

12.1 As requested as part of its work programme, this report gives the Committee the opportunity to comment on the delivery of the Visitor Strategy 2014-2020 and support for the visitor economy in future.

## **13. Summary of Options**

13.1 None.

## **14. Conclusion**

14.1 Visitors make an important contribution to our local economy and support a significant number of jobs for residents. The Visitor Strategy 2014-2020 set out our framework for building a clear brand for Guildford and working with stakeholders and partners to deliver a co-ordinated marketing approach.

14.2 There have been significant changes to the staffing structure at the Council in recent years. There have also been many technological changes impacting on the way people find information. Whilst building on the work of the previous strategy, we need to adapt to reach a wider audience by providing a modernised, improved service with alternative digital and online communications.

## **15. Background Papers**

None

## **16. Appendices**

Guildford Borough Visitor Strategy 2014-2020