



**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MUNICIPAL YEAR 2020/21**

**FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**21 DECEMBER 2020**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PROSPERITY AND DEVELOPMENT**

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**1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on the status of the draft Tourism Strategy for Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) in light of the recent unexpected COVID-19 pandemic.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 It is recommended that Members:

- (1) Consider the updates and how certain elements of the Tourism Strategy have moved forward despite COVID-19 and its implications.
- (2) Approve a later than planned consultation process with partners, due to restrictions imposed in the Delegated Decision and the negative perceptions that currently exist within the tourism sector due to COVID-19.
- (3) Approve an early 2021 start to the process of establishing the RCT Strategic Board (who will help deliver the Strategy), when it is hoped a more positive outlook on tourism will be realised.

**3.0 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 On 24 March 2020 a delegated decision was passed to enable the draft Tourism Strategy to go out to public consultation, where any form of consultation would only commence when it was deemed appropriate in light of the situation posed by COVID-19.
- 3.2 At the start of the national lockdown (23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020) all attractions and accommodation providers as well as visitor businesses were instructed to close in order to adhere to health and safety guidelines. Despite Government

funding/grant packages, this put massive pressures on visitor related businesses.

- 3.3 It was several months before Welsh Government relaxed this ruling and provided guidance on how the tourism and hospitality sector had to operate if it was to reopen. This guidance however did mean that many visitor businesses were unable to reopen.
- 3.4 A stint of local lockdowns and fire breaker lockdowns then ensued, meaning many of the visitor businesses had to deliver their offerings in a completely different manner and to a different audience. Others were forced to close until a more practical response became available.
- 3.5 As such, the tourism and hospitality sector was one of the worst to be hit, with businesses unable to operate as they once did, leading to diminishing income and job losses across the industry. Visitors have become worried and more aware of safety practices and are less inclined to travel. Many businesses have had to close permanently, with many more putting all hope upon a vaccination to enable things to return to normal.
- 3.6 Partners within the tourism sector currently hold a pessimistic view on the future of the industry due to COVID-19 and its effects, and as such it would be beneficial to delay any consultation until perceptions improve to avoid a negative bias response.

#### **4.0 BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 On 23 July 2019 members from the Finance & Performance Scrutiny Committee provided comment and approved the proposed direction of the RCT Tourism Strategy which replaced Destination Rhondda Cynon Taf 2014 - 2020.
- 4.2 The RCT Draft Tourism Strategy Cabinet Report was presented to Senior Leadership Team (SLT) on 28 February 2020, where it was approved.
- 4.3 On 24 March 2020 a Delegated Decision was made to pass the draft RCT Tourism Strategy for public consultation. However, it was included that any form of consultation would only commence when it was deemed appropriate in light of the situation posed by COVID-19.

#### **5.0 UPDATES**

##### ATTRACTIONS

- 5.1 Both Dare Valley Country Park (DVCP) and Ynysangharad War Memorial Park (YWMP) have been identified as Discovery Gateway Sites for the Valleys Regional Park (VRP) and have successfully gained VRP funding (£1,054,000 and £885,000 respectively) to make improvements:

- DVCP has two brand new family bike pump tracks with uplift facility, which will be officially opened in 2021 as a key visitor attraction for the Cynon area. These tracks are complemented by brand new cycle storage and washout facilities.
- A brand new children's adventure play area at DVCP was officially opened in August 2020 and is already popular with visitors.
- YWMP works are due to commence in December 2020 and be completed in 2021. These will include upgrades to the current footpaths and lighting to bring it up to standard and more appealing during low light seasons.
- Further funding applications (£1.9million) have been made to the Heritage Lottery for the Park for the People Initiative Fund, which if successful will be used to make improvements that complement the park facilities such as a new training and community facility and upgrades to key features such as the bandstand and sunken garden.
- In August 2020, benefiting from £800k funding through the Welsh Government Targeted Regeneration Investment Programme, a new foot bridge between Llys Cadwyn and YWMP was built, creating an important new link for pedestrians and connecting the area.

5.2 Work is currently underway on the Zip World Tower site with the zip line under construction and tree felling underway. Planning application has been received for their second attraction on the Tower Colliery site, with their proposed coaster being the only two seated roller coaster of its type in Europe.

5.3 There are no major updates to report in regards to the Rhondda and Abernant Tunnels, with a business case being put forward which partners are discussing (Rhondda Tunnel), and funding secured to progress preparatory work associated with the eventual reopening (Abernant Tunnel).

### ACCOMMODATION

5.4 VRP funding has also enabled the refurbishment and modernisation of the hotel facilities on the DVCP site. Welsh Government Guidelines in relation to the accommodation sector has meant the hotel is yet to open however. Funds have also been used to improve the caravan campsite shower block, with the caravan park also being extended and modernised in readiness for the start of the 2021 season (March/April).

5.5 The Cardiff Arms Bistro came across building work complications in relation to the accommodation provision, and as such development has only recently commenced. Original plans have changed and there will be less rooms than originally planned – with 16 in total. The owner is looking at accessing further grants to develop a distillery onsite and offer a rounded visitor experience, with stay, sample and eat concept.

5.6 The rise of Airbnb is evident and the renting of a room or an entire house/apartment is providing hugely popular in RCT. From January 2017 to December 2019, the amount of available listings increased by 309% for entire

place listings, and by 110% for private room availability, with booked listings rising by 452% in entire place listings, and 193% in private room listings.

### COVID-19 RELATED SUPPORT

- 5.7 A joint effort between the Regeneration and Tourism Services has meant that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses have been provided with regular and up-to-date information, advice and guidance on a variety of national and local funding opportunities available to them. These funding opportunities include (but are not limited to) the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Economic Resilience Fund Development Grant (currently in Phase 3), the Lockdown Business Fund, and Freelancer Grant.
- 5.8 A COVID-19 Business Review Survey was undertaken (again via the Regeneration and Tourism Services) to determine the impact COVID-19 was having at that particular point in time and had had in the lead up to it taking place, so that any response was based upon local factual information.
- 5.9 A COVID-19 Business Recovery Guidance document was written, to assist businesses deal with the effects COVID-19 had brought about, as well as provide the necessary advice and guidance as well as examples of best practice to move forward and continue business practices (be it in a potentially different manner).
- 5.10 Furthermore, several web pages dedicated to providing supplementary information to businesses in relation to COVID-19 were set-up on the RCT Corporate website. Information ranges from COVID-19 specific risk assessment tools and guidance to information relating to support from external partners such as Business Wales.

<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Resident/EmergenciesSafetyandCrime/InformationforResidentsCoronavirus/NEWCoronavirusCOVID19latestinformation/SupportandAdviceforBusiness/SupportandAdviceforbusinesses.aspx>

- 5.11 Regular information (daily during certain months) from Welsh Government has been disseminated to RCT businesses in real time, including the Visit Wales e-Newsletter and the roll-out of the national initiative “We’re Good To Go”, which is an industry-wide certification enabling businesses to show they have taken the necessary health and safety precautions when welcoming back visitors.
- 5.12 RCT is represented on regional and national meetings and forums, such as the South East Wales Tourism Forum, by the Tourism Service. Here the views and issues faced by the local businesses can be raised and considered.

### **6.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) screening form has been prepared for the purpose of this report. It has been found that a full report is not required at this time.

## **7.0 CONSULTATION**

7.1 It is recommended in this report that the draft RCT Tourism Strategy be consulted upon with a variety of partners early 2021.

## **8.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION**

8.1 There are no direct financial implications in delivering the RCT Tourism Strategy, but as the opportunities are developed, the financial implications will be fully assessed and necessary approval sought.

## **9.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

9.1 There are no current legal implications, but as the opportunities are developed, the legal implications will be fully assessed.

## **10.0 LINKS TO THE COUNCILS CORPORATE PLAN / OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES / SIP / FUTURE GENERATIONS - SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

10.1 The delivery of the RCT Tourism Strategy will contribute to the Council's corporate priorities:

- Economy
- People
- Place

10.2 The RCT Tourism Strategy's primary objective is to increase and sustain the economic growth of tourism in RCT, encouraging skills development and providing well paid secure employment for the local workforce. Tourism product development, especially in the outdoors (trails development, for example) will have an associated outcome of providing wellbeing opportunities for residents, enabling greater access to their outdoors and green leisure corridors.

10.3 The Sustainable Development Principle and five ways of working have been incorporated into the RCT Tourism Strategy in the following ways:

- i. Long term - Immediate short term tourism developments shall take into account long term requirements. For example, well paid, sustainable job creation and the consideration of biodiversity and eco systems management within tourism product planning
- ii. Integration - Integration of wellbeing plans and goals from different organisations will be taken into account by undertaking partnership

working. Wellbeing Tourism has been identified as a theme to explore further within the strategy

- iii. Collaboration & Involvement - The Tourism Strategy will involve a number of relevant partners and organisations in its delivery and collaborate with them to ensure strategic objectives are met.
- iv. Prevention - By working with the right people at the right time, as identified in the “Next Steps” section of the Tourism Strategy, we will seek to mitigate against any risks and problems presenting themselves to achieve the best possible wellbeing outcomes for our communities by implementing actions to deliver against the strategic tourism objectives

10.4 This approach makes a direct contribution to the seven national well-being goals, in particular:

- i. A Healthier Wales (allowing greater access to the outdoors through trails and product development)
- ii. A Prosperous Wales (providing an environment within which home grown tourism businesses can flourish)
- iii. Resilient and cohesive communities (the unique selling point of our Destination is our communities and the warm welcome they provide to visitors. The Tourism Strategy will support the vibrancy of such communities through localised infrastructure, connectivity and product development)
- iv. A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh Language (our culture will be celebrated as a reason to visit RCT and opportunities have been identified for bespoke Welsh Language tourism packages to be developed).

10.5 The Tourism Strategy will also seek to address priorities within:

- i. Prosperity For All: The National Strategy 2017
- ii. The Environment (Wales) Act 2016
- iii. Cardiff Capital Region City Deal & Valleys Task Force Delivery Plans
- iv. Our Cwm Taf – Public Service Board (PSB) Well-Being Plan 2018-2023
- v. Rural Development Programme (RDP) – Cwm Taf Local Development Plan

## 11.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 11.1 Following the approval by SLT of the draft RCT Tourism Strategy, ambitions and expectations were high, with much hope placed upon not only sharing the Strategy with partners, but formalising and delivering on many of the projects.
- 11.2 However, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the tourism and hospitality sector has been hit, and hit hard worldwide, with many visitor businesses having to close down, some permanently.
- 11.3 There is an overall uncertainty and pessimistic view within the industry with regards to the future, and this has meant that it is even more important that a Tourism Strategy for RCT is not only produced but delivered in conjunction with partners.
- 11.4 What has become apparent, is that despite these unprecedented times, individuals, couples, groups and families within the UK are still keen to travel and visit new locations, and this can be seen through the travelling habits once lockdowns were eased. It is evident that there is a key audience that is attracted to offerings RCT has as unique selling points, with the outdoors, landscape and cultural heritage all important factors, when people chose to 'visit local' in the midst of this pandemic, This bodes well for tourism in 2021, when restrictions on travelling and tourism and hospitality industry ease.