



North
Kesteven

Tourism
Strategy



2024



2029



North Kesteven
DISTRICT COUNCIL

1. Foreword

North Kesteven District Council's Tourism Strategy embraces 'traditional tourism and the wider Visitor Economy' with a total value of £201M and 2.9 million visits to North Kesteven in 2023. This strategy will help support and deliver both the new Destination Management Plan (DMP) for Greater Lincolnshire and Rutland and the recently accredited Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP), the vehicle linking local brands to the National Tourism Recovery Plan written by DCMS and its Arm's Length Body Visit England. Despite the clear benefits of this new hierarchy, it is important that North Kesteven continues to have a strong identity of its own, and it is intended to continue to use and develop our Heart of Lincs brand to promote the district, both independently and in partnership.

This Tourism Strategy is a companion to the North Kesteven Economic Development Strategy of 2024 which identifies tourism as a key growth sector, while it also aligns to The Council's Climate Change Strategy.

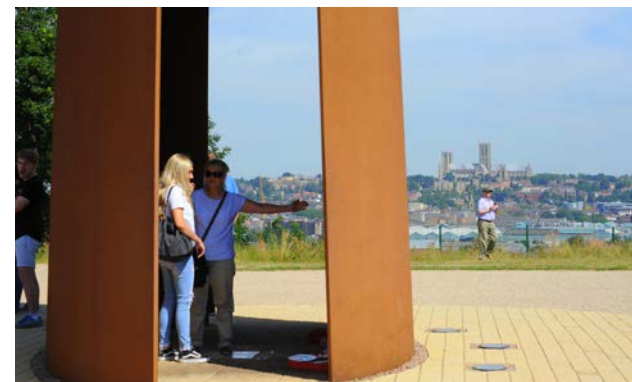
Tourism development is a priority for North Kesteven. It is a central component of the 'Our Economy' priority of the 2024-27 NK Plan which aims to: "Support sustainable and regenerative local economic growth and resilience, transitioning to a green economy working within environmental thresholds"

This Tourism Strategy will support the Priority's key aim and set out how we intend to deliver it. Tourism matters to the district because the sector supports and sustains flourishing businesses of all sizes. By continuing to engage with residents and visitors, we will champion job creation and retention, generate prosperity via increased visitor spend and foster further innovation and enterprise. Tourism showcases the district as a great location to visit, live and work, placing our unique heritage, attractions and natural beauty at the heart of the District's offer.

We aim to deliver continued growth in tourism and our tourism business sector but in a sustainable way that meets with the Council's long-term ambitions to be a carbon Net Zero authority by 2030. In this respect, this strategy is not just about attracting more visitors to the district at any cost. It is about nurturing balanced growth and adding value through enhancing the quality of the offer to key target visitor segments, whilst simultaneously working with businesses and partners to reduce the impact of that investment on the environment, encouraging longer stays and therefore greater spending per head by visitors.

2. Vision

Encourage, support and drive Sustainable Growth in our Visitor Economy with the Environment at the heart of everything we do, making the most of the natural advantages of the district as a distinctive rural Place for domestic and international visitors.



3. Introduction

North Kesteven is topographically diverse with five distinctive landscape types. With wide-open spaces and 'big skies' that the county is famous for, but also the rolling Jurassic limestone hills of the Kesteven Uplands in the south of the District, the drama of Lincoln Cliff looking down on the Witham Valley to the west, historic Lincoln Heath at its heart and the ancient peat fens of the River Witham to the east. These contrasting landscapes and different soil types give the district a rich and varied biodiversity and is perfect for a wide range of outdoor activities including walking and hiking, cycling and horse riding.

North Kesteven is a nationally important producer of food with over 90% of the district given over to agriculture in which cereals pre-dominate (60%) but with a growing diversity of other crops, horticulture and livestock. Appendix "North Kesteven's Agricultural history" that makes up the landscape today outlines how the agriculture has created the landscape we know today and the importance of the district in helping to feed the nation.



3. Introduction

North Kesteven is an ideal base from which to explore the rest of Lincolnshire by road or rail, being favourably located in the centre of the county within easy reach of the coast, the City of Lincoln and the Wolds, while the towns of Sleaford and North Hykeham offer a first-class range of amenities and attractions for the visitor.

The district boasts rich heritage sites such as the eight-sailed Heckington Windmill, Doddington Hall, and Navigation House, along with notable churches. Cultural tourism thrives with attractions like The Hub in Sleaford, home to the National Centre for Craft and Design, and four heritage and cultural venues managed by NKDC.



Lincolnshire, known for its aviation history as “Bomber County,” features 52 former RAF bases. North Kesteven houses three operational bases, including RAF Cranwell, the world’s first Air Academy, and RAF Waddington, home to the Red Arrows. Aviation heritage venues include Cranwell Aviation Heritage Museum and the International Bomber Command Centre.

The district supports high-quality accommodation and hospitality businesses, from boutique hotels, self-catering accommodation, and glamping pods to rural pubs, cafes and award-winning restaurants. With over 2,000 jobs supported in the visitor economy sector, the district recognises the critical role of tourism, leisure, hospitality, retail businesses, and their supply chains, in its economic vitality.



4. Setting the context

Visitors

The latest available STEAM figures for 2023 highlight that reducing the environmental impact of most visitors will be challenging due to the heavy reliance on cars to access rural areas. However, making subtle shifts toward more sustainable transportation and encouraging the use of public transport for arriving in or getting around the district could make a significant difference. In 2023, North Kesteven received 2.9 million visits, contributing £201 million to the local economy. Of these, 89% were day visits (2.5 million visits valued at £126 million), and 93% of these trips were made by private car.



In contrast, visitors who stayed for more than one night (326,000 visits with an average stay of 2.9 nights) contributed £75.42 million, meaning that 11% of visitors accounted for 37% of the total economic value. The total number of visitors increased by 5.7% in 2023, a notable slowdown in growth compared to the surge between 2021 and 2022, driven by the sector's post-pandemic recovery. Visitor numbers are now almost back to 2019 levels. However, current data from Visit Britain shows a 7% decline in overnight trips in 2023.



Visitor Personas & Behaviours

Research from the DMP has told us that traditionally North Kesteven attracts County-loving traditionalist, typically older couple and empty nesters who prefer rural and coastal destinations and interested in traditional experience and heritage. They like to walk, sightsee and visit historical sites, with a preference to stay in countryside cottages, B&B's or small hotels, looking for quiet, relaxing holidays with a focus on natural beauty. The offer that the district and surrounding area has means we can and should, attract a wider range of personas such as Aspiring Families, Rural Residents, Culture Adventurers and Fun in the Sun.





4. Setting the context

Current Offer

'North Kesteven offers a comprehensive and evolving tourism experience that leverages its rich historical heritage, natural beauty, and innovative cultural offer to attract visitors.'

Historical Sites and Museums: North Kesteven is home to several notable historical attractions. This includes Doddington Hall, Heckington Windmill, Mrs Smith's Cottage, Lincolnshire Road Transport Museum and Cogglesford Watermill. These sites offer insights into the region's history and traditional industries.

Aviation Heritage: As the home of the RAF, the District is home to three operational bases while former airfields, museums and memorials such as Cranwell Aviation Heritage Museum, the International Bomber Command Centre and Metheringham Airfield Visitor Centre are a testament to the bravery of those who served.

Cultural Venues: Visitors can explore cultural sites such as the Terry O'Toole Theatre, Sleaford Playhouse and The Hub; which is home to the National Centre for Craft and Design to experience exhibitions, theatre, comedy, dance and the arts all year round. Events like the Riverlight Festival celebrate local culture, engaging both visitors and residents.

Leisure: NKDC has a clear commitment to the health and wellbeing of the District which is evidenced by the ambition of the Sport and Physical Activity Strategy, including significant investment in the Councils leisure portfolio. This is complimented by a thriving private and voluntary sector which boasts a range of community swimming pools, boutique gyms, sports clubs, and studios.



4. Setting the context

Nature and Outdoor Activities: North Kesteven is a haven for outdoor enthusiasts with a wealth of water and green spaces. Within the Witham Valley Country Park, Whisby Nature Reserve is a popular spot for walking and wildlife watching, featuring a café, children's play area, and cultural activities, along with a versatile conference space. Other green spaces include Millennium Green, Lollycocks Local Nature Reserve, the Nettles, and Tunman Wood, complemented by a network of walking routes enjoyed by over 200,000 walkers each year.

Walking and Cycling:

Viking Way: Starting at the Humber this long-distance trail passes through the district as it wends its way along ancient routes, taking in attractive villages and allowing walkers to discover the varied and beautiful rural landscapes en route to its conclusion in Rutland.

Spires and Steeples Trail: A scenic route from Lincoln to Sleaford that combines arts and heritage with beautiful landscapes.

Water Rail Way: Following the old route of the Lincoln to Boston railway alongside the River Witham this mainly traffic free route features various artworks along the way inspired by the poetry of Alfred Tennyson.

Off road cycle trails such as the Georgie Twigg Track from Doddington and the Water Railway link up to the National Cycle Network.

Events: From dance festivals in the woods to the largest village show in the England, North Kesteven hosts a wide range of events and festivals throughout the year including the Riverlight Festival, the Lost Village Festival, and Heckington Show featuring agricultural displays, crafts, food, and entertainment, showcasing the rural heritage of the area.

Annual festivals which cover the whole district include the annual NK Walking Festival in June which invites walkers to enjoy the district's rich history, heritage, and nature, led by local volunteers, and experts, boosting the local economy and the Heritage Open Days which is a national festival of history and culture offering participants the chance to see hidden places and try out new experiences.



4. Setting the context

Investment in the District

As a local authority, tourism has always been a priority, with the continued commitment to run four retained visitor venues and a successful leisure and cultural offer. 2021 saw significant investment in the Hub in Sleaford of £1.2M with the creation of additional workshop and exhibition space alongside a new café area, also £50,000 was invested in the restoration of Cogglesford Watermill including new interpretation displays. March 2023 saw the end of a 3-year NLHF project, 'Rescuing Mrs Smith's Cottage: A unique slice of bygone Lincolnshire Life' match funded by NKDC. The National Lottery have worked with the project team to deliver a stage 1 and 2 funding of around £1M over a 5 year period.

Through both a financial contribution and support through funding bids, planning and tourism support, North Kesteven District Council assisted in the delivery of the International Bomber Command Centre at Canwick, which now attracts over 100,000 visitors a year and was awarded Gold in the Visit England National Tourism Awards, making it one of the best attractions in the country.

Planning permission has been granted to convert a vacant industrial building adjacent to the current Cranwell Aviation Heritage Museum into a new aviation museum for the district, this would be subject to securing funding and would see an investment of £3.2M. The museum would tell personal stories of people who lived, worked, and influenced RAF Cranwell, RAF College and the Cranwell area. 2024 will see further investment in the Council's leisure portfolio with a number of projects aimed at sustainability, including installation of Solar PV, LED lighting upgrades and further exploration to decarbonise heating.

At the end of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in March 2025 there will have been £3.2M invested in heritage, community and public spaces in North Kesteven and £450,000 of Rural England Prosperity Fund grants awarded to support Food & Drink sectors and supply chains, Hospitality and Visitor Economy businesses and £250,000 supporting community-led projects.



4. Setting the context

Arising opportunities

Within the delivery period of the NKDC Tourism Strategy, it is expected that work will be underway in the delivery of a new reservoir. Anglian Water has identified a preferred location to the southeast of Sleaford. The reservoir is vital for ensuring water supply, not only for the county, but for the Anglian Water area as a whole in response to economic and population growth, droughts and climate change over the next 25 years. Whilst understanding the concerns of the residents and businesses that are directly affected, there will be benefits, to the local economy with the enhanced visitor economy and leisure offer as well as increased visitors, business start-up and growth as well as the environmental and wellbeing opportunities.

The 2023 Sleaford Hotel Feasibility Study highlighted demand for additional bed space within the town and opportunities to enhance the offer. In March 2024, NKDC acquired the Carre Arms in Sleaford as an investment opportunity, this shows we are committed to enhancing the tourism and leisure offer of North Kesteven. The hotel will act as an example regarding sustainable growth to other hospitality businesses, it will work collaboratively and support the NK Tourism Strategy.

As part of the Government plans to support tourism and place, NKDC needs to be able to bid for and react to funding opportunities including those created by major planning applications in solar energy etc., as well as supporting businesses to access funds from DEFRA and other sources promoting access to the countryside and rural communities that support growth in sustainable tourism.

The development of a 'local food offer' is both environmentally advantageous (food miles etc) and benefits residents and visitors alike. There are a considerable number of Award-Winning food and drink businesses in the District, in production, retail and hospitality, from Doddington Hall, to Abbey Farms, wine makers, gin makers, chocolatiers, cake makers and bakers, growers, confectioners, butchers etc., all of which support ideas about local distinctiveness and Place. The opportunity to develop an authentic 'Taste of the District' with stakeholders and partners to add value to a wider Heart of Lincs visitor offer should be explored.





4. Setting the context

North Kesteven's tourism offer within Greater Lincolnshire

Tourism is worth £2.6bn to Greater Lincolnshire, of this over £201m is generated in North Kesteven. Understanding North Kesteven's position within the wider tourism offer is important and will help identify sustainable growth opportunities. This can be achieved via the development of multi-day itineraries, purpose built for visitor personas who want longer stays. Visitors can be dispersed and shared among neighbouring districts that share rail and road routes. This work compliments the vision of this NKDC strategy and can be realised via alignment with the Greater Lincolnshire DMP.



5. Emerging Trends and Research

Visit England - the Top Tourism Trends of 2023

- **Transformational trips** – travel experiences that cater to people who want to undergo a significant personal or spiritual transformation.
- **Forest bathing and digital detoxing** – becoming immersed in nature to enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Going for a long walk through a forest or sitting by a lake and taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the natural surroundings.
- **Off-grid and “survival” travel** – 55 percent of travellers want to spend their holidays off-grid.
- **Hush trips, workcations, and micro-cations** – a secret trip taken by an employee without their employer’s knowledge; linked to remote working.
- **Traveling for “bleisure”** – the trend of business travellers tacking on some leisure time to the end of business trips.
- **Set-jetting** – visiting destinations primarily because they were featured in a popular movie, TV show, or book.
- **Sustainable tourism and electric travel** – “ecotours” enjoy holidays while learning about environmental and sustainability issues in a particular location.
- **Budget-friendly travel** – thrifty travellers in camping, self-catering, and all-inclusive holidays; hiring equipment rather than buying.
- **Glamping** – sleeping and living in the great outdoors, but with a step-up in comfort from traditional camping.

Many of these trends play directly into the advantages of rural destinations like North Kesteven. Having target visitor profiles in mind and supporting businesses to develop products that attract them (see visitor profiles) will position the District as an attractive and ‘must visit’ destination. Attracting new and repeat visitors will form the fundamental building blocks of moving towards a strategy that delivers sustainable growth.



5. Emerging Trends and Research

Destination Lincolnshire Research.

In the wider context of the Visitor Economy in 2023, Destination Lincolnshire research captured the following data which informs both the size of the opportunity and the challenges in promoting sustainable growth, many of the emerging market trends offer several opportunities to target sustainable growth in the sector in North Kesteven.

95% of visitors to Lincolnshire are repeat visits. Only **5%** are new visitors. Lincolnshire is not proactively marketing or targeting new visitors.

Lincolnshire's visitor economy is underperforming. Day trippers spent only **£43** on a visit. The experiences most visitors have in Lincolnshire are free (sightseeing, walking, being outdoors, etc).

Product **development** is required to generate more spend among loyal visitors and new visitors.

Infrastructure is a barrier to growth. Over **95%** of people use their car as the main mode of transport. Long-term cross-sector working is needed to highlight the needs of the sector in future planning.


>Appendix/link to full research>

5. Emerging Trends and Research

Destination Management Plan (DMP)

Looking ahead (2023-33) the new DMP for the county to be managed by the new Government-backed visitor partnership (LVEP) and aligned to the Government's National Tourism Recovery Plan has highlighted the following trends most of which would suggest that there is an opportunity for Lincolnshire to position itself favourably as a competitive UK destination with plenty to see and do much of which offers value for money.

The attraction of 'free' benefits like outdoor activities, countryside, open spaces and the environment are key advantages for North Kesteven and the Heart of Lincs. Monetising these benefits will not be easy however experience shows that it is possible to add value for the consumer/visitor, for example, guided walking vs walking without compromising the attraction, while a 'lack of infrastructure' could be seen in the light of emerging consumer trends (see below) as a benefit of the authentic rural experience, as well as an opportunity to develop sustainable assisted transport hubs.



Cost of living crisis has changed consumer's holiday habits. The Visit Britain Consumer Tracker has been tracking the changes over time with the May 2023 edition showing:



The cost of accommodation remains the top barrier, followed by cost drinking/eating out.

Most UK adults (67%) are either 'cautious and being very careful' (49%) or have been 'hit hard and are cutting back' (18%) due to the cost-of-living crisis.



33% of UK adults plan to take fewer day trips to save money. Of those that are planning a UK day trip 28% said they will look for more free things to do, and 25% said they will spend less on eating out.

30% of UK adults plan to take fewer overnight UK breaks this year to save money. The top barrier to taking overnight UK trips in the next 6 months is the 'cost of living.'



36% of respondents indicated they are more likely to choose a trip in the UK than overseas, compared to the last 12 months - the top reasons being 'UK holidays are cheaper', 'they are easier to plan', and 'the travel time is shorter'.

5. Emerging Trends and Research

Conscious Visitors and Consumer Expectations

Pre-pandemic, sustainability and climate change were entering the public consciousness, however post pandemic awareness has accelerated significantly. Both leisure and business travellers are now giving much more thought to their carbon footprint when planning visits. There is an expectation that businesses will support them in helping to reduce their impact.

There have also been several changes in consumer expectations which will influence the activity of tourism businesses in the future:

- Ageless travel – not pigeon-holing experiences based on age. This includes opportunities for multi-generational families to be able to participate together.
- A desire for easy booking protocols and more importantly ease of cancellation.
- Providing “real experiences” that are authentic to Place.
- Use of technology such as AR, VR and in particular AI.
- Opportunities for visitors to volunteer/ take part in self-improvement activities.
- Active outdoor, wellness and health tourism (especially post COVID)
- Generation Z values sustainable travel and authentic experiences

Accessible Tourism

Visit England have recognised that businesses need to ensure that with 16 million disabled people in the UK and accessible tourism worth £14.6 billion, their offer is accessible and inclusive for all. Accessible tourism is good for destinations, its businesses, visitors and local communities and more focus needs to be given to this.



5. Emerging Trends and Research

NKDC 2023 Tourism Survey

Feedback from the 2023 Tourism Survey of both businesses and visitors stated that recruitment of staff remains a challenge for businesses post COVID with 37.5% saying they struggle to recruit and retain staff, citing quality of candidates to fill positions, rural location and transport links, skilled chefs, and general staff shortage in hospitality. Businesses are still looking to expand, however feel that the overall tourism offer in North Kesteven could improve, with more events collaborating with local businesses, network of businesses to support and learn from peers, wider promotion on Council websites and more accommodation in areas such as Waddington supporting the RAF and aviation sector and enthusiasts.

Businesses were asked to rank what the top 5 actions should be for the Tourism Strategy, the following were ranked the highest;

- Turn day visits into overnight visits by supporting and developing North Kesteven's accommodation offer.
- Skills – To attract, develop and retain a skilled workforce. Challenge the misconceptions of careers in the tourism sector and support businesses to take advantage of training and development opportunities.
- Improvements to the North Kesteven walking/cycling/outdoor offer.
- Focus on increasing visitor numbers from outside the district.
- Engage more with residents, encourage them to explore their local area and discover what is on their doorstep.
- Encourage businesses to procure locally and encourage local spend.



5. Emerging Trends and Research

Whilst 81% of the respondents say they promote their sustainable approach, 69% see challenges in achieving net zero with 62.5% not knowing what support is available to help them. Cost was cited as one of the main challenges for being sustainable, historic buildings, lack of charging points or only being worthwhile installing if more electric vehicles on the road and the lack of transport links meaning that visits by car is still the main transport.

81% of the respondents to the survey were residents of North Kesteven with only 4% being from outside of Lincolnshire, 74% would be very likely or likely to recommend visiting North Kesteven. Sports & Leisure, Accommodation offer, restaurants cafes & pubs, Towns and Villages and Arts & Culture were all rated highly for attractiveness with visitor attractions, walking & cycling scoring slightly lower and therefore room for improvement. Sporting activities and heritage events were the most popular to undertake followed by eating out, walking and art & cultural events.

The top three venues visited were The Hub in Sleaford, Doddington Hall & Gardens and International Bomber Command Centre, the bottom three that had never been visited were The Lincolnshire Road Transport Museum, Sleaford Museum and Mrs Smith's Cottage in Navenby.

Whilst 60% use social media to find out about place to go or events that are on, 56% are still referring to printed material and word of mouth is still a key way of finding out what's happening. 63% of visitors stated that it was very important or important that tourism businesses or places they visited had a focus on sustainability and aspirations to reduce their carbon levels and to be more environmentally friendly.

Importantly 71% of visitors felt that the tourism offer in North Kesteven could be improved, whilst a mix of suggestions were put forward, key suggestions were around improved cycling links and safer routes, wider variety of accommodation with local eating establishments offering quality and variety of opening hours, more events and wider promotions both in printed material and working with businesses on their websites and social media accounts, link activities and offers, improvement to public transport and support businesses to grow.

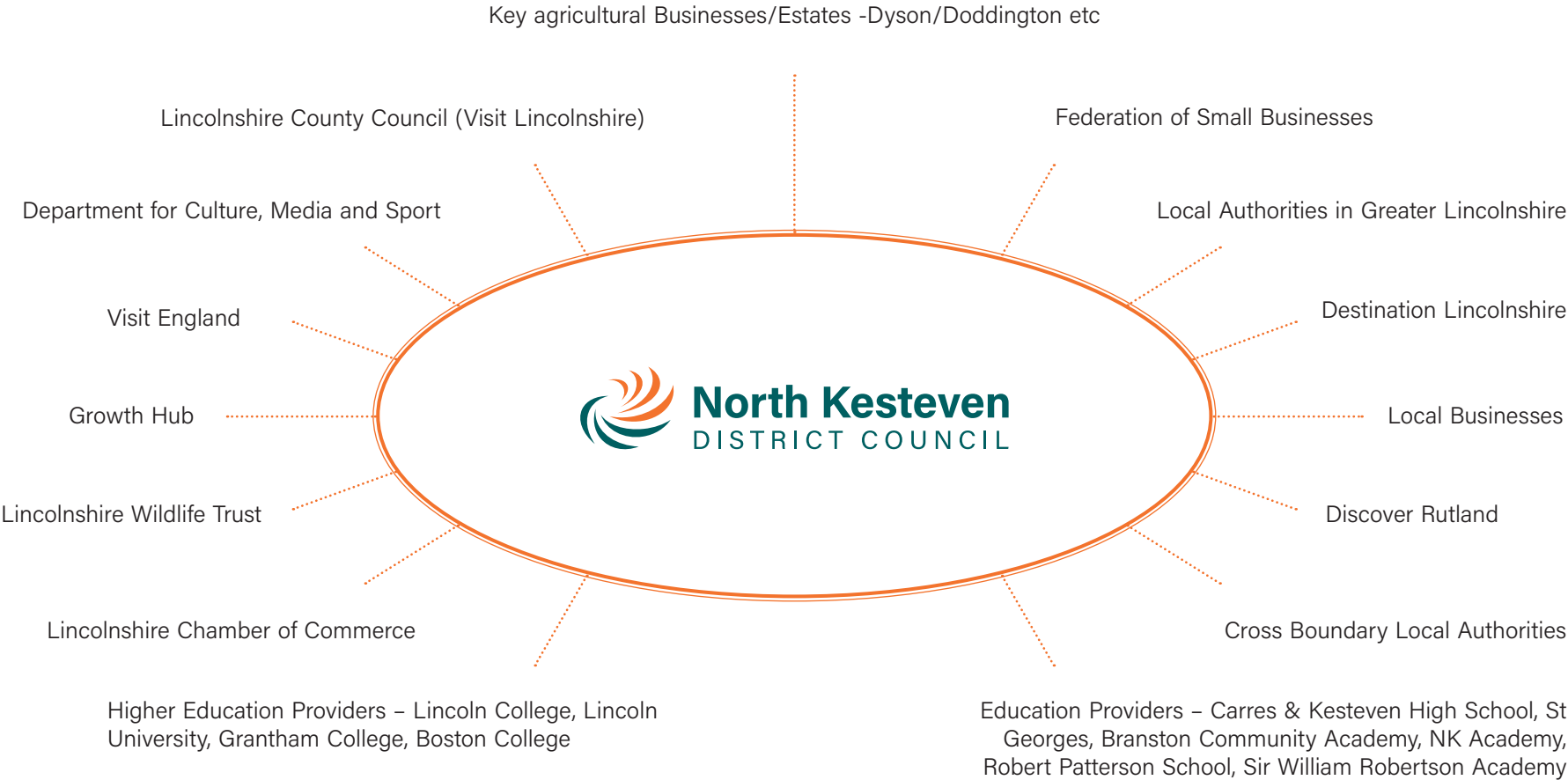
Visitors were asked to rank what the top 5 actions should be for the Tourism Strategy, the following came out as top;

- Work more effectively with other organisations to improve and promote better transport links and connectivity.
- Improvements to the North Kesteven walking/cycling/outdoor offer
- Focus on increasing visitor numbers from outside the district.
- Engage more with local residents, encourage them to explore their local area and discover what is on their doorstep.
- Encourage businesses to procure locally and encourage local spend.
- Supporting the sector to be more sustainable and carbon conscious.
- Skills – To attract, develop and retain a skilled workforce. Challenge the misconceptions of careers in the tourism sector and support businesses to take advantage of training and development opportunities.

5. Emerging Trends and Research

Working with Partners

Key to the delivery of the strategy is partnership working, these partners will change according to the action, however, key partners include:



6. Key Priorities & Objectives

Through the research work, aligning to Climate Strategy, Economic Development Strategy and the DMP, the following priorities have been identified for the North Kesteven Tourism Strategy. These priorities will support sustainable growth and resilience, they will nurture growth in visitor numbers and value in spend through enhancing the quality of the product offer, whilst reducing the impact of that investment and enhanced offer on the environment. They will support the local businesses and help to ensure that there is a skilled workforce to meet the demand.

Within these priorities, objectives have been set which will ensure delivery. The delivery plan [<Inert link>](#) sets about how these priorities will be delivered in partnership and will be updated quarterly.

1. The Environment – Embed the Green Thread through businesses, residents, and visitors by promoting responsible tourism, minimise environmental impact, green business support and sustainable travel making NK a sustainable location.
2. Product Development- Identify key tourism products and experiences, working to enhance and create new products and experiences that generate visitor spend and visitors to stay longer.
3. Business Support – Support, advise and champion sustainable growth in business.
4. Marketing & Promotion – Promote as the place to Live, Visit and Invest. Encourage wider buy-in on branding from partners such as Destination Lincolnshire. Support businesses to maximise their marketing opportunities
5. Skills Agenda – Attract, maintain and upskill the workforce.



7. Monitoring Progress

The delivery plan will be reviewed quarterly to ensure that the objectives are being met, as part of the annual monitoring, data will continue to be collected and fed into the Countywide STEAM annual report, with a focus on reporting on;

- Economic Impact generated through visitor and tourism business expenditure - % increase
- Economic impact of staying visitors -% increase
- Number of visitors to the district
- Number of overnight stays
- Comparison on year-on-year visitor numbers
- Average visitor spend
- Number of people employed in tourism sector in the district

An annual visitor and business survey will be undertaken to ensure that the key priorities are still the focus of businesses and visitors. Understanding how businesses have engaged in support and what difference it has made. And to understand if the visitor experience has changed, whether it has improved and how they are hearing about the offer.

Engagements with businesses will be recorded, monitoring jobs numbers, investments, product developments and change in their carbon footprint.

Carbon reduction

– Carbon reduction figures are provided by DEFRA, these will be used to evidence any district wide emission reductions. However, it should be noted that the data is always two years behind and grouped into fixed categories such as industry, transport, commercial and agriculture and cannot be subcategorised further.



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