

Report title: Visit Essex - how the visitor economy has responded to the pandemic	
Report to: Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
Report author: Councillor Graham Butland, Cabinet Member for Devolution, the Arts, Heritage and Culture	
Date: 10 January 2022	For: Discussion
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County Divisions affected: Not applicable	

1. Purpose of Report

This report and presentation aims to provide information to the Scrutiny Committee on how Visit Essex has responded to the impacts of the pandemic on the Essex visitor economy. Visit Essex produced a recovery plan to support the industry and outlined a programme of work.

2. Background

Visit Essex is a destination management organisation (DMO) that has operated a membership model since 2010. The remit is to promote and develop tourism across the county, and to co-ordinate the tourism proposition. Over the past 18 months, COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on the economy, and, tourism and hospitality have been amongst the hardest hit. Over 60% of the £3.4 billion industry was estimated to have been lost. 50% of businesses decreased their staffing levels and 73% were running at 75% capacity or less during the months they were open.

This recovery plan produced in April 2021 sets out how Visit Essex will support businesses to prepare for a sustainable future and has 6 key priorities to best cope with the impacts of COVID. We continue to emphasise the quality and diversity of our offer but also begin to differentiate the Essex brand and reposition the county. The priorities are:

1. Understand our customers and deliver to their needs ensuring the product is consumer ready
2. Develop our digital infrastructure
3. Supporting our businesses to ensure their sustainability and success
4. Deliver stand out marketing campaigns to aid recovery and re-position Essex by creating awareness of assets
5. Position Essex as an important component in place making and place marketing,

6. Building links and celebrating collaboration

The Visit Essex team have been successful in attracting external funding which has allowed an increase in activity. This is we have had the highest member retention rate of 98% and 49 new members which has provided evidence that our efforts have been valued. Activity has been aimed at communicating being a responsible visitor, supporting the industry and promotion to raise the awareness of Essex as a place and the tourism offer within the county. Activity has included:

- Virtual member events including the presence of the Tourism Minister, to ensure the industry is kept up date. This has been supported by monthly newsletters and emails communicating changes, opportunities they need to be aware of.
- Securing additional grants for businesses from SELEP via the REVIVE programme in which £160k was given to Essex businesses.
- Training has been provided for our members at no cost the business to help them with recovery and we have set up a new virtual network and knowledge hub for the industry.
- Digital marketing activity which has led to a 120% increase in website traffic and a 14% increase in social media activity.
- A coastal campaign which aimed to promote the lesser-known parts of the Essex coast and encourage walking and cycling.
- A locals campaign "Make Memories close to home" which also included the Essex bigger weekend whereby locals could bid for free attraction tickets.
- A staycation campaign "Break away from the crowds" attracting visitors from London with an advertising, digital and press campaign. The Visit Essex team have hosted 15 press visits.

Next year Visit Essex will continue with our locals and staycations campaigns. In March we will be airing a SKY TV advert supported by digital and press activity and we will have a focus on food and drink and will launch a new film in the Autumn. The Visit Essex team are also developing a plan to ensure that the industry is responding to climate change and implementing sustainable practices.

3. Place Marketing

In addition to COVID-19 recovery Visit Essex has been working with colleagues on a wider remit of place marketing, re-positioning Essex as a great place to live, work, study, invest and visit. Essex is a great county of amazing contrasts but due to certain perceptions there is a lack of awareness of all that the county has to offer. We want to bring to bring key stakeholders together to develop a new narrative and vision for the future as well as a programme to promote Essex's key assets with a clear message as to why people should come to Essex. This will benefit other businesses aside from tourism attractions and accommodation providers, and will seek investment from wider stakeholders e.g. transport providers, universities and

large businesses across the county who see the benefit in being part of this well-connected and vibrant county. This will also help us to gain greater credibility with national organisations like Visit England, Arts Council, etc.

In 2019 Visit Essex created the “This is Essex” campaign to start promoting Essex as a place to an external audience. The campaign involved the recruitment of local ambassadors, a calendar, and a film challenging the perceptions of Essex people. The campaign attracted a lot of press attention and got covered in all national papers, BBC Breakfast and This Morning. Since the campaign the media’s coverage of Essex has become more positive and the Visit Essex team have won three awards including the prestigious PRCA DARE national marketing award.

Appendix – Presentation on the work of Visit Essex