

North East boosts visitor numbers and attracts more spending but lags behind regional rivals

New data indicates visitor levels to the region are picking up though they remain below pre-pandemic levels and behind other areas of the country.

Around 69m people visited the North East last year, a 5% rise on 2022's numbers, according to tourism body Destination North East England, which cites STEAM (Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor) modelling. The organisation – the first ever Destination Development Partnership pilot in England – also pointed to visitors spending more than half a billion pounds more than in 2022, excluding inflation.

But separate analysis of overseas visitor levels, published by VisitBritain and citing International Passenger Survey data, showed the North East was well below all other UK regions and nations, with neighbouring Yorkshire & Humber outstripping it with 1.1m visits during the year vs the region's 459,000. Spending by those international visitors to the North East also paled at £360m compared to the larger Yorkshire & Humber attracting £644m.

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Destination North East England said the STEAM figures indicated a “promising upward trend” for the regional sector which it said now employs 63,000 and represents an economic

impact of £6.1bn, up nearly £35m on 2022. But it acknowledged the North East is being outcompeted by other parts of the country – highlighting that international visitor spend is 45 times lower than London.

In response it said there is an “urgent need for more investment, a higher number of hotel beds and places to stay, more world-class attractions and budget for international marketing to attract more people to the region.”

The results come as Destination North East England enters the final year of delivering the first-ever Destination Development Partnership pilot in England after receiving £2.25m from the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport in 2021. It said it had established the foundations of a 10-year plan that aims to double the size of the visitor economy in North East by the end of the decade.

North East mayor Kim McGuinness said: “Tourism and culture are a big part of my plans to create jobs and opportunity in the North East and help our economy grow. We all know how amazing this region is. The pride we feel is part of our identity, as is the warm welcome we offer. It’s very encouraging to see growth in visitor numbers and spend, not just in the cities but in our towns, along our coastline and in the villages and countryside too.

“But I know we can do more. I’m committed to building on Destination North East England’s ambitious plans to supercharge the visitor economy. It’s important we tell our story with one voice and showcase what this region has to offer to local people and to visitors. If we get this right, we’ll create thousands of good jobs and support local businesses across the region too.

“As North East Mayor I will always be a noisy champion for the North East. It really is the best place to visit.”

John Marshall, chair of Destination North East England, said:

“Destination North East England was established with ambitions to dramatically transform our region’s visitor economy. It is encouraging to see strong numbers from every corner of the North East – indicating that we’re on a path to achieve our goals of doubling the value of the visitor economy by the end of the decade and being recognised as one of Europe’s most welcoming, inclusive and regenerative destinations.

“That said, 2023’s figures reflect the challenging environment the sector and its businesses are operating in. The region still lags behind other parts of the UK, often by some margin and it demonstrates more than ever, the need to attract greater investment, support more jobs and attract more people to the area – in a sustainable and accessible manner.”