

## Destination True North

Raby Castle 12/09/2025

### True North Visitor Economy Event Summary

#### Introduction

The theme of the event was growing tourism in the North. Without doubt the North East and Cumbria is a treasure trove of rich history and heritage, two world heritage sites, stunning unspoilt landscapes, miles of glorious sandy beaches, dramatic peaks and the darkest of skies. Couple this with award winning attractions, the most incredible food and drink offer, world class events and film locations and endless outdoor and indoor activities and pursuits for all ages and abilities, the region in its entirety is very much a hidden gem. A destination with the right conditions, that is ripe for growth.

In 2024 the North East visitor economy was worth an estimated £6bn supporting approximately 63,000 jobs, whilst in Cumbria the sector made a contribution of £4.6bn with 74,823 jobs, literally a quarter of the jobs available within the county. Overall visitor figures were down slightly on the previous year, with notable exceptions in Durham and Northumberland and the region continues to work towards reaching and overtaking pre-pandemic levels.

The sector however is not without its challenges with tourism businesses citing a variety of issues such as transport and infrastructure, connectivity, rising employment costs, difficulties with recruitment and a skills gap, an over focus on areas such as the Lakes and Northumberland coast which bring with it local community frustrations, over regulation and a need for more investment and marketing to highlight the region nationally and internationally.

#### We asked the conference the following questions:

How do we create the right environment for tourism and the sector to flourish in the North;

Employability – how do we ensure we have a skilled workforce and balance increasing costs whilst maintaining an attractive offer.

What do we need to do to have an all-year-round tourism economy whilst still offering a product that local people use and what should national Government and our regional authorities do for the long-term vitality of our tourism visitors and communities.

Transport and Infrastructure – what improvements do we need to see to deliver on the above questions.



The audience of over 80 people was made up of people from a variety of sectors and age groups – tourist attractions, museums, local businesses, cultural sector, media and screen industry, hospitality, including hotels and accommodation providers and food and drink, local government representatives, transport providers and small businesses of various kinds. A wide-ranging audience all deeply invested in the visitor economy in the north.

Our panel members leading the discussion were Rhiannon Hiles, Chief Executive of Beamish Museum, Alison Gwynn, Chief Executive of North East Screen, Daniel Harrison MBE, Former CEO of True Potential, Trustee of the Harrison Foundation and family owner of Matfen Hall. We also heard from Cllr Elizabeth Scott the former cabinet member for the tourism economy in County Durham who did a short presentation to show how working positively and in partnership County Durham increased the economic benefit to the county to over £1 billion per annum. The event was chaired by Cllr Amanda Hopgood, former leader of Durham County Council.

### Discussion

There was little doubt from the meeting that the visitor economy in the North could do more, that it underperforms and lags behind other areas, this is despite some of the best facilities nationally and fantastic natural assets.

The word map below demonstrates the views expressed in our questionnaire including the words:

Fragmented    Ambitious    Asset Rich    Seasonal    Lagging other areas

Potential    Promising    Opportunities    Insular    Growing

Needs kiss of life    Training    underfunded    lacking investment    award winning

**Cllr Elizabeth Scott** began the event with a presentation demonstrating what can be achieved when we focus on our tourism offer, work in partnership and collaboration and promote the sector as an economic driver. She highlighted how Durham County Council focussed over the last four years on a cultural led inclusive economic strategy and how that had increased in that time period the economic value of the visitor economy for the region from £800m to £1.4bn with numbers and jobs now exceeding pre pandemic rates.

**Rhiannon Hiles** showed the event the promotional video which assisted in Beamish Museum being voted UK Museum of the Year 2025, demonstrating the amazing visitor attraction and the diverse offer it has for all ages. She focussed on how the visitor attraction industry should work collaboratively, how by working together they can provide an offer that would attract visitors to the area for a longer stay, whilst still maintain an offer for residents local to the area. To enable long term success training and skills needs to be a priority for the industry working in partnership with education providers.

**Alison Gwynn** played a video promoting some of the excellent productions funded and produced by North East Screen, these productions highlighted the wonderful assets we have in the north, whether that be our fabulous world heritage sites or fantastic natural assets and landscapes. Alison was optimistic for the future of the region if we get the national support needed, the film and production centre is the largest growing sector in the country and the North has the chance to not only be part of it but lead on it.

**Daniel Harrison MBE** focussed on the hotel and hospitality industry, the lack of support nationally for the industry whether it be through tax incentives or planning policy that creates extra work, cost and blockages to expansion and investment. He highlighted how infrastructure and transport links in the region can be a barrier for both visitors and staff, the recruitment of staff especially in the more rural areas of the region is challenging.

There followed a wide-ranging debate with participation from all parts of the northern visitor economy.

The main recommendations coming out of the event are as follows:

### **National**

True North is calling for national support for the visitor economy in the North East and Cumbria, aiming to balance the visitor economy nationally so that not only do visitor's experience the outstanding heritage and attractions on offer but that the region can reach its true potential economically.

International tourism is expanding but its not reaching all parts of our area, it is too much London focussed. We require national bodies to promote the region at key locations both outside and within the UK, this should include amongst other outlets such things as trade events, online promotions, key transport links.

Fair and equitable capital investment into infrastructure, the North is significantly underfunded when it comes to public transport and our road network. Despite being the main gateway on the east coast to Scotland, Northumberland is the only county in England without a motorway, recent changes to the LNER timetable have reduced links from Edinburgh to Durham to less than a handful per day and public transport between the east and west remains woeful.

We require an increase in strategic thinking so that the industry can reach its potential, tax, NI and VAT rates are having a huge effect on the ability to not only recruit but to expansion of sectors of the industry. With reduced rates of taxation for the tourism industry the potential for expansion and investment and therefore ultimately a greater contribution to the regions GVA would benefit not only business but the public purse.

A change is required when it comes to national planning policy. Current policies are restrictive, time consuming and excessive in terms of delivery and cost. Time and money spent on planning is currently disproportionate and could be much better used invested in frontline delivery.

## Regional

To unlock the true potential of our northern visitor economy, there is a need to create our own **Destination True North** to drive growth, create jobs and improve infrastructure. There has never been a better time for us to work collaboratively as a region so that this sector can reach its full potential. With two combined authorities and a third one hopefully coming soon this should be a main driver for economic growth, this will require investment and partnership working.

Tourism and the creative industry is a key driver for our future. Along with the mayoral combined authorities, local authorities need to get behind the sector, our region needs to be more than a stop off for people, it is and should therefore be promoted as an exciting and fulfilling destination for visitors, increasing the overnight stay rates and bed space offer will benefit the region as a whole economically.

As a region we need to recreate a regional brand whilst protecting our local identities, they are not exclusive and can be used in tandem. Collaborative and partnership working within the industry in certain locations has demonstrated what can be achieved, this needs to be expanded and become the norm to ensure that the benefits are felt by all.

Devolution provides us with many opportunities going forward, this includes working with our education sector to ensure that we have the right courses and skills for the future. With a thriving film and media sector we have the potential to embrace this to help us with the creation of **Destination True North**.

