

A proposal to award a project management consultancy contract to VisitWiltshire

This is a proposal to commission VisitWiltshire to manage a piece of project management consultancy work that is required to create a Destination Management Plan (DMP) for our county.

The Visitor Economy is one of Wiltshire's most valuable economic sectors, underpinning jobs, local businesses, and community wellbeing. Our responsibility covers both the social and economic wellbeing of our communities and this business sector includes domestic and international tourism, staying and day visits, business visitors and events, and the activities that benefit from visitors e.g. local communities, accommodation, food and drink providers and our attractions.

Wiltshire Council have in the existing Towns Programme budget, an amount of £55,000 that was originally allocated for the production of a Wiltshire Council Tourism Strategy. Following discussions with VisitEngland and VisitWiltshire, this budget is now allocated for the production of a Wiltshire Destination Management Plan, the production of this plan being a VisitEngland requirement as part of Wiltshire being granted Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP), accreditation. The plan must be produced by 31 May 2026, and we have been told by VisitEngland that there is a risk that Wiltshire will miss out on future Government funding if the plan is not in place.

Therefore, for the reasons detailed below it is our recommendation that the £55k budget for the management of the Destination Management Plan project be allocated to VisitWiltshire, as the accredited Wiltshire LVEP. This is a one-off piece of project management consultancy work, and it is not a contract for ongoing Destination management services. Which organisation will deliver which elements of the DMP has yet to be decided.

Reasons for awarding the DMP and business engagement work to VisitWiltshire:

1. Previous Experience

VisitWiltshire is an experienced, award-winning, and very successful Destination Management Organisation (DMO) accredited by VisitEngland and as they have been managing the visitor economy in our county for the last 13 years, they know the industry inside out.

2. Track Record

VisitWiltshire is highly regarded by VisitEngland, and this was confirmed when the Director of VisitEngland met the Leader of Wiltshire Council recently. Through its established relationships with VisitEngland and VisitBritain, and as the accredited LVEP, it is the only Wiltshire organisation that has direct access to data, market intelligence, research and other information that will be required, and that is not available to organisations other than accredited LVEPs.

3. Contacts & Relationships

VisitWiltshire has direct access and established relationships with the domestic and international travel trade, national tourism associations and travel media therefore is uniquely placed to facilitate input from these organisations. It also regularly engages with 20 Town Partners and +1,000 tourism and hospitality businesses and as it holds a data base of these organisations it is well placed to secure input from a wide range of businesses and stakeholders.

4. Project Management, Partnership Working & Business Engagement

The VisitWiltshire team have experience in managing tourism projects, including managing Destination Management Planning and Development projects with a number of our towns. Using its inhouse skills and experience it will manage the process of the plan development and its final delivery as it has done in the past. It will use a specialist company to research and write the plan providing them with industry knowledge, data, market information, and business connections etc during the process. The DMP will be developed in Partnership with Wiltshire Council and the LVEP Advisory Board, and these organisations will be involved in the plan brief development, liaising with supporting appointed consultants and inputting into the final report.

5. Value for Money

Because of its contacts, industry knowledge, data base etc. VisitWiltshire can facilitate the main elements of engagement, consultation, research, and data far more cost effectively than could any other organisation therefore this will result in broader consultation and engagement, better value for Wiltshire Council and a higher quality output.

6. VisitWiltshire as the Accredited LVEP

The LVEP board consists of private sector partners and representatives of towns who have provided funds plus, from Wiltshire Council our Head of Economy and Regeneration Officer and our Economic Development and Tourism Portfolio holder Councillor, who is also Vice Chair. We will therefore be able to track the Plan's development in detail and on a regular basis. The LVEP board will lead on ensuring that the plan is delivered and there will be regular consultation with Wiltshire Council during the plan development.

7. Capacity and Ability to Work at Pace

No other Wiltshire organisation has the status, experience, track record and relationships to manage this complex project within VisitEngland guidelines, meeting DMP national requirements, and within the timeframe required by VisitEngland. VisitWiltshire are therefore well positioned to hit the ground running, working effectively at pace to meet deadlines.

History

In 2012 Wiltshire Council created VisitWiltshire as a public/private funded Destination Management Organisation tasked with generating economic growth and raising the awareness of Wiltshire by getting more visitors to come to our Country both for social and potential business activity, getting those visitors to stay longer in the County to experience all that Wiltshire had to offer and as a result spend more in our economy whilst with us. It also had the responsibility of supporting the Government's national and local strategy for developing the county's tourism product. The involvement of the public sector in the partnership is necessary to address market failure as set out in the Government's De Bois Independent Review of DMO's in England 2021, also to support the funding of the vital non direct marketing management activities that the company has to perform.

When VisitWiltshire was funded in line with its needs i.e. before Wiltshire Council reduced that funding in 2019 and then Covid hit, the company with the support of Wiltshire Council, our towns and its private sector partners, had outstanding success resulting in VisitEngland recognising it as one of the top performing Destination Management Organisations in the UK. It also met or exceeded all the Deed of Entrustment KPI's set by Wiltshire Council.

The nationally accepted way to measure the performance of a Destination Management Organisation is the economic impact it creates in its specific County because of its activities. For example, visitor number and visitor spend increases, increase in GVA and the number of jobs created etc. Whereas a county-to-county comparison of the total number of visitors or the total size of the visitor economy is a meaningless comparison, because of the differences in product offering, size of the visitor economy, scale, geography accommodation provision, large events, funding levels, and marketing budget etc.

KPI performance figures for VisitWiltshire were independently measured and verified through an economic impact research study undertaken by the Southwest Research Company using the Cambridge Model. However, it should be noted that when Wiltshire Council cut the funding to VisitWiltshire in 2019 the company was unable to afford to commission the research to track the agreed KPI's and no other KPI's were agreed for the balance of the contract. Any future work commissioned will have agreed KPI's attached.

Pre 2019 VisitWiltshire achieved the following KPI performance.

Growing the Wiltshire visitor economy from £1.1bn to £1.5bn per annum

Increasing Wiltshire's Tourism GVA from £626m to £860m per annum

Increasing the number of tourism jobs in our county from 21000 to 29000 (9% of our workforce)

VisitWiltshire private sector Partners increased from 330 to over 600.

Unique visitors to the VisitWiltshire website increased from 500,000 to 1.2m per annum.

Achieved a return of 44:1 on marketing campaign activity with the company's main season marketing campaign alone generating £15m per annum.

Achieved a PR reach of 200million people per annum.

Developed new marketing services to increase private sector income.

Achieved several national awards e.g. best UK destination website, best social media performance, best travel trade activity.

The decline in the Wiltshire visitor economy since 2019

The VisitWiltshire business model was based on a funding level of £250k per annum from Wiltshire Council, it being the level that is considered by VisitEngland to be correct for the size of the visitor economy in our county and it was also the figure recommended in the government commissioned The DeBois DMO Review, This is funding level that VisitWiltshire received until Wiltshire Council decided to reduce that to £150k per annum in 2019 and then stop funding VisitWiltshire altogether in 2024.

This dramatic reduction in Wiltshire Council funding and then cancelling of funding altogether plus the pandemic and the increase in the cost of living has had a devastating effect on Wiltshire's visitor economy.

VisitBritain estimate that in period 2020/21 the value of the Wiltshire's visitor economy reduced by £900m i.e. from £1.5m per annum to £600m. In 2023 however VisitBritain's forecast was that if VisitWiltshire had the correct level of funding and therefore recovered at the same speed as its main English competitor counties the Wiltshire visitor economy would recover to the pre 2019 level by 2025. However using the Office of National Statistics and VisitBritain data sets, the latest estimate is that Wiltshire's visitor economy has only recovered to 80% of the pre 2019 level. This means that our county has £300m less income and there are 5800 less jobs than would have been achieved had we realised our potential. The slower than average recovery compared with its competitor destinations is particularly due to the lack of Wiltshire Council funding over that period.

During 2021 to 2025 Wiltshire Council not only reduced then cancelled its funding for VisitWiltshire but it also withdrew strategic support for visitor economy growth by taking tourism and hospitality out of the local strategies and plans. Its focus being on producing local initiatives (e.g. the APP's) primarily aimed at local residents rather than investing in out of county visitor growth and development.

Also, when the Government's response to DeBois DMO review was published Wiltshire Council did not support allocating resources in line with the report's recommendations which meant that Wiltshire was excluded from the Governments new national DMO structure i.e., it was not awarded Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) status. This meant that our county's tourism and hospitality businesses were put at a competitive disadvantage with the result that in 2025/25 it is estimated that we lost £50m of short-term visitor spent having been excluded from National VisitEngland and VisitBritain marketing and business support activity.

Another indication of withdrawing support for tourism is that in 2024 domestic staying visitors in Wiltshire was 23% down on 2023 compared with a drop of 10% for England as a whole (Source Office of National Statistics and the Great Britain Tourism Survey)

The Future

We need to reverse the decline in our Visitor Economy and get it performing again to the same levels of success, and more, that we experienced pre-2019. We have an organisation in VisitWiltshire, that was set up by Wiltshire Council, is highly regarded by VisitEngland, by many of our towns and currently 300 private sector partners and that has a proven successful track record. We need to fully use these skills and experience that are available to us.

Due to that high regard VisitBritain and VisitEngland have for VisitWiltshire, plus some of our towns putting funding in, and finally in January 2025 Wiltshire Council saying they were supportive of an LVEP application (although without any funding), VisitWiltshire were able to gain LVEP status for Wiltshire. LVEPs aim to provide strong local leadership and governance in the visitor sector. They also look to foster strategic collaboration between local and national tourism agencies, bringing more visitors to the county and driving growth for communities and businesses.

When announcing the new LVEP accreditation the then Leader of Wiltshire Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Councillor Clewer, said: "We're pleased to confirm our full support for the establishment of a Local Visitor Economy Partnership for Wiltshire. Tourism plays a vital role in our county, supporting local businesses, creating jobs, and preserving our rich cultural heritage. By forming this partnership with VisitWiltshire, we will be able to unlock new opportunities for investment, promotion, and collaboration, ensuring Wiltshire remains a top destination for visitors from across the UK and beyond."

VisitEngland have stated that LVEP status was granted to VisitWiltshire based on their successful track record, despite VE's concern about the very low levels of public sector funding available. However, LVEP status will only continue if VisitWiltshire is funded in the future at the correct level to assure its sustainability. VisitEngland are clear that their expectation for accredited LVEP's is that they also receive a minimum level of public sector funding and support.

A very key component of getting our visitor economy going again is the production of a Destination Management Plan, this plan forming the blueprint for the management of the visitor economy going forward. The expectation from VisitEngland is that this work should be targeted for completion, with a deadline now extended to 31 May 2026 We are now up against it time wise if we are to hit the May 2026 date and we need to get on with it. Your support to commission VisitWiltshire to undertake the project management consultancy work will allow us to do just this.