The sad demise of effective tourism planning and management in England

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2023

Published by Responsible Tourism Partnership
6 Plane Tree Court, Church Road, Faversham ME13 8GZ
https://responsibletourismpartnership.org/rtp-library/

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Most commentators agree that tourism can only become more sustainable if it is properly managed. For decades it has been recognised that the development of tourism must be controlled by the public sector as its development involves the use of public goods, publicly owned infrastructure, and the natural environment. The rationale for public sector oversight of tourism is also that its impacts affect the wider population and the places in which they live not just tourists and the tourism industry.

Furthermore, it is also widely accepted that tourism management needs to be strategic and long-term in its perspective rather than based on the short-term tactical thinking and opportunism that typifies most private sector businesses.

For more than fifty years, academics and commentators have warned us of tourism’s dangers if it is not properly managed and controlled. This was explicitly recognised in the apt title of the book ‘Tourism: Blessing or Blight’ written by the British politician George Young and published by Penguin Books precisely fifty years ago in 1973.

Over decades we have seen a plethora of books and academic papers not only stressing the importance of public-sector-led tourism policy, planning and management but also providing copious quantities of examples of good and bad practices from around the world. In the early days of post-war tourism, the UK would have been amongst the former, now, it feels as if it would be described as the latter!

I contend that while many other countries which started with little or no effective tourism policy, planning, and management in place are moving towards it, we are going backwards, having dismantled statutory planning systems and organisations which were providing us with a sound tourism planning and management system several decades ago!

In recent years I have become increasingly concerned about the decline and ultimately, the death of effective tourism planning and management in England. This concern relates to the weakening of the statutory planning system that guides and controls development, as well as how the impacts of tourism are managed together with the management and marketing of tourist destinations.

I must emphasise that here I am talking about England rather than the UK because since devolution the situations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all vary slightly. I am focusing on England partly because it is the part of the UK that I know best and partly because trying to incorporate all the variations found in the other three nations within the UK would have introduced further complications into a story which is already complex enough. However, it is fair to say that much of what follows, particularly in relation to statutory planning rather than destination management, also applies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

At a time when we are painfully aware of the urgent need to make tourism more responsible and therefore hopefully sustainable, it is sad to see England putting the final nails in the coffin of what was once one of the world’s most effective systems of tourism planning and management.
It is indeed ironic that many countries adopted elements of UK system of planning and tourism management when developing their own approaches at the same time as that very system was being dismantled in the UK. As an aside, it is also worth noting that many of these countries opted for having stand-alone Ministries of Tourism, which are relatively high profile, something which the UK has generally not done. Not for one moment am I saying that tourism planning and management in this country was perfect in the past, but I know from personal experience that it was certainly much more effective than it is now.

I am conscious that many readers may not even have been alive in the closing decades of the last century when things began to go wrong with the UK approach to tourism planning and management. With that in mind, I thought it might be helpful to use some of my personal experiences to paint a picture of the system we have lost.

In the summer 1980, I was a newly qualified ‘town and country’ planner, having trained at the University of Liverpool, where the first school of town and country/urban and regional planning in the world was established in 1909. My first post was with the tourism team within the planning department of a major local authority, Kent County Council. The County Council was the strategic planning authority for the whole County of Kent while the fourteen District Councils were responsible for tactical planning at the local level based on the framework provided by the County Council.

Kent County Council produced the Structure Plan, a broad-brush strategic planning document that set out general policies covering social and economic issues and the environment. It highlighted areas where certain types of development should be encouraged or prevented. It provided a framework for local plans, which were produced by the District Councils who also controlled most development through the formal planning system although some more strategic planning issues were dealt with at County Council level.

The tactical development control system operated by the District Councils involved mechanisms for granting or refusing permission for individual proposed developments as well as powers to stop unauthorised development and even demolish any buildings or structures that had been developed without permission. While tensions certainly existed between the views of the County Council and the District Councils, there was at least an integrated system for planning across the whole County.

I saw for myself how the system worked at the District Council level as from May 1982 until I left Kent in October 1984, while I was at the same time working for Kent County Council also an elected member of a District Council within Kent, Maidstone Borough Council, where I served on the committee that was responsible for tourism-related matters.

The County Planning Department of Kent County Council had different sections covering a wide range of issues that were relevant to strategic land-use planning ranging from housing to economic development, countryside recreation to conservation, transport and highways to minerals and waste disposal and, of course, tourism.
As all of these sections were located in the same building, there was a constant dialogue between the teams, which led to a coordinated and integrated approach to planning for the County. While views might well differ between the different teams at least there was a structure in which these views could be expressed and decisions reached.

The tourism team itself contained four to six members who worked solely on tourism while I was working there as it grew as the importance of tourism to Kent became increasingly recognised. The team had a broad remit that included policy development, contributing the tourism section of the Structure Plan, research and market intelligence, guidance for developers, destination marketing, and coordinating the tourism policies and marketing activities of the District Councils within Kent.

The work of the tourism team at Kent County Council and the District Councils also fitted into a well-established national and regional structure of government agencies in the tourism field, starting with the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which was responsible for marketing the UK abroad. Each nation within the UK then had its own tourist board, such as the English Tourist Board (ETB), which focused on domestic tourism, and then there were regional tourist boards covering the whole of England. In the 1980s, these government agencies were well-resourced, had clearly defined roles, and had experts in tourism policy and planning within their teams.

The ETB and the regional tourist boards went well beyond simple destination marketing. Their remit included policy development, market intelligence, and the registration and quality assurance of accommodation, for example. The ETB also produced Insights, a widely circulated regular publication including market intelligence but also commissioned opinion pieces by academics and others featuring issues the editors thought would interest policymakers and industry practitioners. I recall writing around twenty of these in the 1990s on topics ranging from tourism education to heritage and urban regeneration, ethical marketing to lessons for the UK from rural tourism development in France. This went far beyond the excellent marketing data which Visit Britain/Visit England provides today under the same title of Insights. I believe successful tourism planning and management requires both types of ‘insights’, one broader and perhaps more strategic, the other information that tourism marketers can use tactically immediately.

The scope of the work of the tourism team at Kent County Council can be seen from the projects I led or worked on during my four years there. These included:

- analysing the results of a survey of over 30,000 international visitors passing through East Kent and using the findings as input to the Structure Plan and to develop a range of new tourism policies
- proactively promoting specific sites to developers that met the strategic objectives of the County Council in relation to tourism
- providing comments to District Councils about planning applications they were considering that had any implications for tourism
- identifying the best locations for new tourism-related infrastructure
The sad demise of effective tourism planning and management in England © John Swarbrooke

• setting up the Heart of Kent Tourist Association, which brought together several District councils and the private sector to market an area which straddled the areas covered by several local authorities
• working with a central government department on one of the first ‘brown-and-white’ tourist road signs’ schemes in the UK
• assisting with the creation of the first cross-border tourism partnership between Kent County Council and the regional council of Nord-Pas de Calais in France in anticipation of the opening of the Channel Tunnel
• providing input for the tourism sections of the local plans produced by the District Councils as well as to policy documents within Kent County Council
• producing an events guide for Kent to attract visitors in the off-peak season
• liaising with the network of local tourist information centres across Kent to share market intelligence and trends in consumer demand that helped shape the activities of the County Council tourism team
• producing a new piece of promotional print in cooperation with the British Tourist Authority that was designed to attract international visitors to Kent. This was made to a format that was standard for all destination promotional material distributed through the BTA
• organising and attending a range of trade fairs and public holiday exhibitions in the UK and abroad to promote Kent as a tourist destination. This included coordinating the activities of the District Councils to ensure that Kent had a clear identity at these events, including the annual World Trade Market in London and major trade fairs in Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Utrecht, and Madrid.

The structure of public sector tourism planning and management at that time was quite well integrated with the central government’s efforts and the two critical levels of local government in England, Counties and Districts, although disagreements certainly did occur!

This was a period in which local authorities played a key role in tourism management in England as I experienced myself when working for Merseyside County Council before its abolition in 1986. That Council was spearheading the integrated marketing of the city and surrounding region of Liverpool as a destination for leisure and business tourists and using tourism as a vehicle for urban regeneration during one of the most challenging periods in the recent history of that city region.

Indeed, at this time, local authorities were leading players in many schemes across the UK to use the development of visitor attractions as vehicles for economic regeneration using old buildings that were no longer required by industries in severe decline.

Since those times a number of changes have occurred in piecemeal fashion based on the political philosophies of different UK governments. These occurred in a disjointed and fragmented way rather than being a ‘grand plan’.

I believe that these changes have all resulted in nothing short of the death of effective tourism policy, planning and management in Britain.
Firstly, the funding of both the BTA and the English Tourist Boards was reduced and the regional tourist boards were eventually abolished altogether. This latter action removed a crucial element in the system: linking the central government with the many local authorities.

At the same time, the focus of tourism policy at central government level became focused almost exclusively on destination marketing and generating business for the private sector. This went alongside the culture of privatisation championed by the Conservative government between 1979 and 1997, which wished to see less intervention by the public sector in the economy and fewer controls on development and less regulation of industry.

These policies meant a reduction in conventional tourism planning and management which is almost wholly a public sector activity, albeit hopefully in partnership with the private sector.

The same philosophy of reducing the size of ‘the state’ also resulted in a squeeze on central and local government expenditure, which has not been reversed since then. Because of this many local authorities, over time, withdrew from their involvement in tourism as they had no statutory responsibility to market or manage tourism, unlike other services which they were required to provide by law.

One sad effect of this reduction in local government spending on tourism was the closure of many Tourist Information Centres or TIC’s which provided a vital interface between the destination and its visitors. Their importance is shown by the fact that according to Visit England, even after many had closed the four hundred or so that remained dealt with an estimated twenty million inquiries in 2012. As such, they represent a great opportunity to influence tourist behaviour, a crucial part of tourism management.

The largely ‘laissez-faire’ approach to tourism planning and management that developed in the UK from the late 1980s onwards led over time to a number of other changes including:

- a relaxation of planning controls over development in general and the growth of a permissive culture in the planning system where there is normally a presumption in favour of development
- the abolition of County Structure Plans in 2004; nothing replaced them to provide a strategic framework for local plans, so nearly twenty years later, some of them are still being used despite being outdated

The Localism Act of 2011 introduced Neighbourhood Plans, often covering places with just a few thousand residents. In Cornwall, where I live there are 140 ‘Neighbourhood Areas’ each supposed to produce one of these plans in a County with a little over 500,000 population!

While in theory, they sound like a good idea, putting more decision-making in the hands of local people, the problem is that the lowest level of local government unit is supposed to develop these plans, the Parish or Town Councils. But these authorities usually need staff with planning experience or tourism knowledge and need more legal powers and financial resources to implement any of the plan’s contents. And of course, their small size means that they cannot take a strategic overview, but because of the planning system changes, no
other public sector authority is taking such a view any longer. Interestingly, more than a
decade after the Act was passed, nearly half of the 140 ‘Neighbourhood Areas’ in Cornwall
are yet to complete their Neighbourhood Plans!

In 2012 the government published its new ‘National Planning Policy Framework, which
streamlined the system by replacing the existing documents with one single document
which should have been an improvement. Unfortunately, while some of this seventy-five-
page document relates to issues which are relevant to tourism there is little or nothing said
specifically about tourism despite it being a major industry in the UK.

The Growth and Infrastructure Act of 2013 now permits those developing major projects to
submit them directly to government planning inspectors rather than to local planning
authorities, thus taking decisions from local elected representatives’ hands. In the context of
tourism, this will potentially include developments such as airports, ferry terminals, major
resort complexes, large theme parks, and so on, as well as major industrial developments
which might have a detrimental effect upon the local tourism sector.

Unfortunately, all of these changes in the planning system together with the reduction in
public sector intervention in tourism have taken place at a time when it could be argued that
we need more public sector tourism planning and management not less. We are facing a
climate crisis because of a failure to manage our economic activities, including tourism,
sustainably yet we still cling to an outdated economic model based on the goal of
continuous growth. A model which has clearly failed.

Over the past few years, we have seen the rise of the so-called ‘overtourism’ issue with local
residents in ‘tourism honeypots’ protesting against the impacts of tourism on their
communities and everyday lives. This issue may have been rather side-lined and
overshadowed by the Covid pandemic and its impact in tourism-based economies but the
resurgence of mass tourism numbers will undoubtedly see it arise again.

Yet in England at least, there is in effect no longer any public body with the powers or the
resources to respond to this challenge. Instead, the main focus of the DMOs seems to
continue to be how to attract more visitors regardless of the capacity of the destination or
the wishes of local residents.

The UK government has also failed to make any effective response to the adverse impact
that tourism is having on local communities through the growth of second-home ownership,
which is placing an ever greater strain on the housing stock in many tourist destinations,
particularly in coastal regions and rural areas.

This has been exacerbated by the rise of the ‘Airbnb phenomenon’ which has seen property
owners convert properties formerly owned or rented by local residents into tourist
accommodations because it is more profitable. This not only adds to the housing crisis in
many tourist destinations but it creates unfair competition for established businesses as they
are often not conforming to key safety requirements due either to ignorance or deliberately
to help keep their costs down. This lack of proper regulation of accommodation quality can
also harm an area’s reputation when the media features horror stories of sub-standard accommodation as it now regularly does.

While discussions are slowly progressing about an effective accommodation registration scheme there is still none in place at the time of writing. However, it seems likely that what might result is a scheme which is bureaucratic and more about generating income for the authorities rather than managing tourism effectively. And with regional tourist boards and local authorities actively engaged in tourism, it is difficult to see how any registration scheme will be enforced.

Another major problem facing tourism in the UK today is what has happened to destination management, which was formerly largely in the hands of the BTA, ETB, regional tourist boards and local authorities. At that time, the effectiveness of what was done may have been questionable, but at least everywhere in the country had some form of destination management.

However, two things have happened as a result of the decline in public sector involvement in tourism in terms of destination management.

First, we have seen the replacement of destination management with pure destination marketing, which is focused solely on attracting more tourists rather than being concerned with managing their impacts as well. This begins with the national bodies now known publicly as Visit Britain and Visit England rather than the BTA and the ETB, the new names tells you about the focus of their activities.

Since the 2015 Spending Review these two organisations have been brought closer together, this makes sense in coordinating their efforts. Their statutory duties are listed as being:

- to encourage people to visit Great Britain and people living in Great Britain to take their holidays there
- to encourage the provision and improvement of tourist amenities and facilities in Great Britain

They are also responsible for advising ministers and public bodies on matters relating to tourism in Great Britain as a whole.

The two key roles of Visit Britain/Visit England are clearly related to growing tourist numbers and improving the infrastructure that will allow tourism in Great Britain to grow. However, there is no mention of them having any role in ensuring the impacts of tourism are effectively managed or seeking to make tourism in the country more sustainable or using tourism to help reduce poverty.

In an attempt to fill the vacuum filled by the demise of regional tourist boards and local authority-led destination management and marketing, we have local public-private partnerships functioning as Destination Management Organisations or DMOs such as Visit Kent and Visit Cornwall amongst many others.
As noted above, his name ‘Visit’ tells you all you need to know about these organisations' purpose and mission. They seem to see themselves as destination marketing organisations rather than destination management organisations.

Most of these grew out of organisations that were originally developed by local authorities many years ago. At that time, they aimed to allow local authorities to work effectively with the private sector on destination marketing activities. However, they were still directly linked to local authorities, which were also planning authorities responsible for tourism policy and development control in their areas.

Most of them today are public-private partnerships that sit largely or wholly outside local authorities. They tend to be led by the private rather than the public sector and not surprisingly, therefore, their focus is almost exclusively on destination marketing with the aim of attracting more tourists to an area. Many of these organisations have commercial membership schemes and their members are understandably interested in what these organisations can do for their business rather than managing the impacts of tourism.

The weakness of this approach of focusing simply on destination marketing rather than destination management became starkly evident during the Covid pandemic. With UK residents unable to travel to other countries, there was a ‘staycation boom’. While this was certainly beneficial to the tourism sector in economic terms, it exacerbated the problem of ‘overtourism’ in various parts of the country. This was made worse by the behaviour of some of the visitors who wanted to be holidaying abroad but were forced, against their wishes, to stay in the UK for their holidays.

In late 2022 when he retired the highly respected former Chief Executive of Visit Cornwall, Malcolm Bell, set out what he saw as a new approach to tourism in Cornwall. He said a new direction focused on the wishes of all local people, not just businesses. Yet the management of these DMOs is generally not in the hands of elected representatives of the local community and they are usually not directly accountable to that community.

He went on to say there needed to be greater emphasis within DMOs on the improvement of jobs and career prospects and in ensuring that the tourism that was developed was sustainable and regenerative not damaging. He also said that the public sector should regulate the accommodation stock and quality standards.

We need more of these DMOs, along with Visit Britain and Visit England, to take a more long-term view of tourism and focus on its negative impacts and economic benefits. They also need to commit to playing their part in making tourism as sustainable as possible, including the need for it to enhance rather than diminish the quality of life of those who live in a tourist destination.

Secondly, we have seen the development of the concept of Business Improvement Districts or BID’s which were first introduced in the UK in the Local Government Act of 2003 although the idea originated in North America. One source suggests that there are now over three hundred BIDs in the UK and as many as twenty-five new ones are being set up each year.
Thus, we are left with a patchwork of different types of organisations trying to perform at least some of the role of a Destination Management Organisation or DMO or more accurately, Destination Marketing Organisation.

There is little coherent national or regional framework for them to work within even in the area of marketing and there is often more competition than cooperation and coordination between them. And some areas which are significant tourist destinations in the UK have been left without any real Destination Marketing Organisation at all let alone a Destination Management Organisation.

The BIDs themselves are business-led and business-funded bodies which are set up to improve a defined commercial area, often a town centre. It appears that the average income of BIDs is between around £200k and £600k per annum although it can range from £50k to £2m. From that amount they are expected to pursue objectives such as increasing footfall and spending, reducing business costs, and marketing and promoting their area. They only have a life of up to five years and can only be extended following a ballot amongst businesses in the area. Thus, they are unable to take the long-term view which is essential if we are to make tourism more sustainable and need to concentrate on producing short-term ‘wins’ for local businesses to ensure that their existence continues after the first five years. A number of major UK tourist destinations have BIDs including Bournemouth, Blackpool, St Ives and the ‘English Riviera’

However, in relation to tourism, the BIDs have a number of weaknesses.

1. local residents who are not tourism business owners have no say in their activities and the way in which they market the area where they live.
2. their limited budgets are a major constraint on what they are able to achieve so understandably they tend to focus on highly visible promotional activities designed to bring short-term financial benefits to local businesses.
3. they usually have no formal links with their local authorities, yet it is precisely these authorities which manage the environment in which businesses operate.
4. because of their limited budgets they usually lack staff with experience of either destination marketing or management.
5. Finally, the BID’s often cover just individual town centres with no remit beyond so they rarely coincide with local government boundaries and may often exclude the places where many tourists that they are targeting are staying. This limits their potential effectiveness.

Given all this it is clear that BIDs are not the answer to the lack of tourism planning and management in the UK.

In some areas, local communities are stepping into the vacuum to try to develop the kind of tourism they want to see in the places where they live rather than leaving their fate in the hands of tourists, the tourism industry, and the media. A small-scale example of this is the Tin Coast Partnership which was established in 2016 with the intention of making tourism in the area more sustainable and making sure that how the area between Morvah and St Just
on the north-west coast of Cornwall is marketed is controlled as much as possible by local people.

Its aim is not to increase visitor numbers to the area but rather to spread visits more evenly across the year. The Partnership wants to enrich the visitor experience by sharing stories about the area with visitors and helping them discover places that might otherwise not find themselves.

It is also undertaking initiatives to encourage tourists to park their cars and explore the area by bus, cycle, foot, or horse! This is not only to reduce the carbon footprint of tourism in the area but it is also about reducing the traffic congestion and parking problems that make the lives of local people more difficult during the main tourist season.

You can find out more about the work of the Tin Coast Partnership on its website, www.tincoast.co.uk. It is realistic that its impact will be modest but in the absence of any other effective tourism planning and development in the area it is intent to do what it can through this form of self-help, a good example of the idea of responsible tourism.

Returning to the national scene, in April 2023 yet another new type of organisation was introduced by central government into the organisational landscape of destination marketing and management in England, at least, namely the Local Visitor Economy Partnerships or LVEPs. Their introduction follows the De Bois Review, which was an independent review of DMOs in England.

Fifteen areas have been selected to become LVEPs ranging from whole Counties such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Northumberland, Kent, and Cumbria to cities such as Liverpool and Manchester. They are to be developed and administered by Visit England and their priority is to ‘grow the local visitor economy’. When the LVEPs were launched the press release stated that they were designed to ‘play a central role in transforming the visitor economy in an inclusive, accessible and sustainable way’.

It remains to be seen whether LVEPs represent a move towards more effective management of tourist destinations, in England at least, or whether they are just another gimmicky initiative that perpetuates the weaknesses of the current situation. While words such as inclusive, accessible, and sustainable were used in the press release the focus still seems to be simply on growing the visitor economy even in places which may already have as many tourists as they can handle such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Still, the focus seems to be on the quantity of tourism rather than its quality. The new LVEP’s also seem to be a top-down approach, managed by a central government agency, rather than a locally led bottom-up approach which would seem to be much more in tune with the ideas of sustainable tourism and responsible tourism.

It is clear that from the late 1980’s we have seen a process of liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation in relation to the planning and management of tourism which has reduced our ability to plan tourism strategically and manage it effectively. This has happened just when we need strong tourism planning and management to allow us to:

- respond to the challenges posed by climate change
deal with the impact of second home ownership and the Airbnb phenomenon and their negative impact on local communities in our tourist destinations
- let communities have the ability to develop the kind of level of tourism that they want in their area
- protect the quality of the tourism product and conserve the natural and built environment on which much of our tourism sector relies
- compete with other countries which have more effective tourism planning and management systems in place

And government policies that were not directly related to tourism have also had a negative impact on tourism management. For example, following the privatisation of the water industry, the government has failed to ensure that the water companies protect our rivers and beaches from pollution. In March 2023 for example Surfers Against Sewage advised people to avoid eighty-three beaches across the country where raw sewage was being pumped into the sea nearby. They reported that there were at least 5,500 discharges of sewage into coastal waters. Again, this is a failure of planning systems to control something which has a direct impact on tourism.

Perhaps the biggest weakness today in planning and managing tourism in England and the wider UK is that regional government agencies and elected local authorities have largely been removed from the scene and replaced by top-down government agencies and unelected locally based ad hoc bodies, led by well-meaning businesspeople, which have narrow remits that focus on destination marketing alone.

Therefore, local communities and their elected representatives have little or no say in how tourism is planned and managed in their communities today. They are unable to initiate or even influence action designed to both tackle the negative impacts of tourism and maximise the benefits of tourism in their area.

And if I just go back to the example of Kent where I worked all those years ago, we can see a microcosm of how strategic planning and tourism management has been largely dismantled in England.

Today Kent County Council no longer even has jurisdiction over the whole of the County for in 1998 the Unitary Authority of Medway was created covering the former District Councils of Gillingham and Rochester upon Medway. It is a conurbation with a population of around 280,000 which represents nearly fifteen per cent of the population of the County as a whole. The Medway authority now handles many of the functions previously undertaken by the County Council although the two authorities do work together on many issues.

The last Kent (and Medway) Structure Plan was published in 2003 and contained three and a half pages of tourism policies and commentary. They represented a clear strategic framework in relation to key issues such as the most appropriate locations for future accommodation, visitor attractions, and tourism and leisure facilities. Unfortunately, Structure Plans were then abolished so this one has never been either fully updated or replaced with something else.
It is now twenty years old and dates back to a time before Airbnb, Covid and the widespread recognition of the climate change crisis yet it is still used as a strategic framework for planning in Kent simply because nothing else suitable has been put in its place.

Kent County Council does produce strategies for the future of the County regularly, but these say little or nothing about tourism specifically. Meanwhile, District Councils produce Local Plans for their areas which are required to conform to national planning guidelines but there is no overarching plan for Kent. Each District is a Local Planning Authority has a Local Plans which may or not conflict with each other. Most Local Plans appear not to say much about tourism either.

An Internet search of ‘Kent County Council Tourism’ produced a rather random selection of items including some useful statistics from Kent Analytics and details of two EU funded projects, one of which was due to conclude in June 2023. Despite several attempts, the author was unable to find any tourism team or tourism specialist though the Council’s own website. So, it appears that the responsibility for tourism has now been largely transferred to Visit Kent.

As we saw earlier Visit Kent is a public-private partnership that focuses on Destination Marketing. On its website, it says it is a public-private partnership with an industry-led board and describes itself as the official Destination Management Organisation for Kent and Medway responsible for supporting and growing the tourism industry. Its Board contains people with tourism industry experience and while it does not have any representation from Kent County Council it does contain officers rather than elected members from two District Councils and the Unitary Authority of Medway. For a Kent-wide organisation, the lack of a Kent County Council representative on the Board might be seen as odd or unfortunate although it appears that Visit Kent certainly does have the support of Kent County Council. And it appears to be a very professional well-resourced DMO with a strong staff team covering all areas of destination marketing.

While Visit Kent’s 2021-2024 Strategy talks about sustainability and communities and recognises the importance of measuring the social and environmental impacts of tourism as well as its economic impacts the focus is undoubtedly on growing the tourism industry in Kent. There is no real consideration of the potentially negative implications of growth for local communities in terms of greater road traffic for example.

This focus on growth and the needs of business which are the focus of virtually all of the Visit Kent strategy is not surprising as the organisation is industry-led and is following the lead set by Visit Britain and Visit England. Furthermore, when you are a public-private partnership with no legal powers over anything it would be impossible to take on the task of managing the impacts of tourism on communities because that would be beyond both their remit and their resources.

Interestingly, and to its credit, Visit Kent has recently published its Kent Sustainable Tourism Action Plan 2023-2030. However, one cannot help noticing that while it contains a number of valuable initiatives it does not really get to grips with the problem of the negative impacts of tourism and its published ‘three priorities’ are rather disappointing. One is for a pilot
‘nature payback’ scheme by which tourists will contribute towards regenerative projects that increase diversity. The second is providing information to help visitors use low-carbon travel options when visiting Kent while the third is encouraging menu designers to focus on local, seasonal, organic, and plant-based ingredients. These ideas while worthy are sadly neither innovative nor ambitious given the urgent challenges that we face. Cynics might argue that these three initiatives, at least, look more like marketing tactics than serious attempts to make tourism more sustainable.

And while reading all of this it is important to remember that Kent is a gateway to the whole UK through which millions of tourists pass every year via ferry ports and the Channel Tunnel. It is therefore of enormous importance in relation to UK tourism as a whole, so the lack of any countywide, up-to-date strategic tourism planning that looks at tourism management as well as destination marketing would appear to be a real problem.

I hope that using a concrete case study like Kent’s has helped illustrate some of the general points that I have been trying to make. However, we need to acknowledge that the issues raised above relate to the whole of England, and some of them the whole UK rather than just one County.

We have to act before it is too late to develop a new approach to planning and managing tourism that meets our needs today rather than continuing with ideas that are no longer suitable for the world we are living in now.

Continuous growth is not sustainable, and the idea that the private sector always knows best has been shown to be incorrect. It is not about returning to a mythical ‘golden age’ of tourism planning and managing tourism because that never existed but rather taking the best of what went before and blending that with the latest thinking and the principles of sustainability to create an approach that will work for us in the future.

What we need is to recognise that the public sector has to play a key role in tourism planning and management as it is the custodian of the public goods on which tourism depends in a democracy.

Elected bodies which are accountable to the people who elect them need to be able to exercise more control over activities such as tourism whose impacts, both positive and negative, affect whole communities not just businesses. The private sector certainly has a role to play in tourism management but only as part of an equal partnership with the public sector and local communities.

My fear is that if we do not change our approach to tourism planning and management tourism will have no chance of becoming more sustainable in England and the wider UK, and we will also lose out to other countries which take a more enlightened and progressive approach.