

To: Cabinet
Date: 15 December 2021
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Tourism Review Recommendations Update

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned Tourism Review Recommendations Update
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Liz Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Mary Clarkson, Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism
Corporate Priority:	Support Thriving Communities, Enable and Inclusive Economy, Pursue Zero Carbon Oxford
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendation in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 08 September 2021, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report to Cabinet concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned Tourism Review Recommendations Update. This report is delayed in being presented to Cabinet owing to an officer oversight.
2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Mary Clarkson, Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism for presenting the report and answering questions,

Iain Nicholson, City Centre Manager, for supporting the meeting and Matt Peachey, Economic Development Manager, for authoring the report.

Summary and recommendation

3. Councillor Andrew Gant addressed the Committee concerning this item at the start of the meeting in his capacity as the Chair of the Tourism Management Review Group. The review had been a good piece of work with which he was proud to have been involved. Covid-19 had, inevitably, had a profound impact on tourism, as recognised by the update report. This was a matter which warranted more active engagement and the update provided an opportunity to ask that Cabinet revisit the report and recommendations and he urged the Committee to make a recommendation to that effect.
4. Councillor Mary Clarkson, Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure & Tourism, introduced the report. Inevitably much of the work in this area had come to a halt as result of Covid-19. The Council had continued to work with Experience Oxfordshire and provided £50,000 to help support the visitor economy until March 2023. It was unlikely that the Council would be in a position to provide further funding to Experience Oxfordshire which was, now, moving towards operating on a more commercial basis. The emerging Oxford Economic Strategy and City Centre Action Plan would include recovering and rebuilding the visitor economy as a priority. Visitor numbers had plummeted as a result of the pandemic and were currently estimated to be just 15% of the number in 2019 and were anticipated to reach 50% of the number in 2022. Work on identifying alternative arrangements for the delivery of visitors by coach was continuing with the County Council, with a site near the Westgate being considered as an additional drop off location to help ease pressure on St Giles. It would not, however, be meaningful to conduct a consultation (for which funding was available) on options given the atypically low number of coach arrivals at the present time. Officers were working to find a suitable premises for a visitor centre in the hope of finding someone willing to run it on a private and commercial basis. A fundamental challenge was to persuade visitors to spend more time and money in the city. The majority of visitors were estimated to spend no more than 90 minutes in the city. The recent opening of hotels in and close to the city should be help with that.
5. In response, issues that were considered in detail by the Committee included:
 - Parking arrangements for coaches
 - Recent developments in the idea of a cable car running from Redbridge Park and Ride to the City Centre
 - The expected timing of the City Centre Action Plan
 - The future of Experience Oxfordshire
 - Toilet provision in the City Centre
 - Activities relating to the Waterways
6. The Committee makes four recommendations: two made at the meeting relating to i) the environmental impact of tourist traffic to Oxford, and ii) the availability of public toilets in the City Centre, and two subsequently which relate to the benefits

of promoting domestic tourism, and evaluating the impact of Covid and recent policy announcements on previous recommendations made by Scrutiny to the Cabinet.

Environmentally Sustainable Tourist Transport

7. A significant proportion of the discussion held by Scrutiny, evidencing a widespread concern, was over issues relating to making tourist transport to Oxford more environmentally sustainable. With the majority of visitors spending not more than 90 minutes in Oxford, the environmental cost of coming to Oxford has a short period in which to be amortised by other corresponding benefits. This makes it incredibly important, particularly in light of the high ratio of visitors to residents, that the environmental impact of tourist transport is managed as much as possible. The Committee were particularly interested in the new plans for coach parking away from St Giles, the future impacts of the Zero Emissions Zone on coach traffic, and issues of accessibility from the train station to the City Centre. The Committee was also given an update on the previously-mooted idea around a cable car, running from Redbridge Park and Ride to the City Centre, which had recently had a developer come forward with a proposal alongside the world's primary cable car manufacturer. Multiple other meetings with civic, business and environmental groups had also taken place.
8. The Committee recognises that there is a wide matrix of stakeholders responsible for the environmental sustainability of visitor transport to Oxford, with the County Council, bus and coach providers being key. The City Council does not fall within this group who hold primary responsibility, making it more difficult to make direct interventions. However, the Council is not without the ability to influence –its planning policies, the OxWED development, and its joint-working with those key partners on other environmentally-focused traffic initiatives are all opportunities for the Council to press for policies which will promote more environmentally sustainable visitor transport. The Committee asks that the Council give full thought as to how this influence can be maximised.

Recommendation 1: That the Council plans how it will work with those responsible for tourist travel to Oxford more environmentally sustainable

Public Toilets in the City Centre

9. The second issue raised by the Committee is one which Scrutiny has previously made recommendations concerning. A recommendation made by the Companies Scrutiny Panel meeting of 13 March 2020 requested that “the Council tasks the City Centre Manager to reinvigorate and republicise its previous scheme for allowing members of the public to use shop toilets in the City Centre and the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group requires ODS to coordinate with these efforts and capitalise on any benefits accordingly.”
10. This recommendation was made just days before the country went into its first Covid-19 lockdown, meaning the response by the executive was not provided until June 2020, supporting it. Clearly, however, the disruption of Covid has lasted far longer than almost all people anticipated, making it impractical to implement this recommendation. However, the paucity of public toilet provision in the City Centre remains. Although tourist numbers are currently low relative to pre-pandemic levels, this remains an urgent issue for a proportion of those

visitors. It is the view of the Committee that the period when visitors have not returned in the same numbers is an apposite time to commence the groundwork for a scheme, in readiness for when they do.

11. The Committee does recognise that Covid does pose additional challenges to such a scheme. However, it also recognises that decreased footfall is problematic for City Centre businesses, and that similar schemes elsewhere have reported business increasing from participation. In light of the need for access to toilets, the fact that toilet use (and therefore risk) would mainly be displaced rather than reduced if the scheme were not offered, and the positive impact on business for those participating, on balance the Committee supports the revival of the partnership with City Centre shops to provide a toilet scheme.

Recommendation 2: That the Council revives its partnership with City Centre shops to provide a toilet scheme.

Domestic Tourism

12. As referenced in the summary, the following recommendations were made by the Scrutiny Committee not during the meeting at which the original report was considered, but when signing off the draft of this report.
13. Since the report was considered in September, the national and international situation with Covid-19 has deteriorated significantly. Much of the country had received vaccinations which offered a high degree of protection from Covid, and the general trajectory was positive, with a sense that normality (or at least a new normality) would be restored in due course. The emergence of the Omicron variant has significantly altered this trajectory, with the efficacy of vaccinations reducing against the new variant and additional measures reintroduced to limit its spread.
14. One of the most significant changes concerns the ease of international travel, with the reintroduction of stricter quarantine requirements. This is clearly expected to have a negative impact on the number of foreign tourists for some while into the future; even if the Omicron variant were to be brought under control there would likely be reluctance to commit to overseas travel for some considerable time whilst the threat of new variants (and new travel restrictions) remained. As such, the view of the Committee is that efforts to promote Oxford as a destination to international travellers is unlikely to be effective at present, and that domestic tourism – with its lower financial and time commitment, and greater flexibility – is likely to be more fruitful. The Committee recommends that the Council, along with its partners, devotes its attention to attracting domestic tourists to Oxford rather than overseas ones.

Recommendation 3: That the Council in its work with partners, pursues a renewed focus on attracting domestic tourists to Oxford

Reviewing the Effects of Covid and Other Changes

15. As is illustrated by the point above, Covid has had, and continues to have, a hugely disruptive effect on local tourism. The landscape has changed inordinately over two years.
16. In spring 2019 Scrutiny's Tourism Review Group convened, generating 21 recommendations across a series of key issues facing tourism in Oxford, including the need for a vision, coach management and transport planning, tourism levies and revenue generation, tourism products and events, and public realm and access improvements. The view of the Committee is that the Review Group engaged with key strategic issues for Oxford, which have remained of relevance despite the changing landscape. The recommendations made, however, were based on the pre-Covid environment and much has changed since.
17. At the time this report was heard by the Scrutiny Committee the Oxford Economic Strategy and City Centre Action Plan were both being worked on but were incomplete. Many of the questions the Scrutiny Committee wished to ask about the Council's course of action in relation to particular Tourism Review Group recommendations were provisional, subject to the publication of these two documents, or were unable to be answered at all. Now that this major piece of work has been undertaken and the Council has a clear policy and strategy framework within which tourism issues stand, that post-Covid re-evaluation is possible. The Committee suggests that the Tourism Review Group was a strong engagement with the key strategic issues facing tourism in the city, and its recommendations were an effort to address these. Whilst some recommendations may be unworkable in the new environment, some may have become more important. The view of the Committee, however, is that this work was of sufficient weight as not to be simply left behind by Covid, and that there is significant value in the Council re-engaging with these recommendations and reviewing its previous responses to them in light of the vast changes that have occurred since.

Recommendation 4: That the Council reviews and updates its responses to the recommendations made by the Tourism Review Group in light of the changes of Covid and the proposed Oxford Economic Strategy and City Centre Action Plan.

Further Consideration

18. Whilst Scrutiny is unlikely to consider a further update report this civic year on the Tourism Review, it will be considering an update on the Waterways in the new year, an important element of which relates to their contribution to culture, heritage and tourism.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 08/09/2021 concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned Tourism Review Recommendations Update

Response provided by Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism, Mary Clarkson

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agree?</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1) That the Council plans how it will work with those responsible for tourist travel to Oxford more environmentally sustainable	Yes	
2) That the Council revives its partnership with City Centre shops to provide a toilet scheme.	Yes	
3) That the Council, in its work with partners, pursues a renewed focus on attracting domestic tourists to Oxford	Yes	
4) That the Council reviews and updates its responses to the recommendations made by the Tourism Review Group in light of the changes of Covid and the proposed Oxford Economic Strategy and City Centre Action Plan.	Yes	

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