

Speech: Michael Ellis welcomes Visit Britain's annual report

Thank you to Steve and Sally for inviting me this morning and to Judith for that warm welcome. I was sorry to hear that Steve can't be with us today – do please pass on my regards to him, Sally.

And thank you all for coming. It is great to see so many of you here, representing our wide ranging tourism sector.

One of the best parts of my job is being able to travel across the country, and having the opportunity to meet the businesses delivering tourism on the front line. And those meetings have helped me to understand the incredible opportunities you have, as well as the big challenges you face, and reflect on what I can do to help.

In fact, in the last two months alone I've visited the Jubilee Lido in Penzance, the Titanic museum in Belfast and the Royal Military Tattoo in Edinburgh, to name but a few places, and have been thoroughly amazed and taken aback by the dedication and passion which you all demonstrate every day. So thank you for everything you do. Your work provides people with a welcome to Britain, it increases people's understanding of our history and our culture, and – while doing so – it helps to create jobs and growth as well.

Indeed tourism in the UK continues to go from strength to strength, welcoming record numbers of international visitors who are contributing the highest ever amount of money to our economy. Last year that was over 39m visitors spending nearly £25bn! This is in no small part down to the sterling efforts – no pun intended – of the dedicated individuals here in the room.

And I'd like to use my time with you this morning to look back and reflect on what all of you, working collaboratively with VisitBritain and VisitEngland, have helped to achieve in this past year.

There are many areas that I could draw attention to, but I'd like to focus on four this morning.

First I want to talk about business events. This year has seen a significant emphasis on this area for both Government and VB, collaborating with partners to build on our existing capability and encouraging more events to come to the UK. Events such as MeetGB and workshops aimed at helping destinations market themselves have been well received.

This remains a huge priority for me and one where I remain a very active advocate.

Second. The Discover England Fund continues to grow from strength to strength.

I've been fortunate enough to visit some of these projects in the past year; the Brilliant Science project led by Marketing Cheshire, the Majestic Waterways project led by Marketing Birmingham, and I look forward to being part of the launch event for the Great West Way at the end of November!

These projects are great examples of building supply through the delivery of improved tourism products and I am so pleased that the hard work that everyone has put into these projects is starting to deliver strong results.

Third. There is also some excellent ongoing work on expanding our sector for all members of society to enjoy.

Making the tourism industry more accessible can only be a positive thing and the work VisitEngland has carried out by promoting accessible businesses with the Inclusive Tourism awards and working with the National Autistic Society to launch the Welcoming Autistic People guide are brilliant markers for progress in our sector.

Another place I've visited over the summer is Eureka, the National Children's Museum in Halifax, which is a former VE Gold Award winner for Access. And it was superb to see how making an attraction as open and accessible as possible – to as many people as possible – can have a huge impact on experience of visitors.

In fact, I would fully encourage every business here to have a look at how you can open up your business, or those you represent, to more people and share your talent with more of the world.

The fourth – and final – area I'd like to talk about is the huge amount of work that VisitBritain and VisitEngland have carried out on the proposed Tourism Sector Deal.

As you will know, the sector, under the able guidance of Steve Ridgway and VisitBritain, put together an ambitious sector deal proposal which seeks to further strengthen our industry.

Now, I want to stress that this has been an incredibly valuable process.

The proposals set out in the Sector Deal – collated by VisitBritain, working with all parts of the British Tourism industry – are forward thinking and ambitious, and at DCMS we continue to assess what we can do to help deliver some of the ideas.

What I cannot do this morning is confirm whether or not Tourism will get a Sector Deal. A number of industries came forward with proposals, and colleagues across Government will enter into negotiations with those industries they feel best answer the questions set out in the Industrial Strategy.

What I can do though, is guarantee that me and my officials are fully versed in all the ideas you have collated and put forward. And where we think those ideas are workable, where we think they can help to boost productivity in this hugely important sector, we will work with you over the next year to

deliver them.

We have had a good year, no doubt. But we need to make sure we continue to work together to ensure there are better years to come.

So thank you once again for all the hard work that all of you put in, day in, day out to make Great Britain's tourism sector truly GREAT.

And I look forward to continuing to work with you, to make it even GREATER.