



East of England
All Party Parliamentary Group

Co-Chairs: Jess Asato MP & Pam Cox MP

Vice-Chairs: Blake Stephenson MP & Marie Goldman MP

20th May 2025

Dear Sir Chris Bryant, Minister for Tourism and Culture

Support for tourism and culture in the East of England will drive regional & national growth and wellbeing

We are writing to thank you for addressing the East of England APPG meeting on Monday last week and, as promised, are now writing to highlight a number of key issues where we would ask for your support in order that the East of England delivers its tourism and cultural potential with benefits regionally and nationally.

First, let us say that we welcome your comments made on the 12th of May regarding Departmental efforts to encourage tourism outside London and the importance of a thriving cultural sector to driving regional and national prosperity and wellbeing. We are very mindful that the Government's Plan for Change has made delivering economic growth across the UK its central mission. To achieve this, we know growth must be unlocked across every UK region. We are certain that in the East of England this will mean maximising the potential of its tourist and culture sectors.

A number of key issues were raised by yourself, the three expert panellists and the MPs present. There was a fair degree of consensus regarding what needs to happen next – please see [the minutes](#) and [the background briefing](#). However, we thought it may be helpful to highlight eight issues where, with a little more support from your Department – and in some cases the wider Government - more progress could be made.

- There was widespread support for the major investment in Bedford by Universal Destinations and Experiences. The new Theme Park has the potential to attract many millions of domestic and international tourists but getting it constructed on time and with all the employment benefits for local people as well as for regional economic growth will require ongoing collaboration between the private sector and local and national government (including a range of Whitehall Departments). ***Please could we suggest further discussions with the Bedford Borough Council and Universal and emphasise cross-Departmental working e.g. with DfT, DfE and HMT etc to maximise this project's potential?***
- The critical role of developing the right skills amongst the local populations to deliver not only major projects such as in Bedford but more generally to serve the linked sectors of tourism, culture and hospitality was a clear conclusion of the meeting. One key point made was that skills in these sectors should not be seen as low paid temporary stop-gaps but ones where it should be possible to have a career. You may be interested to know that the East of England already has a regional Skills Delivery Group, which brings together skills leads in the LSIPS and Local Authorities and is chaired by Andrew Pakes MP. ***We would request that you urge the Department for Education to engage with the Skills Delivery Group so that planning for the skills of the future can be better co-ordinated and delivered?***

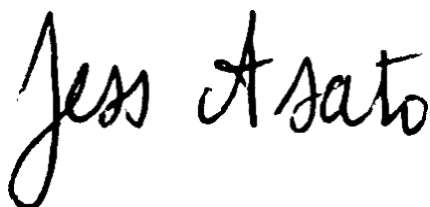
/continued

- The importance of good transport links was also recognised as vital to both a thriving tourism and cultural sector, both for visitors to access and for businesses' employees and supply chains. You may be aware that, as well as strong support in the region for East West Rail, there is equally strong support for investment in Ely and Haughley Junctions. There are also concerns about the capacity and resilience of the A1, A12, A14 and A47. Another point made at the meeting was the importance of developing the cycle tourism offer within a region that should lend itself to cycling. This includes the proposed Varsity Way between Cambridge and Oxford, which could become a major attraction for leisure cyclists. In general, transport investment through DfT has been lower than the national average. ***The East of England APPG would welcome greater engagement with officials at Department for Transport on the specific issue of how transport links of all kinds could better serve the tourism and cultures sectors in the East of England, including with Transport East's Rural Mobility Centre of Excellence which will be exploring this issue in depth this year.***
- There was a warm welcome for the fact that the role of culture in delivering growth has been recognised in the draft Industrial Strategy. We look forward to the final version of the Industrial Strategy and its recommendations regarding strengthening the sector further. ***Meanwhile we would request your view regarding getting culture embedded in all Government Departments for example in education (DfE) - where the number of "creative" GCSEs has declined by 60% over the past 5 years - and in health (DHSC) – where it is well evidenced that culture and wellbeing can go hand in hand.***
- The meeting heard how the First Light Festival in Lowestoft exemplifies how culture can play a vital role in regeneration. We were also pleased to hear that small venues will benefit from surcharges on arena gigs that are to be introduced. It was reported at the meeting that a large number of other coastal towns have a similar need for renewal and where cultural events could play a key role. ***Would DCMS engage with a working party convened by Visit East and the Norfolk Suffolk Cultural Board which brings together relevant cultural, tourism and local authority partners to explore how the First Light model in Lowestoft might be used for developing similar cultural regeneration projects in other coastal towns in the East of England and beyond?***
- The meeting returned time and time again to the important role of local Government, and in particular the potential of devolution to Combined Authorities, to boost both tourism and culture. The need to support Council owned spaces – museums, galleries, theatres and more – was emphasised as well as the hope that the new wave of Mayors (in Norfolk and Suffolk, and in Essex) acknowledge from the onset that developing tourism and culture will be key measures of their success. ***We very much hope that MHCLG would work with DCMS to ensure that devolution delivers on the cultural and tourism agendas.***
- Regarding organisational structures it was pointed out at the meeting that the region is missing one Local Visitor Economy Partnership – in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire - and that this would in effect hold up the advent of a Destination Development Partnership. A DPP has the potential to bring together all regional partners and to lever additional resources and support from central Government. ***The East of England APPG and its partners, which include Local Government East, would be very happy to work with your officials to develop the required LVEP and then DPP as quickly as possible.***
- Last but not least, there was criticism of the Treasury model that determines that domestic tourism is fiscally neutral. We would contest that for two reasons. First, more domestic tourism, for example more city breaks within the UK, will generate additional tax revenues through, for example VAT on hotels and restaurants. Second, if visitors to the East of England are from London then there is also a redistribution effect which, in terms of spreading growth, we would hope would be welcomed by the Treasury. ***We are copying this letter to the Exchequer Secretary for his own reply but if you are able to help put our case to officials in HMT we would be grateful.***

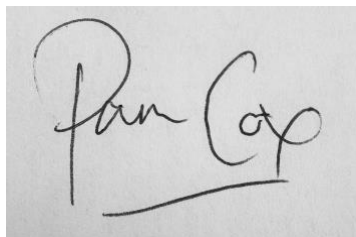
/continued

Finally, as you heard there was a request that you visit a key tourist or culture site in the East of England. We would be more than happy to welcome you at one of the number of places mentioned including the Roman Chariot track in Colchester and the Brecks - where Thetford Forest is East Anglia's equivalent of Hampshire's New Forest - as well as the First Light Festival in Lowestoft and the Making of Harry Potter in Hertfordshire.

Yours sincerely



Jess Asato MP
Co-chair, East of England APPG



Pam Cox MP
Co-chair, East of England APPG



Marie Goldman MP
Vice Chair, East of England APPG



Blake Stephenson MP
Vice Chair, East of England APPG

CC James Murray MP Exchequer Secretary at the Treasury
Simon Lightwood MP, Minister for Active Travel and Regions, DfT

Sent by Steve Barwick, Director, East of England APPG Secretariat – stevebarwickpc@outlook.com

The East of England APPG is kindly supported by:



The academic partners of the East of England APPG are:



The East of England APPG's business partners are:

