

**Report to:**

**TOURISM, ECONOMY AND COMMUNITIES  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Relevant Officer:**

Philip Welsh, Head of Tourism and Communications

**Date of Meeting**

18 November 2020

## **TOURISM PERFORMANCE UPDATE**

### **1.0 Purpose of the report:**

1.1 To provide information on tourism performance in 2020 including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the visitor economy and the measures that are in place to aid its recovery.

### **2.0 Recommendation(s):**

2.1 To consider the performance of Tourism and associated services and to identify any further areas for scrutiny as appropriate.

### **3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):**

3.1 To ensure constructive and robust scrutiny of the report, which has been requested by the Committee.

3.2 Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.3 Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

### **4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:**

4.1 None

### **5.0 Council priority:**

5.1 The relevant Council priority is

- "The economy: Maximising growth and opportunity across Blackpool"

## **6.0 Background information**

### **6.1 Visitor Numbers**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the suspension of the annual Omnibus research, which is usually carried out three times year (January to April, May to August, and September to December).

That means the Council is unlikely to have any clear indication of the overall impact of the pandemic on our visitor numbers during 2020 until the annual STEAM data is published in the middle of next year.

The latest STEAM independent research figures for 2019 showed that Blackpool's annual visitor numbers had remained in excess of 18 million, with the value of the visitor economy increasing to more than £1.6bn.

Given that the tourism industry was closed between March 2020 and the beginning of July 2020, and then badly affected by restrictions during the all-important October 2020 half-term, it is inevitable that the visitor numbers for this year will be substantially lower than 2019.

Some indicators are available to the Council for this year such as footfall and car park usage which can provide a reasonable barometer of visitation trends.

The car parking figures for July 2020 onwards (when the tourism industry started to open up) show that patronage was higher than previous year on five of the nine weeks to the end of August 2020. Similarly, levels of footfall during the summer months were strong as large numbers of people took to the Promenade during the school holidays.

That trend continued into the first three weeks of September, but as more restrictions were introduced, consumer confidence began to wane. During October 2020, traditionally one of the busiest months of the year, car parking patronage fell by more than 40,000.

### **6.2 2020 Events Programme**

This year's events programme has been wiped out by pandemic restrictions with Pride, Armed Forces Week, Air Show, Ride The Lights, World Fireworks, Nickelodeon Slimefest and Lightpool Festival all cancelled.

Other events that bring large numbers of visitors to resort such as conferences and events at the Winter Gardens, including the USDAW conference, GMB Congress, Rebellion Punk Festival, International Soul Festival and the World Dance Championships were also unable to take place.

The only high-profile event the Council was able to stage was the annual Switch-On, though this was done in a virtual format rather than the usual concert in front of 20,000 people on the Tower Festival Headland.

The virtual event was staged in association with the Switch-On partners, MTV, and culminated in the 2020 Illuminations display being switched on by seven "Corona Heroes".

The hour-long streamed event, which included a mixture of “at home” and live performances in the Empress Ballroom generated a huge amount of media coverage.

More than 225,000 households around the world tuned into the virtual show, creating the biggest audience in history for an Illuminations Switch-On event. At one point, the show was trending at number six in YouTube’s top ten videos with people watching across the UK as well as in Australia, Brazil, Netherlands, France, Ireland, Cyprus and America.

Given the success of the virtual event, it is being explored whether next year’s Switch-On could be a mixture of live event and streamed event that is accessible to a much bigger audience.

At the start of the summer season, a decision was taken to extend the Illuminations season by two months, running through Christmas and New Year for the first time in history.

This initiative, aimed at helping businesses to recoup some of the heavy losses they incurred in the initial lockdown, undoubtedly captured the public and media’s imagination and attracted large volumes of visitors prior to pandemic restrictions tightening towards the end of September.

Although the first half of that two-month extension has had to be suspended due to the national lockdown, it is hoped the lights can be switched back on in early December 2020 and run through until 3 January 2021.

### 6.3 Marketing/Key Messaging

At the point of the initial lockdown being imposed on 23 March 2020, the Council would normally have been preparing to roll out the annual destination marketing campaign with TV advertising across Scotland and the north of England.

Instead, a “Do Not VisitBlackpool” message was adopted to deter people from non-essential travel which evolved into “VisitBlackpool Safely” as some restrictions eased and large volumes of people headed to the coast.

At the same time, the focus of the Council’s marketing activity moved to preparing for the reopening of the tourism economy at the start of July. This developed into three key distinct pieces of marketing activity.

The first element was delivered under a theme of “*Know Before You Go*”, focused on building trust with visitors and managing their expectations when they visited hotels and attractions that had been required to limit capacity and operate in a very different way to normal.

Weekly tracker research was used to provide insights into the sort of attractions that consumers would feel most confident about visiting in the first weeks of the post-lockdown period and what they would be looking for in terms of health and safety measures that were in place.

The campaign was website based with social media and PR support, and provided visitors with a wealth of information before they set off. This included details of how the attractions were working to deliver a COVID-19 secure environment, what facilities were available in resort, up-to-date public health guidance and full details of all of our businesses participating in the VisitEngland COVID-safe

industry standard scheme.

The second phase, "*We're Good To Go*", focused on building demand as public confidence started to return and complemented the national staycation campaign launched by Visit England.

This revised approach adopted a much more proactive stance on inviting and welcoming visitors back to Blackpool. There was extensive use of social media to promote our messages and used the Council's close ties with national media and TV to generate significant amounts of PR on what Blackpool was doing to kick-start its tourism industry.

As Blackpool moved out of the summer and into the autumn Illuminations season, the Council's messaging switched to a more celebratory theme of "*Bring On The Light*". Marketing activity included extensive use of social media, outdoor digital screens in the Granada region and advertising on Nickelodeon TV channels as part of our Switch-On agreement.

#### 6.4 Tourism Recovery

In the early stages of lockdown, a Tourism Recovery Group was established comprising key stakeholders in the visitor economy to ensure there was a consistent approach to reopening the resort when conditions allowed.

These meetings enabled businesses to discuss their recovery plans and, as different attractions and venues were allowed to open, provided an opportunity to share best practice and customer insights. It also ensured that as a resort the same key messages to visitors were adopted.

The group, which includes attractions, theatres and representatives from the accommodation sector continues to meet on a weekly basis and provides an invaluable platform for feedback from on the impact of ever-changing rules and restrictions.

As the Council move towards the end of the year, the group will focus its attention on preparing for the 2021 season.

#### 6.5 Plans for 2021

Work on a new destination marketing campaign for 2021 is already underway, although the timing of the launch of that activity will be dependent on what restrictions are in place in the run-up to the New Year.

Our campaign usually commences around Easter but the intention is to commence marketing activity much earlier so that the Council is in a strong position to capture people's attention when they are actively starting to think again about holiday plans.

As it stands, there is already a strong product in place for 2021 with a number of high-profile shows booked at The Winter Gardens from March onwards, the opening of the conference and exhibition centre and two new hotels (Sands Venue Resort and Premier Inn North Pier). Blackpool Pleasure Beach and the Empress Ballroom will both celebrate 125-year anniversaries.

Our own major events programme is also due to be reinstated, though along with other event

organisers, forward guidance as to when large crowds will be able to gather is still awaited. In the meantime, work will be undertaken to develop contingency plans should some restrictions still be in place.

6.6 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

**7.0 List of Appendices:**

7.1 None

**8.0 Financial considerations:**

8.1 None

**9.0 Legal considerations:**

9.1 None

**10.0 Risk management considerations:**

10.1 None

**11.0 Equalities considerations:**

11.1 Non

**12.0 Sustainability, climate change and environmental considerations:**

12.1 None

**13.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:**

13.1 None

**14.0 Background papers:**

14.1 None