

## **Government Launches New Tourism Strategy – But hey. Let’s keep it quiet.**

After 30 plus years of advising various sectors the tourism industry it should have come as no surprise that the Government launched their brand new tourism strategy in a ‘blaze’ (for which read small sputtering candle flame) of underwhelming glory. In fact you’d have been hard pressed to notice anything had indeed been launched at all. The recent NASA satellite launch failure had more ‘get up and go’. And it clearly hasn’t impressed the market either.

Thomas Cook has condemned the government’s new Tourism Strategy for barely mentioning the role of the buoyant outward bound holiday sector (that’s people travelling abroad not to scout camps). And the World Travel and Tourism Council said ‘the government had to realise that outbound was as much as part of the tourism mix as inbound and domestic’.

This may be something of a response to not having been invited to chat through the strategy. Apparently Thomas Cook (the UK’s largest wholly owned tourism business and the largest provider of holidays in the UK) had been asking repeatedly for a meeting with the Minister to no avail. Probably on holiday, or something.

The British Hospitality Association is not happy a bunny either. Ufi Ibrahim, chief executive of the BHA, said that details surrounding the organisation and funding of Local Enterprise Partnerships and Destination Management Organisations were vague and too many policies were being left to the industry to handle.

*“VAT has become one of the most pressing issues facing the industry. The present high rate is making UK tourism very uncompetitive. In the latest World Economic Forum Global Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Monitor, the UK ranks 133rd out of 133 countries in terms of price competitiveness.*

*“So we are spending £100m on seeking to attract 4m additional visitors to the UK just at a time when the UK is bottom of the international price competitiveness league. This serious price disadvantage also encourages potential staycationers to vacation overseas.*

*“This is completely counterproductive to the Prime Minister’s objective to grow domestic tourism from 36 per cent to 50 per cent of total tourism spend by UK residents.”*

A quick squint at the Executive Summary left me rather bemused too. The emphasis is clearly on dredging back the ‘staycation’ market (one of the lowest in Europe). However, under the heading ‘Increasing Domestic Tourism’ the great initiatives for this essential aspect of the Strategy were – yes you’ve guessed it – discussions about relocating a bank holiday to October and tackling the (evidently pressing issue of) brown tourism signs? Well. They’ve got their finger on the pulsing heartbeat of UK tourism there then haven’t they? Sorted!

On the tricky issue of town planning the Strategy notes that:

*“One of the most frequently-cited restrictions on our visitor economy is the difficulty of getting planning permission to develop or expand a tourism attraction. The current system is*

*too complex, slow, expensive and hard to predict, which makes business investments harder and creates a permanent drag on our economic performance”.*

Agreed. And the remedy?

- *Abolishing centrally-imposed development strategies (such as the much-hated and unlamented Regional Spatial Strategies) and replacing them with local decisions on development and land use in each area, taken by local Councils which are accountable to the residents who elected them.*
- *Abolishing the Infrastructure Planning Commission.*
- *Creating a fast-track approval process for any planning application which receives no objections from neighbouring properties.*
- *Creating a presumption in favour of any application which satisfies the criteria of being a genuinely sustainable development.*
- *Increasing the number and type of small-scale changes to a property which count as ‘permitted development’, so they don’t need planning permission at all.*

Fast track planning where there are No objections from neighbouring properties - to a tourism development? You’re kidding, right? In 34 years I haven’t made a planning application for any form of tourism development that hasn’t been objected to by someone, however spuriously. And on the matter of ‘fast-track’, driving a high speed rail route through some of southern Britain’s best and most loved high quality countryside is somewhat contrary to the aims of the strategy methinks. Or is it that HS2 is designed to move visitors rapidly past all that into the Lake District?

What is more, this assumes that the locals actually have a grasp of their tourism needs and are prepared to support them sensibly. In one well known seaside resort I have been battling with the business faction on one side wanting high end, top class, big spender tourism development (something which the strategy actually says correctly is the wrong way to go – niche we ain’t) and the local residents who would rather it all went somewhere else and didn’t clog up their life with additional traffic and disturbance. Go figure.

And there is precious little on the Permitted development front that will apply in reality. So, situation normal then.

While we’re at it, What is a ‘genuinely sustainable development’ in tourism terms? Tourism is by its very nature unsustainable to a degree. Taken to its ultimate (genuine?) sustainable position that would mean people would stay at home. Literally.

The real problem for UK Tourism PLC is that there has been such substantial underinvestment in many sectors of the industry for so long that it is proving challenging, if not impossible, to recover to a meaningful level, especially in the depths of a recession. Tastes and aspirations have also changed markedly. The bucket and spade beach holiday for a week or two has now moved abroad - aided and abetted by ultra low-cost flights and cheap accommodation on the Spanish Costa’s - leaving the UK to those seeking shorter breaks.

This has been OK when people had the money to take several mini-breaks in a year (in addition to their main holiday in the sun somewhere). But as belts tighten and job prospects diminish so these marginal holidays have been pared back, leaving the domestic market struggling. Those who can deliver good quality and consistent product at a budget price will

survive (witness the growth in the budget hotel market) but many traditional sectors will continue to require massive cash injections. Even my home town Blackpool (arguably Britain's biggest and best known seaside resort) has struggled to attract business sufficient to keep it alive and after serious cardiac resuscitation in the last five years and a transfusion amounting to £320 million odd in EU and other financial aid is just beginning to see itself awakening from its terminal coma. That's three times the budget promoted in the Strategy for the next four years – for one resort alone!

Please don't get me wrong. Britain has a superb 'tourism landscape' that I continue to enjoy on a daily basis as I continue to assist in securing those all too easy planning permissions!! Fine and multi varied countryside, superb hotels and restaurants and an improved culture of service. Growth investment is slowly moving toward the corporates' in key sectors and some of our longstanding tourism assets are seeing a remake for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Britain definitely is open for tourism business. It may take a little tracking down, but it's all there. We just don't shout about it as much as we might and value for money for the home market remains rather hit and miss. When it costs a family of four more to go on holiday for a week to the Isle of Wight, than a Greek Island (flights included) there is really no contest.

The Strategy rightly highlights that the tourism industry is vital to our economy and a key contributor to the recovery. It is already one of our six biggest industries and our third-largest export earner. Some 200,000 businesses directly provide £52bn of GDP, 4.4% of jobs, and have made tourism one of the fastest growing sectors.

If that is the case (and it is) then for goodness sake get a grip on what the Industry needs to keep that benefit going. The success of the industry in regenerating its position has largely been despite, rather than because of Government Strategy.

Perhaps a little more engagement by the Government and a more balanced public awareness would be a good start. The Olympics will be great and will benefit Britain hugely. But it is not the only game in town.

In short the industry (significant as it is for jobs and economic growth) should be shown some respect by this Government. Tourism Minister John Penrose noted, **“The next four years are set to be the most important and successful for this industry in more than a generation. The challenge is huge, but the rewards for us all could be greater still.”**

So lets stop faffing around with those 'major' concerns about brown signs and bank holidays and establish a proper means of revitalizing the British tourism experience with some meaningful pump priming initiatives. Here's a starter for ten; a presumption in favour of tourism development that can demonstrate direct economic benefits. Oh. I've just remembered. *Planning Policy Statement 4 – Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth* sort of already does and has much to say about tourism development in general. Pity that policy document is not referred to in the strategy.

More joined up thinking please chaps

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