

Report to: **TOURISM, ECONOMY AND COMMUNITIES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Relevant Officer: Alan Cavill, Director of Communications and Regeneration

Date of Meeting: 14 April 2021

TOURISM PERFORMANCE AND RECOVERY

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To provide an update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Blackpool's tourism industry over the past year and to set out plans for recovery.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To consider the report and 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 Not applicable

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 COVID-19: Impact On Tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on tourism and hospitality across the UK, exposing the fragility and hand-to-mouth nature of the industry.

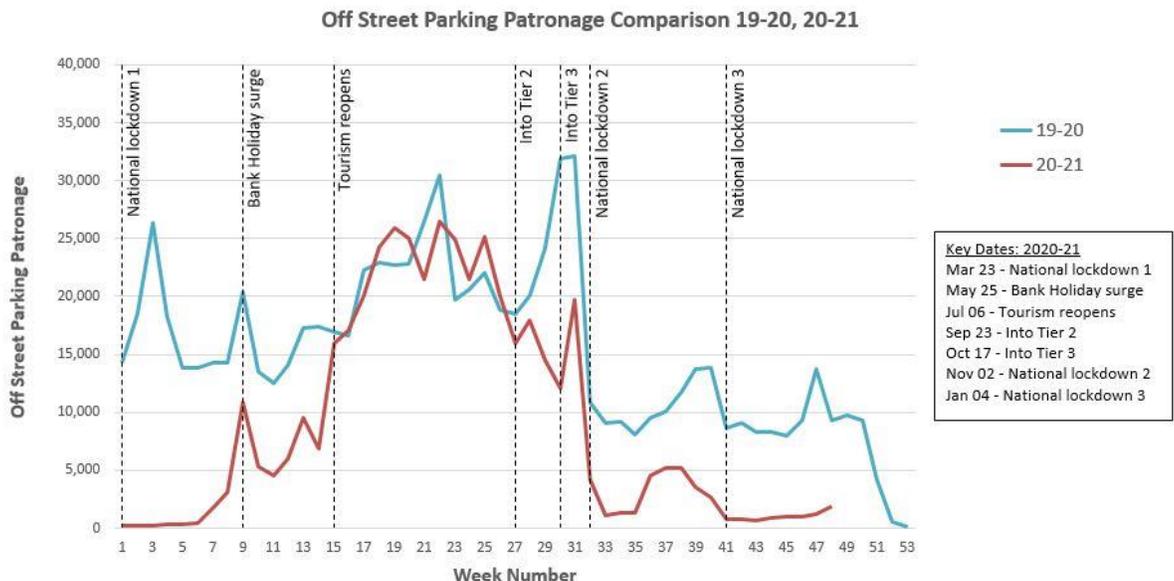
In Blackpool, the loss of key trading periods during 2020 including Easter, both May bank holidays and October half-term as a result of lockdowns and tier restrictions meant that many local businesses were left struggling to stay afloat.

In that regard, the introduction (and subsequent extension) of business support including the furlough scheme, reduction in VAT, business rates holiday, and grant schemes proved critical.

With national bodies suggesting that it could be three years or more before parts of the industry return to pre-COVID levels of turnover and profitability, it is crucial that targeted support for tourism businesses continues.

While we have been unable to accurately measure the true impact on visitor numbers over the past 12 months because research activity has been suspended, we know from indicators such as parking usage that normal levels of activity have reduced by almost half.

The chart below shows how the stop-start nature of 2020 impacted on visitor numbers, with a surge in visitor numbers when tourism was finally allowed to reopen in July last year, followed by a sharp decline as confusing tier restrictions began to undermine consumer confidence from late September onwards.



6.2 Tourism Recovery Plans

It is widely anticipated that 2021 will see a staycation boom due to ongoing uncertainty over international travel and a pent-up demand from people wanting to go on holiday after a year of restrictions.

Given the range of indoor and outdoor attractions, choice of accommodation and wide open

spaces, along with the measures that businesses have put in place to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience, Blackpool should be well-positioned to take advantage of that demand.

Subject to the Prime Minister's roadmap milestones being delivered on schedule, we anticipate that we will have a strong tourism offer from mid-May onwards, although some businesses are anticipating that they will still be operating with reduced capacity and with some social distancing measures staying in place for the foreseeable future.

If that is the case, it will be challenging to stage some large-scale events. The annual Pride Festival, due to take place in June, has already moved to a virtual format and other planned events remain under review while we await further guidance.

It is our intention to once again extend the Illuminations season by two months to give businesses an opportunity to recoup some of the income they have already lost this year due to enforced closure over February half-term and the Easter school holidays.

Given the possibility of some restrictions remaining in place, it will be 2022 onwards before Blackpool has a fully-rounded tourism product incorporating a complete programme of shows and events.

For that reason, it is crucial that recovery planning is not limited to a short-term marketing campaign and that we seek to develop a longer-term marketing strategy that is financially sustainable and capable of maintaining the resort's status as the UK's most popular seaside destination.

In June last year, VisitBlackpool established a Tourism Recovery Group comprising attractions, venues, accommodation businesses and transport providers. That group has met on a weekly basis and will continue to do so over the coming months as it provides an invaluable platform for sharing customer insights and best practice, collaborative marketing and lobbying for business support.

Although tourism has suffered serious disruption over the past 12 months, the physical regeneration of the resort continues apace with the construction of new hotels, the much-anticipated opening of the new Conference and Exhibition Centre adjoining the Winter Gardens, and the major leisure development at Blackpool Central. This investment will be a key factor in helping to secure new audiences in the years ahead.

6.3 Destination Marketing

VisitBlackpool is working closely with partners on a multi-channel tactical marketing campaign for 2021. This will focus on a number of phased elements that reflect the milestones in the Prime Minister's roadmap. This is an outline of the plan for the year ahead:

Initial phase (March to mid-April) – *Ready and waiting, start planning*

Focusing on the need to get people to respect restrictions prior to the opening up of some outdoor attractions (including Blackpool Pleasure Beach and Zoo) and self-catering accommodation on April 12, but also encouraging them to plan ahead and book attractions and accommodation as the tourism industry recovers. This initial phase seeks to build consumer confidence by using the Visit Blackpool website ([Tourist Information and Things To Do In Blackpool | Visit Blackpool](#)) to give people as much information as possible about the COVID-safe measures that are in place before they book. This part of the campaign will utilise PR and outdoor advertising, but will be primarily social media-based to give us maximum flexibility if there is any slippage in roadmap dates.

Second phase (mid-April onwards) – *Find your freedom*

Recognising that we will have a much more comprehensive tourism offer with the opening of indoor attractions, hotels and hospitality from May 17. Again, this campaign will be a mixture of PR, outdoor and social, showcasing the breadth of Blackpool's family attractions and accommodation. The messaging will become increasingly upbeat as we move towards the end of the roadmap and will major on the myriad of things that people can do during the summer as the resort returns to something more akin to business as usual. This element of the marketing campaign will also incorporate promotion of any events over the summer months (subject to them being allowed to go ahead).

Third phase (June onwards) – *You're Welcome*

As we move into the summer months, we will start to roll out an autumn/winter campaign that will see a two-month extension to the Illuminations season; high-profile events over October half-term including Nickelodeon SLIMEFEST and the Lightpool Festival; and a new, much more compelling Christmas offer. This phase will be the mainstay of the 2021 destination marketing activity with a multi-channel campaign incorporating TV, radio, outdoor, PR and social. The key objective here is to drive volumes of visitors to the resort over the traditional Illuminations season, but also generate additional visitation and spend in the final two months of the year to enable businesses to recoup some of their losses from the first few months of this year.

Fourth phase – preparing for 2022.

The destination marketing partnership has already started looking at a new campaign for 2022, when we envisage that the resort will be able to reintroduce a comprehensive package of shows, entertainment, large-scale events, and conferences and exhibitions across the entire year. The preparation work will likely include a new TV creative for roll-out in the early part of 2022.

6.4 Other Support Measures

In anticipation of a surge in visitor numbers over the coming months, it is essential that we have appropriate measures in place to support the tourism offer.

Last autumn, we successfully introduced an army of COVID marshals who were deployed at

key points on the promenade to help with social distancing, queue management and wayfinding. That scheme will continue this year and be complemented by the recruitment of a number of trained ambassadors.

There will also be a renewed focus on anti-littering to prevent some of the issues that arose last year when large numbers of visitors left significant amounts of rubbish on the promenade and sea shore. We are working closely with Keep Britain Tidy and the SEALIFE Centre on key messages to encourage people to dispose of their rubbish responsibly.

The Government has recently awarded Blackpool a total of £222,000 from the newly-established "Welcome Back" fund, which is aimed at improving the look and feel of tourist areas including the introduction of additional outdoor seating areas and pop-up food stalls. We are exploring with partners how this can be best used to support the reopening of the resort.

6.5 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

7.0 List of Appendices:

7.1 None

8.0 Financial considerations:

8.1 Details of financial considerations are contained within the body of the report.

9.0 Legal considerations:

9.1 None

10.0 Risk management considerations:

10.1 Details of potential risk are contained within the body of the report.

11.0 Equalities considerations:

11.1 None

12.0 Sustainability, climate change and environmental considerations:

12.1 None

13.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

13.1 Weekly meetings with key partners who form the Tourism Recovery Group are helping to

inform marketing strategy and future funding opportunities.

14.0 Background papers:

14.1 None