

North East tourism sector hoping for post-pandemic recovery

Hopes that the North East's crucial tourism sector is recovering after a disastrous two years caused by the pandemic have been outlined by senior figures in the industry.

Hotel occupancy rates on Tyneside are rising and it is hoped that a number of major events happening in the region this year will add to the number of people choosing to visit.

Before the pandemic, the region's tourism sector was worth around £5bn and supported more than 60,000 jobs, but a series of lockdowns and travel restrictions devastated the industry.

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Though rising Covid case numbers around the UK are causing concerns, there are hopes that events including Rugby Magic Weekend, the Rugby League World Cup, the arrival of the Lindisfarne Gospels and UK Pride will bring visitors to the region.

The sector last week celebrated some of its successes at the North East Tourism Awards, which was held as part of English Tourism Week.

Ian Thomas, tourism director at Newcastle Gateshead Initiative, said: "Already, forward weekend bookings in April and May stand between 47 and 65% occupancy.

"The city's reputation for providing a warm welcome, its compact nature, proximity to the coast and of course, a wide range of things for people to see and do are combining to make it a great place to visit in 2022, now that all restrictions

are lifted, and people can once again get out and about.”

He added: “We continue to see major investment in the sector, for example the recent opening of the Hard Rock Café, and INNSiDE Melia hotel on the Quayside, and there are ongoing plans for the Newcastle Gateshead Quays regeneration scheme, due to open in 2024, which is expected to attract more than 300,000 additional visitors each year.

“On top of this we’ve seen the approval of a landmark five-star hotel for the centre of Newcastle and a £30m hotel complex in the Grey Street/Cloth Market area of the city; add to this the city’s wider transformation plans that will create cleaner and greener space for local people and visitors alike and you have a city that is certainly working hard at bouncing back from the pandemic.”

Mr Thomas’ optimism was shared by Anna Wadcock, general manager at Newcastle’s Maldron Hotel and co-chair of the North East Hoteliers’ Association. She said: “We’re certainly seeing resilience in the leisure market: our city and region have always been a popular spot for weekend breaks but it’s the midweek business travel that is still slow to return to post pandemic levels and this is due to factors such as companies switching to either fully working from home, or hybrid working and there is still a hesitancy around travel due to Covid etc.

“Although there was a slower start to the year, with the restrictions still in place in January, I am far more confident for the rest of 2022. It’s just fantastic to have our hotels filling up and seeing people get used to being out and about again.”

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