

BREXIT, RECESSION AND THE GROWING POPULARITY OF UK STAYCATIONS

Summer holidays! With winter now hopefully on the wane, many people are busily making detailed plans for warm sunny weather. But they are planning in different ways.

Brexit uncertainties, a slow recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, a weak pound, inflation, rising interest rates and long airport security queues, are pushing growing numbers of UK families towards stay-at-home holidays in Britain.

Not surprisingly perhaps, their 'staycation' planning often includes searches for not only low costs but also increasingly sophisticated experiences. And their combined spending power is substantial.

In response, many holiday park owners are working on site expansions and upgrades that need statutory planning permission. In parallel, they are extending the holiday season while investing heavily in high-quality on-site shops, restaurants, bars, modern pools and competitive recreational facilities.

The corporate investment industry and major leisure companies are interested too. Booming demand and supply has resulted in at least one recent deal topping £1 billion.

But they are not the only people who stand to gain. Holidaymakers' money can boost local economies and communities. Robust businesses are a reliable revenue stream for local councils too, which in their dual-role as planning authorities (LPAs) also need sound, impartial information to make responsible decisions.

INFORMATION FLOWS

Clearly, many different people and organisations have an interest in seeing the sector prosper. But there are different ways of setting about good business and environmental planning. For example, in my experience a piecemeal mindset tends to produce piecemeal results.





I think a multi-disciplinary approach is a much more successful route because it carefully brings together the many challenges, concerns, solutions and opportunities affecting the commercial enterprise project developments into an integrated cost-, energy- and time-efficient strategy.

What makes the critical difference is being able to produce a reliable flow of real-time and digital modelling information that underlies what makes projects tick. This data is useful to everybody.

The versatility of good environmental impact assessments. This is where I have to explain the importance of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) as extremely detailed umbrella documents bringing together a very wide range of technical services.

Yes, EIAs are primarily a planning tool under the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017. Interestingly, rather than specifying predetermined environmental outcomes, they put the onus onto decision-makers to consider environmental issues carefully.

In practice, they play a key role in resolving practical issues between resort operators, planners and local communities – water, power and utilities concerns, noise abatement, sympathetic landscaping, site layout, traffic control, amenity value, plus the growing

impact of both flooding and droughts.

But the detailed information they provide can be vital in the boardroom too where to make good business sense, developing attractions on a par with what modern families and young people expect to find elsewhere must also make sound environmental sense.

For example, how can you build a new £1 million new clubhouse to maximise enjoyment but minimise any potential nuisance that a disgruntled neighbour could use to file a complaint, or series of complaints, with the local authority?

However, before looking at EIAs in more detail, I would like to look at how we Britons are changing our holiday habits and why the sector is expanding so quickly when other industries are not.

STAYCATIONS – THE LURE OF STAYING PUT

On 1st March 2018, the British Holiday & Home Parks Association invited other organisations to join it in a UK-wide survey of the holiday park sector's economic impact. Park-owners were able to use the findings of a similar 2014 Scottish study to support planning and funding applications, and in lobbying to raise the sector's profile with Government other bodies (bhpha.org.uk).

This work builds on the fact that good staycation resort accommodation is in such high demand that there are now supply shortages in many areas. While breaks in Florida, Spain or the Caribbean are losing their attractiveness, staycation options are also increasingly being seen as acceptable alternatives to buying expensive holiday homes, particularly as conventional property costs rise.

CHANGING HOLIDAY PATTERNS

The way that we holiday is changing too. Sojern tracks travel behaviour (www.sojern.com) and finds that staycation searches and bookings for breaks taken between June and August 2017 rose by 23.8%, a trend that is continuing. Another survey, this time by Barclays, identified a 5% 2017 increase in adults on, or planning, UK holidays – rising from 70% to 75%.

Easier travel within the UK compared to the anti-social hours often involved in foreign flights is also modifying holiday habits. The traditional one or two-week holiday overseas is giving way to more frequent shorter breaks of three days or less. Many people bothered by job-related stress are reported to be more comfortable with a few days offline to relax than longer periods.

INFORMATION FOR OPPONENTS

However, not everyone is so thrilled about park resort expansion. In general, local authorities prefer development next to existing parks. This can be at odds with what residents want.

Local opposition is not unusual and is often justified. One upset objector explained recently that a rural village was being turned into “another lump of concrete and tarmac”; from a “rural idyll” into “a residential housing estate rather than a country lane” (gazette-news.co.uk/news/local/15114020).

Where local services, including medical facilities, are under stress, councillors as elected representatives can decide to bypass usual processes and call in applications to be decided by planning committee members.

Being able to offer credible environmental evidence that is either positive, or when negative is supported by reasonable mitigation proposals, is a very strong defence.

Whenever resort companies meet local communities, or local authorities talk to residents, robust information that is also accurate and honest strengthens the case. People are often reassured by being able to vent their grievances providing they receive reasonable answers in return.

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ADVANTAGES

Enzygo’s multi-disciplined approach takes these many diverse issues into account, which is why we provide a complete planning application service.

We believe in investing time to understand our clients’ projects and specific needs from the outset. We then cooperate closely to shape proposed developments before designing and phasing our work to allow early discussions with local planning authorities. This provides the best platform for a positive response and realistic requirements for technical assessments.

Many projects start with us writing a full range of application documents and continue through to the coordination and delivery of discharge of planning conditions and development implementation. We also take the lead in stakeholder communications, consultations and planning representations.

Our strength I believe is in combining extensive experience in flooding and hydrology, waste management and renewable energy, landscape architecture, acoustics, ecology, geotechnical and traffic and transport management services. We also help companies to meet stringent environmental regulations.

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Where visual aspects are a problem, we use imaginative site layouts, extensive tree and shrub planting programmes and easy-on-the-eye creative colour schemes to lessen any impacts. To improve the flow of transient holiday with normal local traffic, we have commended the reconfiguration of busy junctions. We also focus very strongly on ecological issues to minimise any potential disturbance to vulnerable plant and animal habitats.

Water is another issue; we have helped to supplement limited borehole sources. The Environment Agency also requires high-quality wastewater treatment and disposal standards from holiday sites. Septic tanks are covered by tight legislation, as are connections to local sewage treatment plants. In some instances, to solve wastewater problems we have recommended and overseen the installation of rotating biological contactor treatment systems (RBCs) for secondary processing.

Water is also increasingly making its presence felt as heavy rain. When flooding is a potential risk, our Flood Warning and Evacuation Plans (FWEPs) safeguard life and property. Along with Business Continuity Flood Assessments (BCFAs), they are designed to get site facilities up and running again as quickly as possible. We discuss flood protection in detail because of the extensive damage that river (fluvial), coastal, rainfall (pluvial), groundwater, sewer and aggressive surface flooding can cause.

CHANGING EIA REGULATIONS AND MASTER PLANNING

EIAs are changing fundamentally too, which is another area where we can help. More front-loading at the screening and scoping stages is designed to produce fewer EIAs but more proportionate assessment.

Planning authorities are being given more responsibilities that developers will be expected to meet. Many of the changes are technical but new topics will be introduced, including human health, climate change, and the vulnerability of projects to major accidents and/or disaster risks.

Another important point is the potential for highly-detailed EIAs to feed into master planning. This is a very detailed process that systematically considers all environmental aspects and impacts.

Master planning creates a conceptual guide for the development and growth of buildings, amenities, population profiles, social settings, transport, land-use and the surrounding environment. This is a complex area where I will be happy to provide more detailed information.

PROFILE OF A SUCCESSFUL INDUSTRY

I am also very pleased to say that we regularly help leading holiday and leisure resort companies to increase the business and environmental value of their sites.

Bourne Leisure includes the Haven, Butlins and Warner Leisure Hotels brands and operates 6,500 acres of real estate assets. Its priority is the provide enjoyable, safe, secure and appealing environments, and identify new services, facilities and locations successfully. Bourne's core 6,000 employee team increases to 14,000 in peak periods. With more than 4 million families visit annually, this demonstrates why FWEPs are so important (bournejobs.co.uk).

Clearly, there is considerable concern about the UK's short and medium-term economic future.

However, I believe that come rain, shine or Brexit, the sector's performance in recent years indicates very strongly that holidays at home are here to stay for the foreseeable future.

If you feel more information would help you, do please contact me. All discussions are naturally confidential.

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