



**All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Visitor Economy**

**Chairs:** Nigel Huddleston MP and Margaret Ritchie MP

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**Date and Time:** 17 January 2017, 17:00-18:00

**Location:** Room S, Portcullis House

**Theme:** Coastal Communities, Digital, Social and Transport Connectivity

**Present (Parliamentarians):** Margaret Ritchie MP, Nigel Huddleston MP, Dr. Philippa Whitford MP, Peter Aldous MP, James Duddridge MP, David Amess MP, Oliver Colville MP

**Non-Parliamentarians present:** Scott Dolling, Group Manager – Enterprise and Tourism, Southend Borough Council, Chris Todd – Campaign for Better Transport, Jennifer Hall, Chair of Directors of Beadnell Bay Caravan, Vernon Hunte – British Hospitality Association,

**Election of officer**

The following officer was elected to replace Nigel Huddleston MP as Co-Chairman: Steve Double MP

**Introduction from Co-Chair Margaret Ritchie MP**

Margaret Ritchie MP welcomed everyone to the meeting, introduced herself as the chair for the session and explained the format of the meeting. Each speaker would cover their key messages and be asked questions from parliamentarians.

**Scott Dolling, Group Manager – Enterprise and Tourism, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council**

Scott highlighted the importance of tourism to Southend-on-Sea, stating that tourism produced £6.5 million a year for the town. He said that the majority of these visitors are day visitors and that a major focus of the council is to encourage longer stays. Scott outlined the travel availabilities for Southend-on-Sea; a local airport, two train lines into London and two major roads in to London. He also mentioned that Southend-on-Sea is home to the UK's longest pleasure pier.

He highlighted the improvement of Southend-on-Sea's tourist offer by outlining the increasing number and quality of the hotels available, stating that the first four star hotel in Southend-on-Sea had recently opened. He noted that the majority of these hotels were used by single day visitors and highlighted the importance of longer staying visitors by stating that the longer people stay, the more they will spend in the local area.

Scott mentioned the efforts made to increase the interaction between the council and local education institutions in regards to tourism. He said that the Southend-on-Sea campus of Essex University had looked at the possibility of offering a degree in tourism services.

Scott cited the effort to increase housing stock by easing the process of granting permission to convert unused commercial land into housing, however, he voiced the concern that this had led to a need to find employment land within small boundaries. He said that in order to tackle the issues faced by his area, cooperation beyond the confines of small political regions was required.

He explained that work was needed to extend the season for the UK coastal tourism industry beyond the summer months and to increase the length of time that people are staying. He expressed that a sense of civic pride was required in local areas and in the message sent out, to illustrate to UK visitors that a UK coastal holiday was something to be proud of, not a low cost option.

Speaking about the Coastal Communities Fund, Scott stated that the money Southend-on-Sea had received in one of the earlier rounds of funding had been a great help. However, they received no money in later rounds and this has led to a sense of disenfranchisement within the communities that had put the proposals together. He also said that support for regional tourism had declined and there needed to be greater support for local tourism.

Regarding the transport situation, he said that local transport needed greater support, and that local authority needed to be consulted more on decisions by the Department of Transport. He explained that when deciding which roads needed building or improving, greater consultation should be given to the benefits for local areas, giving the example that better road links with Southend airport would have a significant positive impact on the town. On rail transport, Scott also stated that local authority needed a greater voice in decision making. In particular short term contracts to rail franchises had led to continued under-investment and that greater stakeholder involvement was required.

Finally, Scott spoke to the importance of digital connectivity, he highlighted the issue of seaside areas not having 360 degree access due to the sea. He stated that a key barrier to people visiting, moving to, and investing in an area was a lack of good digital infrastructure. He mentioned a local private firm, CityFibre, had been contracted to install the town's broadband infrastructure.

#### **Cllr Jennifer Hall, Chair of Directors of Beadnell Bay Caravan**

Jennifer started by giving an overview of Beadnell Bay, saying that it is a rural fishing village on the beautiful Northumberland coast, 25 miles south of Berwick-upon-Tweed. She went on to explain that as a result of uncontrolled development and short sightedness by local authority 83 percent of houses in the area were second homes. She said that since 1983 the village has lost its school, village hall, shop, bar and most recently the post office in 2012. All of these buildings have now been converted into holiday homes.

Cllr Hall highlighted that between 2001 and 2011 the number of houses in the village rose by 24% but the population only increased by 3 percent. She mentioned that in 1990 there were 400 houses in the village and that there are now 750 and 45 more houses have been approved. She said that as a result of the demand for second homes, house prices have doubled. She continued that the number of residents has decreased as those moving out of the village are not being replaced by new residents. She stated that young people are educating out of the village and not returning due to a lack of jobs and career prospects. She went on to say that many older people say they want to move as they are often the only house permanently occupied in their part of the street and because of the issues of having a different set of holiday makers as neighbours every Saturday and that Beadnell has the highest percentage of older people and the lowest percentage of under 25's in the county.

She explained that there are only really three job markets in the area; tourism, self-employment, which in itself is often in the tourism industry, and as carers for the elderly and that few of these jobs are full time or offer apprenticeships or career prospects. She said that as a result of the increasing lack of permanent residents of working age many travel between 20 and 50 miles in order to work in the village, and that employers are constantly struggling to find workers. Those who do move permanently tend to move after retirement and if they do open a business it is often one that closes during the winter and as such does little to expand the season beyond the summer.

Jennifer spoke the problems with digital utilities in her area, highlighting that BT runs cables to the centre of the village and then out from there, meaning that the caravan sites on the outskirts have weak signal in a time when tourists demand the same that service they have at home. She explained that the mobile signal is also poor, with patchy coverage and poor signal at best.

She quickly highlighted two key issues with the village; that most of the working age people have left due to a lack of career prospects and that the cost of living is high due to the cost of transport. She then explained a critical problem with the proliferation of holiday homes, that they pay nothing into the local economy by registering as a business to avoid council tax but remaining below the threshold for business tax, stating that their only contribution is having to buy a bin. She continued to say that often these houses are not even let out, that they only have to be available for 20 weeks a year to be considered holiday homes. She cited that under Welsh law they have to be let out for 70 days a year.

Jennifer suggested a number of possible solutions to the issues of her area, first, challenging the widespread 'Tax Avoidance' by taking holiday homes out of the remit of Small Business Rate Relief, or, at least, insisting the properties are actually let out for the majority of the year. Secondly, give support to communities such as St Ives and Beadnell's own Draft Neighbourhood Plan that want to introduce new 'Permanent Residency Restrictions' on all new developments and finding ways of implementing the agreements, and monitoring that developers aren't finding ways to get around the intention of the policy. Thirdly, increase funding for community support organisations such as Development Trusts, who help existing community groups, create social enterprises and have the potential to build additional business premises and affordable housing to attract new people to move to the area. Finally, provide support for initiatives which encourage businesses, not linked to tourism, to move to the area. She said that it needed to make easier for more to do so and bring their businesses with them. Not to replace tourism but alongside the holiday homes which currently bring in very little financial benefit to the local area.

### **Chris Todd, Campaign for Better Transport**

Chris stated that he was, unlike the other speakers, not speaking about a specific local area but about the wider issue of poor transport infrastructure in coastal areas and the impact on tourism. He explained that even in coastal areas with broader economies, like Brighton, tourism infrastructure remains vital. He cited the 'hinterland problem' with regard to coastal areas, in that the majority of them have to have enough routes in 180 degrees or less of available land.

He mentioned that transport into coastal towns is poor but also vital is transport within the towns or around to the local area, as in order to increase longer staying visitors there needs to be an ability to get around, as not all tourists have access to a car. He cited that there has been a significant decline in bus services due to cuts in 2010 which affected 2,400 services. As well as increasing local services, he stated that a greater awareness of the services available is necessary, as if people think getting around is too difficult they simply will not bother. He voiced concern about the management of National Rail

and the perceived lack of care given to the general scheduling of services and engineering works in coastal areas. He mentioned that as a result of engineering works and an unreliable service many areas are severed from potential tourists on the most important days, due to the commuter-centric approach of the rail service. Chris cited, that as a result of the perceived reliability of trains and increasing fares, with train travel 60 percent more expensive in real terms over the last 20-30 years whereas in the same period car travel is 40 percent less expensive. He stated that there is a need for a bus investment strategy similar to the Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy, and that the current bus services bill should be better promoted to local authorities so they better understand what is available to them.

He also expressed the need for better destination infrastructure, specifically cycling and walking infrastructure, as it would also help activity holidays. He lauded the success of the Camel Trail in Cornwall, which in 2003 welcomed 3 million visitors, however, he criticised much of the National Cycling Network, saying that other than the Coastal Path, little of it linked up effectively together, or with sites and town centres, meaning that often people had to drive to the start and circle back to their cars.

### **Questions**

James Duddridge MP, asked Scott Dolling to what extent proximity and good connectivity to London was a mixed blessing? Scott replied that a mixed blessing was an apt description, referring to it as a double edged sword, saying that Southend does suffer from the lure of London, but equally benefits during the season as it increases the ease with which those that live in London can visit for a short trip. He stated that perhaps a different perspective was needed to increase the focus on getting those from to stay longer, and those flying in to Southend airport to stop and enjoy Southend on their way through.

Nigel Huddleston MP asked Jennifer Hall what the average stay in the holiday homes in Beadnell Bay was. Jennifer answered that the homes were now being let out for shorter periods in order to be let out twice a week and that some are not let out at all.

Oliver Colville MP, mentioned that Plymouth was celebrating Mayflower 400 and has a desire to bring in American tourists. He stated that the Plymouth airport was no longer operating but consideration was being given to the benefit of reopening it, and so asked Scott Dolling about his thoughts on the benefit to Southend of the airport. Scott replied that the airport in Southend-on-Sea had only truly expanded in the last five years, having previously been a small flying club and repair operation, but with investment from Stobart it had grown significantly in the last few years, and will be adding 70 more routes from Easter. He acknowledged that the majority of passengers were visiting London but mentioned the opportunity of stopping them on the way.

Oliver Colville MP asked Chris Todd that often when transport infrastructure is improved it makes it easier to leave as well as come, and as a result to what extent it was a benefit. Chris answered by acknowledging the problem but saying that people go both ways, but that an increase of people visiting somewhere like London from a coastal area has little impact on London while improving the numbers of visitors going the other way can bring a significant benefit, it produces an overall benefit. He also stated that it also helps prevent those that perhaps would have needed to move for work to remain and still be able to access London or another city when necessary, preventing the loss of people from coastal areas.

Dr Philippa Whitford MP, asked what impact leaving the European Union would have on staff shortages. Jennifer explained that a loss of European migrants would have significant impact on her area and that employers were constantly struggling for workers. She explained that the influx her area had of European migrants 6 or 7 years ago was the saving of it; that the migrants were of working age and looking to set up families and contribute to the area. She expressed that there was real concern in her area about how employers would replace the loss of workforce.

Nigel Huddleston MP asked that with the holiday home not paying tax was it worth instead pursuing a local tourism tax. Jennifer replied that perhaps it would because as it stands large aspects of the tourism sites in her area is used for free, and that community groups had considered that idea of a voluntary contribution. Scott added that parts of Suffolk had begun a voluntary contribution.

Margaret Ritchie MP, questioned what the solution to the issues of broadband connectivity in coastal areas would be. Scott replied that Southend-on-Sea had turned to a private company to dig out a trench and lay fibre optical cables as BT had not done it. Jennifer followed underlining the issue with BT running the broadband out from the centre of the village, stating that her caravan park had recently invested £12,000 to improve the signal at the park, and it still had not produced a signal of the strength demand by her customers.

Dr Philippa Whitford stated that imposing a visitor tax was counter to the idea of reducing Tourism VAT and that as lots of hospitality business are close to being pushed out of business if costs go up. Jennifer agreed, saying that she reconsidered her earlier answer and she would prefer that people were made to pay either council or business tax.

Nigel Huddleston MP asked that in terms of increasing the numbers of activity holidays who show be leading that, the council or local hospitality providers. Jennifer replied that in her area neither could afford it.

Dr Philippa Whitford questioned whether there was the possibility of doing in England what has begun in Scotland, of linking activity tourism, so people either walk or cycle between areas every day or two so several areas share the benefits of the same tourists. Jennifer said that her area would benefit if the infrastructure was there as they attract a large number of walkers. Chris followed by saying that cycling funding could benefit that idea, if it was increased. Scott added that the private sector helps cycling funding in denser areas but there as it stands there is limited benefit for them to invest in rural areas.

Peter Aldous MP, asked whether seaside towns suffer from a general negative perception in terms of accommodation. Saying that the perception to him was of poorly managed hotels, and that the idea of a four star hotel in Southend-on-Sea was surprising to him. Scott replied that this was the precise problem and stereotype that places like Southend-on-Sea had to struggle against and that it was critical to increase the aspiration of UK tourism and increase the cultural offer on show in coastal towns.

Margaret Ritchie MP asked what, aside from funding could be done to improve coastal transport. Chris answered by explaining that it was important to inform councils of what funding was available and what they are able to do by better directing it, and to increase the interaction with Local Enterprise Partnerships.

Dr Philippa Whitford asked in terms of changing perspectives what had been looked at in terms of extending the season. Jennifer replied that the local area had plenty of ideas including promoting the visiting to see seal cubs to building better trails for winter walkers and cyclists but said that while there were ideas there was simply no funding. Chris followed by saying that there was interest in winter activity holidays if the paths and associated infrastructure was in place.

Peter Aldous MP mentioned the success Scotland and Northern Ireland have had in branding themselves and asked whether they thought that Visit England had been successful in doing the same. Scott replied that they had not. Jennifer said that some areas have been, but more so the areas where lots of it is done for them by having particularly notable sites. Chris mentioned that Brighton has been a success in this regard. Scott concluded that there needed to be more pride in Britain's tourism offer.

Margaret Ritchie MP thanked the witnesses and MPs for their time and outlined that the APPG intends to publish a report on this subject in the Summer.

**Amendment, Chris Todd, Campaign for Better Transport:**

*“One point I wanted to follow up on and that was the funding for cycling nationally. I said I thought it was around £1 per person per year, which generated some discussion. I have since found that the CTC estimates that the funds available for **both walking and cycling** work out at just £1.38 per person in England outside London. This is a pitiful amount and if boosted would allow coastal communities to do far more to increase their appeal / offer.”*