

Report to:

SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD

Relevant Officer:

Philip Welsh, Head of Tourism and Communication

Date of Meeting:

1 July 2020

TOURISM RECOVERY PLAN

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To gain an insight into how Blackpool Council is developing a tourism recovery plan for the resort in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown. The report is intended to illustrate the steps that the Council is taking to facilitate this recovery process together with key partners in the visitor economy.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To note the content of the report and challenge planning progress.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 To ensure the recovery plan is robustly challenged.

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 On March 23, 2020, the Government declared that the country had moved into a lockdown phase as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.1.1 This resulted in the immediate closure of the vast majority of Blackpool's tourism and hospitality industry (although a small number of hotels were allowed to continue to trade to accommodate key workers). The timing of the lockdown could not have come at a more critical time for businesses dependent on tourism as it came just before the start of the tourism season at Easter.

6.1.2 The report is intended to demonstrate the steps that the Council is taking to facilitate recovery as the Government starts to ease restrictions.

6.2 **Key dates**

6.2.2 Blackpool's tourism industry went into lockdown from March 23 as part of the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely anticipated that Government will start to ease restrictions on the tourism and hospitality industry from July 4, although at the point of writing this report that date had yet to be confirmed.

6.2.3 Forward guidance on how the tourism and hospitality industry can start to re-open, including a possible reduction in the 2m social distancing rule was expected to be announced at a Government briefing on Tuesday 23 June. If there is a reduction in social distancing guidance from 2m to 1m that will have undoubtedly have a significant positive impact on the viability of many tourism businesses who are faced with operating at a significantly reduced level of capacity and income with a 2m rule in place.

6.2.4 For a number of businesses operating in the tourism sector, the amount of notice they are given for reopening is key, as it will take some of them several days (if not weeks) to bring furloughed staff back into the business and prepare for opening under what will be very different and challenging operating conditions.

6.2.5 This has been demonstrated by the announcement on zoos which gave them less than a week's notice that they could reopen from 15 June. In Blackpool's case, the zoo will not reopen until 29 June 2020 to ensure all preparation work and retraining of staff is completed.

6.2.6 The Council has been working closely with its own key attractions for several weeks now and most are assuming that 4 July 2020 is the key date. Holiday accommodation, pubs and restaurants are also working towards that date. Given the current continuing social distancing measures, there is no guidance as to when theatres and venues will be allowed to open although it is hoped that this will be clarified in the 23 June 2020 briefing.

6.3 **Preparing for recovery**

Industry Standard

- 6.3.1 VisitEngland is continuing to work on a new industry standard for tourism and hospitality businesses that can be rolled out ahead of 4 July 2020. Again, at the point of writing this report, it was due to be launched in the week coming 22 June 2020.
- 6.3.2 The standard will take the form of a voluntary registration and assessment process that will enable businesses to acquire a nationally recognisable accreditation mark and give a credible form of assurance to build customer confidence that the industry is taking all necessary steps to ensure public safety.
- 6.3.3 The working title for the accreditation scheme is *'We're Good To Go'*. VisitEngland has stated that the online registration will be free for businesses including hotels, Bed and Breakfasts, attractions, venues, restaurants and pubs and that a helpline manned by up to 40 advisors will be put in place to help businesses to get through the accreditation process.
- 6.3.4 From a Blackpool perspective, the Council is planning to align itself to this national industry standard firstly, because it will be recognisable across most of the sector and, secondly, because the domestic staycation campaign that VisitEngland is looking to roll out during the summer is likely to be linked directly to the *'We're Good To Go'* messaging.

6.4 **Resort Infrastructure**

6.4.1 Beach Patrol

Our Beach Patrol service operates year-round, albeit with reduced numbers of staff outside of the normal bathing season. Given the increasing numbers of people already starting to use the beaches and Promenade areas, coupled with further easing of restrictions and the onset of warmer weather, seasonal staff are being recruited to ensure we have a fit-for-purpose service in place for the summer season. In addition to their normal duties, Beach Patrol are using their mobile loudspeaker system to remind people of social distancing advice and the need to dispose of litter in a responsible way.

6.4.2 Signage

Extensive signage has been installed across the resort to reinforce the safe distancing messages. There are three variations – one aimed at beach users, one at visitors to our parks and the other a more generic one be installed at arrival points, car parks and at locations around the town centre. A fourth variation has been developed with the Town Centre BID to coincide with the easing of restrictions on non-essential retail from 15 June 2020.

6.4.3 Litter

The initial easing of lockdown restrictions created significant issues with litter being dumped on the promenade and beaches, even though bins were not full. In response to this, a new anti-littering campaign, “*Don’t Be A Scruff, Bin Your Stuff*”, has been launched with posters installed along the length of the promenade, supported by PR activity and a social media campaign.

6.4.4 Tourist Information

The Council’s own facilities management service is working to prepare the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) to re-open to the public from early July with necessary social distancing and staff/customer protective screens in place. This opening date is subject to satisfactory risk assessments being undertaken.

It is anticipated that over the coming months, the TIC will be used less as a ticket agency and more as a focal point of information on what facilities are open. It will also be used to reinforce safe distancing and hygiene advice. We are planning to sell a range of I Heart BPL face masks.

6.4.5 Public Toilets

A number of public toilets were reopened by Danfo in mid-May 2020 because of the increasing numbers of people visiting the resort. The opening of the new block at Flagstaff Gardens (opposite South Pier) has been delayed because the contractors were taken off site at the point of lockdown. Work resumed at the start of June with a view to getting these facilities open before by the first week of July 2020.

6.4.6 Car Parking

Although most of the Council’s car parks remained operational during the lockdown, there was no enforcement in place which meant any users were able to park for free. From the start of June, the civil enforcement officers returned to their duties and have been carrying out a softly-softly approach to ticketing on car parks with a view to returning to a normal service from 1 July 2020.

At the end of May, the new PayByPhone parking app was launched that allows customers to pay for their parking without queuing, handling cash or touching payment machines. It also enables users to top up their parking session from a remote location. The initial take-up has been extremely encouraging. Extensive signage has been installed around the car parks and along the Promenade to encourage people to download the app.

6.4.7 Inbound Rail Services

Blackpool-bound services have been heavily disrupted during the lockdown period with rail operators encouraging essential travel only. The main regional operator, Northern Rail, has confirmed that there will be an uplift in Blackpool-bound services (including the restoration of the Manchester Airport to Blackpool service) from 6 July 2020. They are also reviewing their messaging as to when they can start to promote leisure travel as opposed to essential travel only. The introduction of the new daily London services by the operator, Grand Central, has been delayed until 2021.

6.4.8 Coach Travel

The lockdown has already had a serious impact on the coach industry with a number of operators going into administration during the pandemic and the risk of more to follow.

Those that have gone into administration, including Shearings, Wallace Arnold and National Holidays, brought an estimated 200,000 people into Blackpool each year, many of them staying visitors.

There are a number of large hotels in Blackpool that are heavily dependent on coach trade/group travel, particularly for the shoulder and off-season months. Key attractions and venues are also dependent on coach parties to bring in day trippers, and coach trips contribute a significant volume of visitors during Illuminations season. The key issue facing coach operators is social distancing regulations which, at two metres, mean that operators will only be able to accommodate 14 passengers on a standard coach, against a current break-even capacity of 31.

A review of Blackpool's overall dependence on coach travel in the accommodation sector and the likely scale of the economic impact on the wider visitor economy is underway.

The Council is working with coach industry representative groups to determine how it can support what remains of the coach industry and find ways of retaining those visitors who rely on this form of domestic package holiday.

The Council is also working with our own transport company, BTS, to explore what support and interventions can be made at local level, including organised tours during the Illuminations.

6.5 **Blackpool Tourism Product**

- 6.5.1 Since the early stages of the lockdown, the Council has been working closely with key venues and attractions through a Tourism Recovery Group. The key aim of this group

has been to prepare the resort for reopening when conditions allow. They have each produced their own robust recovery plans of which officers have had sight (an example is shown below under the Pleasure Beach heading).

- 6.5.2 The easing of restrictions across the wider economy is moving at a rapid pace and the only forward guidance issued to date is that tourism and hospitality businesses will be able to reopen on or around 4 July 2020, subject to them being able to meet key criteria.
- 6.5.3 Most of these criteria will be around social distancing and hygiene measures which, depending on whether there is a 2m or 1m rule in place, will have an impact on capacity and the actual visitor experience. Blackpool's various attractions are adopting similar measures including managed queuing areas, PPE for staff, enhanced cleaning regimes and a much-reduced capacity in the opening weeks.
- 6.5.4 If the tourism industry is allowed to start to reopen from 4 July 2020, there is confidence that there will be a good mix of attractions to offer to visitors. The details below were correct at the timing of compiling this report and are subject to changes depending on Government and Public Health guidance.

6.6 **Attractions**

6.6.1 Blackpool Zoo

Scheduled reopening: Monday 29 June with previews over the previous weekend. Zoos were the first ticketed attractions to be given the go-ahead to reopen. Some of the European attractions operated by the zoo's parent company have already started to open so there is a good understanding of what needs to be done to open safely.

When the attraction is reopened to visitors it will be a slimmed-down visitor experience with a capacity of 1,000 visitors, most indoor attractions closed and no "added value" animal displays where crowds might gather. Capacity will be gradually increased to up to 2,500 as the summer progresses and the Zoo is considering whether to introduce morning and afternoon sessions at some point in order to expand capacity.

6.6.2 Pleasure Beach

Scheduled reopening: 4 July 2020.

The park will be taking online bookings only and is planning safe distancing measures, regular cleaning of rides and temperature checking of staff. A key issue for Pleasure Beach will be capacity and also ensuring a positive customer experience. In the early stages, it is envisaged the park will be running at somewhere between 30 and 50% of

its normal capacity at the point of reopening. A comprehensive guide to how the park intends to reopen safely can be found here:

<https://covid.blackpoolpleasurebeach.com/>

6.6.3 Merlin Attractions

Tower Top, Sea Life and Madame Tussauds: Scheduled reopening: 4 July 2020.

Other Merlin attractions including the Tower Ballroom and Dungeon are provisionally scheduled to reopen in July and August respectively. At this time, there is no confirmed date for the reopening of the Tower Circus.

The three attractions scheduled to open on 4 July will operate with online bookings with allocation of 15-minute time slots for entry, cashless payment, one-way access through the attractions, protective screens at reception points and provision of PPE for staff and protective screens at tills.

6.6.4 Sandcastle Waterpark

Scheduled reopening: 16 July 2020 (provisional).

The Sandcastle team has produced a comprehensive reopening plan focusing on the measures that will need to be undertaken to ensure safe distancing. This includes remodelling of changing rooms, closure of some facilities and different ways of operating some of the indoor slides. Indoor waterparks clearly operate in a different way to “dry” attractions and there is little evidence to date as to how pools, spas and leisure centres can operate and with what restrictions in place.

6.6.5 Coral Island

It is anticipated that there will be a gradual reopening with the adult gaming area and takeaway food restaurant reopening in June, followed by the main arcade and other concessions and attractions in early July.

6.6.6 Piers

Scheduled reopening: 4 July 2020.

6.6.7 Tramway

Scheduled reopening: July (date to be confirmed).

6.7 **Theatres/Venues**

6.7.1 Winter Gardens

Scheduled reopening: To be confirmed.

The issue facing theatres and cinemas is less clear in terms of how they will be able to operate with social distancing in place and the inevitable knock-on financial impact with reduced audience numbers. The management team are continuing to deal with, conferences shows and events on an individual basis to determine whether they can go ahead in some form or be moved to another date.

6.7.2 Viva Blackpool

Scheduled re-opening: 4 July 2020 with reduced capacity and limited programme of entertainment.

6.7.3 Grand Theatre

Scheduled reopening: 5 September 2020.

The theatre has suspended all of its summer programme and moved its four-week run of Dirty Dancing from August this year to August 2021. The theatre is hoping to resume operations in some form from September, though that will clearly be governed by guidance on how theatres are allowed to operate. There is the added complication that some of the shows programmed in the months ahead for UK theatres might not happen because a number of touring productions have disbanded during the lockdown.

6.8 **Retail**

Non-essential shops and stores were given the go-ahead to re-open from 15 June 2020 if they could demonstrate that they had adopted COVID-19 Secure guidance. The Houndshill Shopping Centre and car park reopened on that date with most national chains opening either on the day or over the following few days.

6.9 **Hotel Accommodation**

A number of hotels have stated their intention to re-open as soon as restrictions are eased. It is anticipated that the larger hotels (particularly those operated by national groups) will be at an advanced state of readiness.

Consumer confidence research suggests that self-catering accommodation is likely to be most in demand when the lockdown eases along with large hotels that can convert

function areas into additional public eating areas.

The industry standard being developed by VisitEngland is key in terms of supporting the wider accommodation sector to open and provide reassurance to guests.

These are provisional opening dates for some of our larger hotels (though note that the dates could be subject to change). Most are expected to open with much reduced capacity though, again, that could change depending on any amendments to social distancing guidance:

The Boulevard, The Big Blue and The Imperial: 4 July 2020.

The Royal Ruskin: 6 July 2020.

The Elgin and The Sheraton: Scheduled reopening, 13 July 2020.

Choice Hotels (Cliffs, Claremont and Viking): July 2020 (date to be confirmed)

Hampton By Hilton: Has remained open throughout lockdown for construction and key workers.

6.10 **Self-Catering**

The self-catering sector including caravan parks, campsites and holiday villages would appear to be well placed to attract staying visitors in the early stages of lockdown restrictions being eased.

Haven/Marton Mere

Provisional reopening date: 6 July 2020.

Will be marketed as “Haven Hideaway” breaks with a slimmed-down offer that will allow visitors to stay in self-catering units with takeaway food service, but with no immediate access to pools, entertainment venues or on-site pubs/restaurants. Likely to operate at around 25% of normal capacity in early stages.

Ribby Hall Village

Provisional reopening date: 6 July 2020.

Will be marketed as “Ribby Retreat” packages with self-catering accommodation, takeaway good options but limited or no immediate access to pools and leisure facilities.

6.11 **Next Generation Hotels**

Premier Inn, North Pier

September opening postponed. Now due to open on December 4, 2020

Sands Venue Resort Hotel

Due to open July 2021

6.12 **Illuminations**

The annual Illuminations display provides a great opportunity to market the resort over the final third of the year. The fact that the Illuminations can be experienced as a drive-through attraction without any social distancing issues gives it an added appeal. The installation of the display is on schedule for the 4 September 2020 switch-on. In order to help businesses recoup some of the losses they have suffered during lockdown, we have announced an extension of the Illuminations season by two months, ending on Sunday 3 January, 2021.

Some of the attractions (including Pleasure Beach) have indicated that they will open weekends only into the winter months to provide additional reasons to visit the resort during this extended Illuminations season.

6.13 **Events**

The town's major events programme has already been seriously impacted with Pride, Armed Forces Week and Air Show weekend all cancelled. Other events including Ride The Lights, World Fireworks and Slimefest are all under review.

Given the difficulty of implementing social distancing at large-scale gatherings, most of these events are at risk and the Council will be looking to make further announcements of cancellations or postponements in the weeks ahead.

A virtual version of the Switch-On celebration is to be staged in association with MTV to ensure that we can generate national PR for the Illuminations. This will take the form of an hour-long streamed show, freely accessible to all on the evening of Friday 4 September 2020.

The Council is also working on a Lightpool Festival for October half-term, though that is likely to be in a reduced format because of the withdrawal of Arts Council funding and the difficulties of staging events such as the Illuminated Tram Parade with social distancing measures in place.

The Government is being lobbied to declare an additional bank holiday in October to compensate for the loss of Easter and the two May Bank holidays and officers will continue to monitor whether that creates any opportunity for one-off events.

6.14 **Marketing Campaigns**

As more of the restrictions are eased, communications are moving away from the DoNotVisitBlackpool messaging that was adopted at the point of lockdown. Since the start of June, this has evolved into VisitBlackpool Safely, reflecting the fact that large numbers of visitors were heading to the coast.

As moves are made towards a reopening of the tourism economy at the start of July, initial focus will be on messaging that provides reassurance that Blackpool is a safe place to visit.

Under normal circumstances, the annual destination marketing campaign would be currently being rolled out with TV advertising across Scotland and the north of England. That campaign, which is co-funded by key partners, has been suspended and will be re-worked for the 2021 season.

In its place, three distinct pieces of marketing activity will be launched over the remainder of 2020:

1. Know Before You Go

This first phase is focused on building trust with visitors and managing their expectations when they come here. Weekly tracker research is being used to provide insights into the sort of attractions that consumers will feel most confident about visiting in the first weeks of the post-lockdown period and what they will be looking for in terms of health and safety measures that are in place.

The campaign will be website-based with social media and PR support and will provide visitors with a wealth of information before they come to Blackpool.

This will include details of how the attractions are operating to deliver a COVID-19 secure environment, what facilities there are in resort, up-to-date public health guidance and full details of all of businesses that are participating in the VisitEngland industry standard scheme.

2. We're Good To Go

This second phase is about building demand as public confidence starts to return and taking on a much more proactive stance to inviting and welcoming visitors back to Blackpool.

VisitEngland will be launching a relatively high-profile domestic staycation campaign using the 'We're Good To Go' branding in July 2020 and it is the Council's intention to align with that, but giving it a more bespoke feel by incorporating some very specific Blackpool messaging across our own channels.

There will be extensive use of social media to promote messages and close ties with national media and TV will be used to generate significant amounts of PR on what Blackpool is doing to kick-start its tourism industry.

3. Bring On The Light

As stated earlier, the Illuminations season offers an outstanding opportunity to both extend the tourism season to the end of the year and promote a visitor experience that will not be materially affected by post-lockdown restrictions.

The Council is working on a celebratory theme called “Bring On The Light” which will play to the perception that the country is finally emerging from a period of darkness. The promotion of the 2020 Illuminations will commence during the summer and will include extensive social media activity, PR and some advertising on Nickelodeon TV channels.

The display will also be heavily promoted during the virtual Switch-On streamed event which will go out across the VisitBlackpool and MTV social media channels.

4. Planning for 2021

The annual destination marketing campaign, which is delivered in association with key partners including Merlin, Pleasure Beach, Blackpool Transport, Winter Gardens and Sandcastle Waterpark, usually commences at Easter and runs through to the end of August.

For 2021, it is intended to produce a brand new campaign that will be launched at the end of this year to ensure that the town is in a strong position to capture people’s attention when they are actively starting to think again about holiday plans. The Council is already working with an agency with national and international experience on the creative concept for the TV advertisement element of this campaign and will look to complete that piece of work in the autumn.

6.15 Monitoring

As stated earlier, through VisitEngland weekly tracker research is being used to gain insights into the public appetite to undertake day trips, overnight short breaks and extended holidays in the UK once lockdown restrictions are lifted for the tourism industry.

The research, which started on 1 June 2020 and will continue until the end of the summer holidays, has a particular focus on barriers and concerns around travel and how these evolve over time. It addresses the likelihood of UK residents to travel; when and where they plan to go; specific trip details such as accommodation and the sort of reassurances they are seeking from the sector.

The first phases of research are already throwing up some interesting pointers in terms of perceptions on car usage versus public transport; indoor versus outdoor

attractions; and the point in the future when people perceive that things will return to “normal”. It is based on surveys of 1,500 people and given the immediacy of the survey results, it will prove enormously useful in terms of being able to manage and evolve messaging over the months ahead.

Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

7.0 List of Appendices:

7.1 None.

8.0 Legal considerations:

8.1 None

9.0 Human resources considerations:

9.1 None

10.0 Equalities considerations:

10.1 None

11.0 Financial considerations:

11.1 None

12.0 Risk management considerations:

12.1 Blackpool’s tourism industry is valued at more than £1.5bn per year, supporting an estimated 25,000 jobs. A full recovery is key to the town’s future economic prosperity.

13.0 Ethical considerations:

13.1 None

14.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

14.1 None

15.0 Background papers:

15.1 None