Executive Summary

- Broadband continues to be a major issue for rural communities and this is also true for Tourism businesses, visitors and destinations.

- While Local Authority budgets remain restrained, Destination Management Organisations remain important and the government should help to share best practice to augment the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of DMOs. There is also a growing need in the global market to continue to augment and invest in place marketing.

- Visitors do not stop at Local Authority or LEP boundaries and this should be reflected in opportunities for cross-border funding for tourism initiatives.

Introduction

1. The Leicestershire Rural Partnership (LRP) is an established and successful partnership which brings together stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary and community sectors to improve services and support rural communities and businesses in Leicestershire. The partnership is chaired by the lead County Council cabinet member for rural issues and Leader of Melton Borough Council, Mrs Pam Posnett. Membership includes the local branches of the NFU and CLA, local business, the Voluntary and Communities Sector including Parish Councils, the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership, District Councils and the National Forest Company.

Questions

Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?

2. Leicestershire Promotions (LPL) is the Destination Management Organisation in Leicester and Leicestershire and currently does a lot of work to promote rural tourism. LPL is well regarded for its work and has led a number of successful promotional schemes such as Stay, Play and Explore, which generated almost 32,000 additional bed nights across the LLEP area in 2014, making it one of the most successful destination campaigns in the Country. However, through local
consultation with the sector (and other stakeholders) a need to enhance resource and strategic focus for place marketing has clearly been identified.

3. Colleagues at the National Forest Company have highlighted that while the Government is focussing more on attracting international visitors; developing destinations, such as the National Forest, are still working to attract domestic customers. Therefore, a more thematic approach to marketing to a range of audiences would help.

4. A major issue is that funding made available through Government via LEPs is mainly capital based and does not allow for revenue spending on marketing and/or initiatives developed through collaboration. Some revenue funding to support the marketing of new ‘place-based’ initiatives and the development of local business-based tourism partnerships would be welcome.

5. It is also a problem when funding is restrained within LEP and Local Authority boundaries. We know that tourism is not constrained by administrative boundaries. The National Forest Company is an important partner in Leicestershire which spans several LEP and Local Authority areas. It would be beneficial if destinations could draw funding from multiple LEPs in a coordinated and streamlined way.

6. With resources stretched and public resources diminishing, there is increased need to ensure that Destination Management Organisations are structured and funded as efficiently and effectively as possible, whether from public, private or income generation sources and a coordinated sharing of good practice and exemplars by Government would be beneficial.

**Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?**

7. Decreased levels of funding, balancing the accessibility needs of more remote rural areas with those of the more urban areas, and an ageing population will make it ever more difficult to maintain current, or improve, accessibility levels, particularly by traditional bus services – hence alternative and innovative solutions need to be sought. Improved connectivity and accessibility to raise the profile and encourage alternative travel options including travel by foot and bike. In addition, work with visitor attractions to develop travel plans to reduce the proportion of their visitors and employees travelling to attractions by private car, this could include collaborative approaches between venues to test commercial viability.
Funding and fiscal policies: How can public funding be best targeted to get new rural tourist businesses off the ground and keep them going? Are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?

8. The Leicester and Leicestershire Tourism Sector Growth Plan points out that there is a need in the area to support existing businesses rather than stimulating a large number of new start-ups. It is noted, however, that supporting diversification into tourism and hospitality sectors by rural businesses is important. Investing in rural diversification was identified as a major opportunity and provides increased scope for tourism to support the wider economy.

Planning and regulation: What, if any, changes are needed to planning and other regulations covering rural areas of special character, such as National Parks, to encourage sustainable tourism?

Infrastructure and skills: What measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs? How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?

9. Broadband in rural areas is of significant importance to communities and businesses more generally. A consultation undertaken in the producing a Tourism and Hospitality Sector Growth Plan for Leicester and Leicestershire identified better broadband in rural areas as one of the main issues affecting business growth. In addition, continued support to encourage Broadband ‘take-up’ in those areas that do have access and support for businesses to ensure that they maximise its use.

10. Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership’s Tourism Sector Growth Plan recommends “Assembling a major capital investment fund to refresh and increase capacity at our major visitor attractions, including ancillary services such as conferencing, education, car parking and transport infrastructure, catering, stimulating low carbon”. We know that the nature of rural areas makes transport a barrier to growth. A lack of public transport, particularly in rural areas, affecting access for both staff and customers, has been identified as an issue for the sector across Leicester and Leicestershire. However, it is also recognised that with budget constraints, commercially viable models and sustainable solutions need to be sought. This could be achieved through greater collaboration and more joined-up approaches between sites.
11. Skills gaps and staff retention are major issues in the industry and are predicted to become more of a problem as employment opportunities in other sectors increase. There are opportunities through the Careers and Enterprise Company to promote the scope of occupations and opportunities within tourism hospitality. Continued work with local FE colleges to design skills development that meets business need and ensures that vocational training is available from entry-level through to management and local leadership.

12. The development of tourism champion networks that have the skills to effectively market the area and wider attractions to their visitors.

Local environment and character: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

13. In Leicester and Leicestershire a proposal to establish a Combined Authority (CA) to government has been submitted and discussions are ongoing regarding a local Devolution Deal. It is anticipated that the CA will have greater powers in relation to strategic planning, transport and skills. Through local consultation it has also been proposed that the CA fulfils a strategic role in terms of local place marketing and tourism development. The CA through its strategic planning role would therefore be best placed to develop local policies which support growth whilst seeking to retain and enhance the local environment and character. Clearly expertise and collaborative working with national agencies, including Defra will be essential to securing this balance.

Defra role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure government departments (including Departments for Communities and Local Government, Business, Innovation and Skills, Culture Media and Sport and HM Treasury) support rural tourism?

14. Government departments need to understand the benefits of tourism to the wider economy e.g. creative industries, food and drink and wider social and health benefits. A strong tourism offer can also be an asset when attracting inward investment to the area.

15. Funding currently available such as through LEADER and EAFRD has proven complex and time consuming to apply for, with significant delays in both programmes. These programmes could be streamlined and expedited so that rural businesses can benefit as much and as easily as possible.
16. Some Business Improvement Districts are targeting their resources to encourage Tourism activity. There could be a role for Government in sharing best practice to support and accelerate this approach.

LRP Management Board Membership:

Leicestershire County Council
Charnwood Borough Council – On behalf of local District Councils
Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership
Andrew Granger & Co – Rural Business Champion
East Midlands Chamber of Commerce
Voluntary Action Leicestershire – Voluntary Sector Representative
Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Local Councils
National Forest Company
Rural Community Council
Leicestershire Promotions Ltd
Federation of Small Businesses
National Farmers Union
Country Land and Business Association

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