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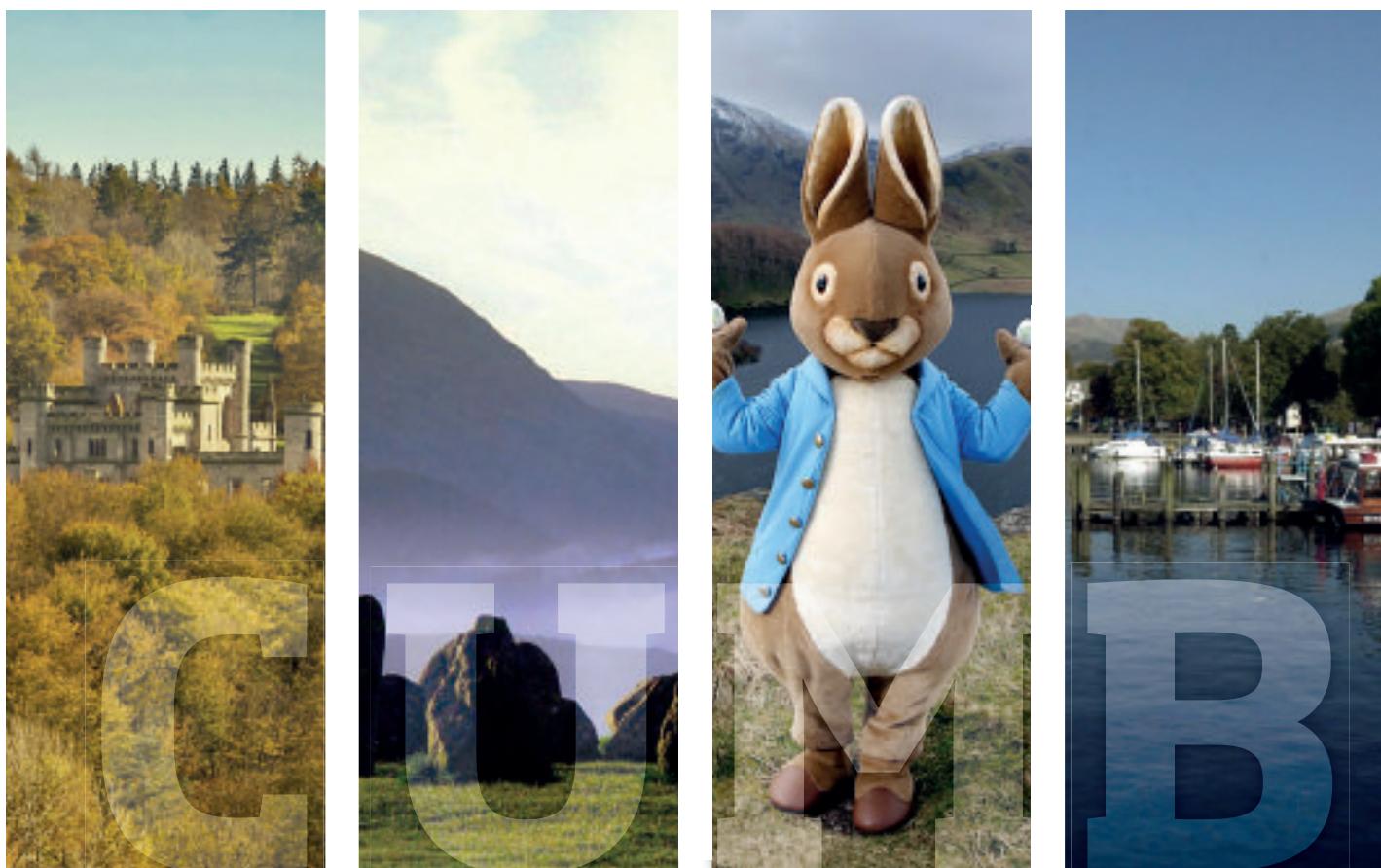
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## Setting direction of travel



In his new-look monthly column, **Professor Frank Peck** of the University of Cumbria's Centre for Regional Economic Development will tackle the burning issue of Brexit. This month, he focuses on how leaving the EU will effect the county's tourism industry

The UK Government and the EU have now agreed a transition period for Brexit that extends negotiations through to the end of 2020.

This has been heralded as a "decisive step", though there are clearly many unresolved issues of some significance that have made this step necessary. Big questions still remain over the terms of future trade with the EU, as well as the role of the European Court of Justice and the status of the border in Northern Ireland.

For a short period at least, the UK has accepted the need to comply with EU regulations and

be subject to changes in rules without having a seat at the table between March 2019 and December 2020.

For business, there is perhaps less anxiety about a cliff edge in March 2019 but much is still at stake. In these circumstances, it is good to focus thoughts on things about which we can be more certain. Cumbria as a tourist destination is one of these.

It is true that there are threats to the visitor economy arising not only from Brexit but also from ongoing processes of competition and the need to improve the quality of visitor experience. However, Cumbria has unique attributes and we can be fairly sure that tourism will remain a

**'There are parts of the county that have tourism potential that is currently under-used'**

vital part of the economy of the county post-Brexit.

A recent report from the Tourism Alliance – Tourism after Brexit 2017 – paints a very positive picture of the industry from an international perspective.

It is estimated that international visitors generate over £22 billion in revenue for UK businesses.

There are of course Brexit issues, not least the threat posed by possible administrative procedures for EU nationals visiting the UK.

Also, there are concerns for businesses that are keen to retain existing trained and experienced workers from EU countries (currently around 11 per cent of



the total). Tourism businesses have also grown accustomed to having access to EU migrants to fill new vacancies.

But, on the positive side, recent trends show growth in overseas visitor numbers to the UK.

This is confirmed by official data from the Office for National Statistics (International Passenger Survey) that shows overseas visits have increased steadily in recent years, from a low point of around 30 million in 2010 to over 37 million in 2016.

Cumbria has shared in the growth. The same data shows that international visits to the county increased from 216,000 in 2012 to 288,000 in 2016.

Quarterly data through 2017 suggests that this growth has continued – up to the third quarter in 2017, visits to “England’s North Country” grew by 5.8 per cent compared to the previous year.

The survey also reveals the UK top markets in terms of visits and spend. Top four for visits in 2016 were from France (4 million), USA (3.5 million), Germany (3.3 million) and Irish Republic (2.9

million). In terms of spend, however, visitors from the USA accounted for 15 per cent of the total (£3,354 million), significantly more than any other source country.

International visitor numbers may be growing, but most visitors to Cumbria are from other parts of the UK.

A high proportion of these are day visitors – currently accounting for about half of all spend – and around half of all overnight stays involve residents from elsewhere in the North of England (reported in the Cumbria Rural and Visitor Economy Growth Plan 2017).

It is suggested, however, that there may be untapped demand in the South East of England.

Also, international visitors may account for only a small proportion of visits to Cumbria at present (around seven per cent) but this has been growing and may grow further, facilitated by the development of Carlisle Airport as a gateway to the Lake District.

In the midst of speculation about threats of Brexit across all

**● Cumbrian assets:** Above, from left, Lowther Castle; Castlerigg Stone Circle; Peter Rabbit; Bowness-on-Windermere, Muncaster Castle, Cat Bells above Derwentwater and Sizergh Castle

sectors, these positive signs in the visitor economy are very welcome.

Cumbria has unique products. Hadrian’s Wall has been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987 and the recent designation of the Lake District for the same status will no doubt raise the county’s profile nationally and internationally.

There are also parts of Cumbria that have tourism potential that is currently under-used, including coastal areas, the Eden Valley, the Pennines and rural areas extending across the county’s “Borderlands” adjoining Scotland.

For those who think in such terms, tourism contributes significantly to the economy of Cumbria in relation to Gross Value-Added (GVA – a measure of the size of the economy in £).

In 2014, total GVA in the county across all sectors was around £10 billion. It has been estimated that visitor spend contributes around 11 per cent of total GVA and supports at least 12 per cent of all jobs.

These details can be found reported in the Cumbria Rural and Visitor Economy Growth Plan 2017 developed through Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership.

It is significant to note that this is a plan not just for tourism but also for rural areas.

Many tourist businesses are embedded in rural communities where there are uncertainties associated with the effects of Brexit on other sectors, including, prominently, agriculture and other land-based activities, as well as implications for landscape and the environment.

In these terms, the document rightly emphasises the need for periodic review.

The growth plan clearly recognises that growing tourist activity will be a key part of a post-Brexit rural economy, but it also emphasizes the need to manage this growth in ways that are beneficial for rural communities and sensitive to unique landscapes and environments; a post-Brexit visitor economy that is both in, and for, Cumbria.