

## Report of: Strategy and Review Business Manager

To: Executive Board

Date: 20 February 2006

Item No:

### Title of Report : Developments in Tourism in Oxford

#### Summary and Recommendations

**Purpose of report:** The purpose of this report is to update the Executive Board on the changes and progress in tourism in Oxford. Several changes have been made in relation to the Council's approach to the management and promotion of tourism over the last couple of years and this report updates members on changes and successes in tourism over that period.

**Key decision:** No

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Maureen Christian

**Scrutiny Responsibility:** Community

**Ward(s) affected:** All

**Report Approved by:** Councillor Maureen Christian, Janet Banfield, Andy Lett, Caroline Bull, Sharon Cosgrove, Michael Lawrence, Mark Luntley, Mike Newman, Anne-Marie Scott, Lindsay Cane.

**Policy Framework:** Tourism links to several elements of the Council's Vision Statement and helps to meet strategic aims of the Council. It helps to improve the environment where we live and work and also creates local prosperity and sustains full employment.

**Recommendation(s):** To note the comparative value for money and new clarity of management of tourism in the city; and progress made in performance, product improvement and collaboration.

#### Summary

- Over the last two years, there has been a clarification of the strategic direction of the City Council in regard to tourism. This includes the recognition of the value of visitors to the local economy, the need to increase the length of stay of visitors and the amount of spend in the local economy. There is also an understanding of the need to improve the perception of visitors among local people and to diversify the product and offer to visitors.

2. Comparison of UK local authorities compiled by the Audit Commission ranks Oxford City Council below average in terms of spend on tourism. This is particularly apparent when compared with other historic cities in the UK with similar draw of visitors. For instance, Cambridge City Council has over 3.5 times the expenditure on tourism of that compared to Oxford despite having lower visitor numbers.

## **Introduction**

3. Over the last two years, several major changes have been made to the way that the Council manages and promotes Oxford as a place to visit. Oxford receives over 7.7 million visitors per annum and therefore requires effective tourism management.
4. The Tourism Strategy and Action Plan for the City and County of Oxford 2003 – 2008, produced in March 2003, identifies a five point action plan:
  - Planning on the basis of relevant and reliable data
  - Marketing the whole county externally as a visitor destination
  - Improving the visitor experience
  - Improving transport links into and around the county
  - Involving Oxfordshire communities in developing and promoting tourism
5. These action points have been developed during the past year and a number of key successes achieved.
6. Current tactical imperatives include:
  - Increasing length of stay of visitors
  - Increasing spend of visitors
  - Improving the perception of visitors among local people
  - Diversification of product and offer

## **Oxford Marketing Group**

7. The Oxford Marketing Group is a partnership between the Council and the local industry to ensure the effective management and promotion of tourism for Oxford. The group consists of around 55 members from all types of business with an interest in tourism. These include accommodation providers, attraction operators, museums, tour operators, University representatives, retailers, transport operators, language schools, cultural organisations, conference venues and other relevant agencies such as Environment Agency, OX1, Tourism Better Business Scheme and local authority tourism departments.
8. An effective steering group made up of local industry operators manages the group and the group is currently chaired by the regional tourist board, Tourism South East, on behalf of Oxford City Council.

9. The group has achieved considerable successes over the last year and is action driven. One such success is that following a SWOT analysis exercise undertaken in May 2004 the need for a central conference desk for Oxfordshire was identified as a key priority for the industry. The development of this desk is reported later in this report.

10. Membership has increased by 10-15% since 2004.

11. Subscription is £50 for an individual establishment and £100 for a group/multiple establishment. This develops a fund of approximately £3000 per annum and the money is reinvested in Oxford tourism in consultation with the group. Typical uses include PR campaigns, attendance at trade fairs and development of new print.

### **Destination Oxford**

12. As mentioned above, the SWOT analysis carried out in May 2004 with the Oxford Marketing Group identified the key need and desire by the tourism industry in the county to establish a central conference desk in Oxford. Indeed, Oxford is conspicuous in the UK by its absence of a conference desk. Between 1999 and 2001 business visits accounted for 25% of all trips, 17% of all nights and 31% of total spend by tourists to Oxford, illustrating the huge growth opportunity of this sector. Business tourism offers high quality; high spend of the tourism spectrum.

13. The industry has led on the establishment of "Destination Oxford" the first dedicated conference desk for Oxfordshire. To date the desk has 66 signed up partners. The desk operates as a partnership between the Council and establishments and has employed an agency (AYA Venues) to run the desk. The desk operates on a standard commission basis, charging 9% on business placed. 1% of this will follow back from the agency to Oxford tourism for approved marketing support of business tourism.

14. The desk has a dedicated phone number, brochure/CD and website ([www.destination-oxford.com](http://www.destination-oxford.com)). To date, £890,000 worth of enquiries has been received, with a conversion rate of 32.94%. This is higher than the industry norm. There have been 85 enquiries and 28 confirmed bookings.

### **Oxford Print**

15. All official Oxford tourism printed material has been re-branded for 2006 to reflect a more current image and to create a "family" feel that is easily recognisable to the visitor as part of the official tourist publications on Oxford. Positive feedback has been received from visitors, the local industry and international offices of VisitBritain.

16. This recognisable "Visit Oxford" brand has been incorporated in advertising undertaken for visit Oxford in neighbouring districts publications, city break magazines and heritage city publications.

17. This "family" was enhanced for 2006 and a comprehensive rate card package for advertising was offered to the local industry. This package has allowed the publications to become cost effective for the first time allowing future growth in 2007 and beyond.

## **Partnerships**

18. Oxford has recently become a member of Britain's Heritage Cities group - a marketing consortium linked to VisitBritain. The existing members are Chester, Bath, Brighton, Edinburgh, Stratford and York. The consortium focuses its marketing activity on the US and other long-haul English-speaking countries. Web marketing ([www.heritagetocities.com](http://www.heritagetocities.com)) and E-marketing are the key undertaking rather than printed material. Indeed it is the only destination website that is listed by VisitBritain.
19. Oxford is also now working closely with the Destination Performance: UK group, in a grouping known as "City 2" – a group of similar sized historic cities. This group allows valuable benchmarking and networking.
20. The city is also represented on the recently established LGA Tourism Forum.
21. Oxford also represents Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire on Team South East. Team South East is a multi-agency group that feeds in direct to the board of Tourism South East.

## **Community**

22. Steps have been made in trying to improve the image of tourism with the local community.
23. The first residents survey was undertaken in 2004 with Talkback sub-panel members. A response rate of 43% was achieved. Encouragingly, 74% of locals visit attractions at least 2 or 3 times a year or more often with 68% saying that they would speak highly of visitor attractions in Oxford. The full report is available at [www.visitoxford.org/factsandfigures.cfm](http://www.visitoxford.org/factsandfigures.cfm)
24. One idea suggested in this survey was the introduction of an open day for residents (85% said they favour the idea), it is hoped that this can be piloted in 2006.
25. It is also hoped that some promotions and competitions can be run in conjunction with local media to raise the profile of tourism in the city as a key employer and economic driver during 2006.
26. A Tourism E-Newsletter is also circulated monthly to Councillors, industry representatives, key tourism contacts and other interested parties, given updates of key tourism developments both locally and nationally.

## **Visitor Interpretation**

27. In November 2004, all finger posts across the city were painted blue and gold as an attempt to improve clarity of direction to visitors and residents. Positive feedback has been received on this improvement. Following this, there has been a comprehensive audit of all the posts and a list of amendments suggested. This includes highlighting of the Tourism Information Centre "finger" and removing unnecessary "fingers".
28. Given that signage has been identified as a key priority by recent visitor surveys at the Oxford Information Centre, the Visitor Information Boards and maps at 11 key sites through the city have been re-designed in line with the tourism brand. The new boards have user-friendly maps on them and contain interesting information relating to its location, together with some fascinating facts.

## **Visitor Survey**

29. The results from the 2005 Oxford City Destination Benchmarking Visitor Survey have recently been published. 83% of respondents to the survey fell into the most affluent "ABC1" socio-economic classification and the 3 key origins of overseas visitors were USA, Australia and Germany. The average length of stay was 6.6 nights. At an average spend of £94.52 per person per 24 hours, staying visitor spend has increased by around 33% since 2003. Day visitor spend has increased by 5% over the same period to £24.46 per person per 24 hours. 88% of visitors rated their overall enjoyment of their visit as high or very high with 93% likely to recommend Oxford as a place to visit to others. The full report is available at [www.visitoxford.org/factsandfigures.cfm](http://www.visitoxford.org/factsandfigures.cfm)

## **Data**

30. Progress has been made in partnership with Tourism South East on the development of a localised data collection model for Oxford. This will allow the provision of clear and accurate tourist data that is robust and justifiable.

## **Website**

31. A great deal of improvement to the Council's official tourism website ([www.visitoxford.org](http://www.visitoxford.org)) has been made over the last year. This includes the introduction of on-line booking for accommodation and walking tours along with a user-friendly database of what to see and do and useful information. It is hoped that further work, including a re-designed home page and Oxford Marketing Group members-only area will be progressed in 2006.
32. The home page of Visit Oxford has been one of the most frequently visited pages of the main Council website ([www.oxford.gov.uk](http://www.oxford.gov.uk)) and for 2005

received on average 20,100 views per month, peaking at 35,000 in March 2005.

### **Tourism South East**

33. Contracts with Tourism South East to provide assistance to Oxford Tourism have been reduced to nil for the financial year 2006/07, allowing more management and promotion of Oxford tourism directly from Oxford City Council ensuring better value for money and direct management control.

### **Oxford Information Centre**

34. Three customer satisfaction surveys were undertaken in 2005 for the Oxford Information Centre – one business survey and two visitor surveys. On the whole, high levels of satisfaction were reported however areas for improvement that were identified are now being addressed. The results of the 2005 Visitor Survey stated that 85% of interviewees rated the Centre's quality of customer service "excellent" or "good". The full report is available at [www.visitoxford.org/factsandfigures.cfm](http://www.visitoxford.org/factsandfigures.cfm)
35. Better liaison has been developed with the tourism industry, particularly accommodation providers, with whom the Centre works very closely, through regular meetings and open evenings. Liaison with the Oxford Guild of Guides, who provide the official walking tours of the City, has also been improved with similar events.

### **Conclusions**

36. Given the considerable progress made with the development of the "Visit Oxford" brand and coherent marketing activity it is hoped that this progress will continue to raise the profile of Oxford as a truly world-class city.

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**Background papers:** None.

