

BRIEFING NOTE | JULY 2020

Support for the visitor economy, with a focus on rural and coastal areas

About the District Councils' Network

The District Councils' Network (DCN) is a cross-party member led network of 187 district councils. We are a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association (LGA) and provide a single voice for district councils within the Local Government Association.

District councils in England deliver 86 out of 137 essential local government services to over 22 million people - 40% of the population - and cover 68% of the country by area.

District councils have a proven track record of building better lives and stronger economies in the areas that they serve. Districts protect and enhance quality of life by safeguarding our environment, promoting public health and leisure, whilst creating attractive places to live, raise families and build a stronger economy.

Challenges facing the visitor economy and rural areas

- In some areas seeing an increase in community tensions, between residents and visitors. This is particularly true in areas where a mass influx of tourists with little or no regard for an area has resulted in excess litter, public disorder, inconsiderate and dangerous parking. Antisocial behaviour is causing 'new' issues in some rural areas e.g. nighttime forest parties in the Lake District, and wild camping leading to increased litter. It is not yet clear whether this is a reaction from a sustained period of lockdown and pent up frustration that will ease soon, or a more prolonged situation. Scenes of overcrowding such as those featured in the media recently have the potential to undermine efforts to restore public confidence.
- Some tourist attractions/venues report it will pose a significant challenge for some of our attractions/venues/events to reopen profitably with current social distancing requirements.
- In shire county areas, district councils are at the forefront of enabling the visitor economy to restart – through environmental health, licensing, managing public realm, ownership of attractions, links to business, provision of car parking, public conveniences etc. For instance, some districts are deploying information officers from their licensing team to support reopening of hospitality. However, enforcement, and associated resources to deliver, remains a concern.

- Dealing with these issues results in more costs for district councils at a time when many licensing and environmental health teams are already stretched. E.g. responding to the licensing law changes, input into test and trace etc. as well as continuing to deliver all business as usual services. These teams are generally small, and their roles complex – it is not easy to redeploy staff into these roles. Further funding should be made available to these councils, making use of the Delta returns provided to MHCLG. Sparsely populated rural Councils also need the certainty that Rural Services Delivery Grant will be continued for 2021-22, at least at its present value of £81 million in total.

How government can support the visitor economy

- In the short term, it is important to avoid a cliff-edge, with a shortened and smaller summer season, followed by an end to government support in October leads these economies facing 'three winters. We would encourage the government to consider further support for these communities – especially for the hospitality, leisure and cultural sectors, where indoor activities are likely to remain restricted for some time. Cash flow will remain a challenge, and there are concerns that furloughed staff will turn into redundancies at end of job retention scheme and as we reach off-season.
- Looking more widely, many coastal communities already experience high levels of seasonal employment and high levels of deprivation. Efforts to restore tourism are welcome, but this needs to look at the needs of coastal communities more widely, and how they might diversify and build their resilience going forwards, as part of the government's commitment to levelling up. Some communities have experienced flooding, recession, coronavirus, with just a few years, and these communities are very fragile. Will government support be available to protect jobs and business if these areas experience local lockdowns over the winter period?
- Government needs to be clear and consistent in public messaging – are we actively encouraging tourism and travel? How will this then be impacted at a local level if there is a local outbreak requiring restrictions to be re-imposed? DCMS and MHCLG (and BEIS) coordination is important to coordinate guidance and communications messaging.
- Visit England and Destination Management organisations could play a role to coordinate messaging around travel and encourage people to a) visit a diverse range of places, to avoid too many people descending on one place and/or b) build on support for staying local by encouraging people to discover new places nearby.
- With an increase in private car use, and increase in single use face masks, antibacterial wipes, etc, the easing of lockdown has seen a step backwards for climate change. There is an opportunity to relaunch public messaging on this and link to recent littering in tourist areas.
- Partnership with county councils is vital. In order to respond quickly, it would be helpful for districts to be able to take decisions on highways restrictions in the public realm locally, such as town centres, and on local footpaths, leaving strategic routes to the LHA.

Our offer

- Districts are highly invested in ensuring a successful visitor and leisure economy. In many cases they are direct providers, running tourism attractions themselves, and many own regional airports either directly or indirectly.
- Council licensing teams ensure that businesses operate safely and manage risks of community disorder; environmental health teams ensure the reputation of the place is maintained by reducing instances of food poisoning or fraud.
- The planning system plays a key role in protecting, enhancing and improving the historic and natural environment

Our asks

Districts can do more if government:

- Devolve business support funds would enable councils to lead a more stable and coordinated approach to business support, helping the longer-term development of tourism businesses.
- Work with the sector to develop an effective but proportionate regulatory offer. Support councils to adequately resource licensing and regulatory teams, and review licensing and other fees to ensure they are cost neutral, and specific regulatory projects to support business development should be fully funded.
- Invest in active travel and rural bus provision to more effectively join up public transport with rural attractions and accommodation.
- Through their statutory functions, and role in economic development, districts are well placed to support the visitor economy to recover locally, through place-based tourism recovery planning and initiatives.
- Introduce a tourism tax to be set and retained locally by districts, in line with most other countries.
- Unspent discretionary grants for business should be retained for local benefit at no further cost to the government, with local areas working in partnership with Destination Management Organisations/Arts Councils regions or LEPs to benefit the visitor economy.
- Councils need the certainty that Rural Services Delivery Grant will be continued for 2021-22, at least at its present value of £81 million in total.
- To promote domestic tourism and encourage people to explore their local area and local attractions, government should undertake a national marketing campaign.

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