

8th February 2024

Response to Welsh Government Consultation on the Structure of the School Year

Wales Tourism Alliance represents 6000 members from across all sectors of the tourism industry, from micro businesses to national bodies with members in Wales. This includes regional destination marketing organisations who, themselves, participate in destination management to varying degrees.

Like a number of policies affecting tourism and hospitality coming out of Welsh Government (WG) this Senedd term, the restructure of the school year does not come from the Economy Minister. We are grateful, however, that Education officials have recognised that any change to the school year will have an impact on our industry and have made a clear effort to gather details on that impact. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out here that the response of other WG Ministers to consultation responses affecting the industry and other rural stakeholders has damaged confidence in the integrity of the process. Despite improvements in the relationship with parts of WG, we regret that the industry remains less willing to engage in consultations. Gathering evidence for this response has, therefore, not been as easy as it would have been two years ago. Consultation fatigue should not be read as contentment with the policy proposals.

We ask you to remember that tourism, as an industry, is not just about accommodation and attractions. It comprises elements of hospitality, retail, events, business travel, transport, training and all manner of place-based experience in which visitors as well as local residents might participate - including learners. It is an ecosystem, so while one sector might be more directly affected than another, the ripple effect is felt by all.

This response does not address all the questions in the consultation document, just those relevant to tourism and the wider visitor economy. We would ask you not to consider these replies in isolation: This policy is just one which is having a cumulative effect on the industry and it cannot be considered, as far as tourism is concerned, solely on its own advantages and disadvantages.

It also offers some observations from our Chair, the previous Shadow Minister for Education, and we begin with those to offer the wider context before homing in tourism

1. At this point, we have not been made aware of any compelling evidence that changing the structure of the year will have significant benefits for learners. While a loss of learning is recognised after a return to school after the summer, that appears to be a short-term issue. Equally you will hear from teachers that learners come back to school ready to be mentally engaged again after resting sufficiently. There is an argument that disrupting the momentum in October for two weeks so soon after what will still be the longest break is counter-productive; teachers and learners need the rest at the end of the school year, especially if in exam classes.
2. You will already know that many countries have longer summer school holidays than the UK and perform better on OECD indicators, including PISA. In particular, WG routinely reaches for evidence from Scandinavia in support of progressive policy development. Summer holidays are longer in Scandinavia.

We urge caution in drawing any conclusion from the experience of covid lockdown in examining this policy. Long periods of difficult teaching and learning conditions in a time of significant anxiety at a societal level cannot equate to moving one week to another part of the year. If anything, it underscored the real challenges to learning arising from resource and emotional poverty, disengagement with the curriculum, intergenerational apathy and increasing isolation away from person-to-person communication - all of which impact on a learner’s resilience and mental health and ability to learn. Moving a week and settling the Easter break will not resolve or mitigate those issues

1. It is perfectly reasonable to ask the question as to whether it is still appropriate to frame the school year around the old traditions of children being needed to help with the harvest in the summer. However, we caution against dismissing the calendar of rural life in the course of the discussion. You will already have heard from the Royal Welsh Show about the potential risk to their visitor and participation numbers: We also draw attention to the other end of the summer holidays and the concentration of local agricultural shows. While WG already embraces the cultural and educational benefits of the work of the Urdd and local eisteddfodau, for example, it might want to consider the similar benefits of these local shows.

It would be a particularly urban outlook which dismisses the importance of these shows in terms of social cohesion and the maturity of children and young people. Of course, they provide experience and knowledge in agricultural matters. They also recognise creativity and practical skills as being as important as physical prowess. They require working together as well as competing against each other. They teach young people how to win with grace and lose without falling apart. They engender respect for others, a willingness to be a participant not a bystander in their own community and the confidence to take that principle into adult life and wider society. Again, all this has positive implications for mental health.

With a new curriculum which recognises the relevance of “cynefin”, it would be disappointing if plans to change the school year dilute this core characteristic of rural community life which remains a strong counterpoint to young people socialising more and more on screens.

Such shows cannot be easily moved, partly because they are so numerous and there will be even more date clashes and partly because they are programmed to fit in with the shape of the food production calendar.

1. In terms of loss of education opportunities, what consideration is given to the effect on out-of-school education in the current structure? While we are unable to offer any insight into the decision of companies or organisations which run formal courses during the summer, we can offer observations on childcare and less formal education provision.

We are sure you will receive evidence about the availability and affordability of childcare during the summer in particular. We would like you to consider how difficult it is to recruit for holiday clubs when periods of employment are short; this is seasonal work too when it comes to finding additional staff. It is a much more attractive proposition to a qualified person to be offered a longer period of employment, possibly being able to take their own children with them to work, than shorter term cover which will not bring in much income or scope to plan activities with cumulative educational benefits. These are not roles for nursery staff whose skills relate to a different age group and school teachers are not attracted to the work. This is a small pool of appropriately skilled people who are in high demand so the work offer needs to be attractive to recruit and retain.

1. Finally on the effect on education, and crossing into the effect on tourism, we ask you consider the advantages and disadvantages of young people having the opportunity of getting their first experience of work. We are concerned that school age children working in some tourism sectors is sometimes characterised as employers exploiting ‘cheap labour’. It would be a worthwhile strand of research on this policy to speak to some young people who take advantage of the long summer holiday to get work experience and agency from earning some money of their own.

It is hard to think of a better apprenticeship to develop the soft skills which employers observe are increasingly absent in those entering the workforce; in-person communication, empathy, taking and accepting responsibility and learning from that, problem-solving, team-working, dealing with difficult people, financial literacy and general confidence. Working in tourism comes with the opportunity for socialising with workmates in an environment based on people enjoying themselves, seeing how your own contribution makes that happen and the consequent satisfaction which comes from a job well done, however demanding at times. How very different from the mental health damage from getting your validation in isolation from a screen.

We ask you to consider the impact of the loss of opportunity for young workers, as well as loss of availability to employers, if those young people have to return to school at times of peak demand. (We are uncertain whether the plans also affect colleges who offer non-vocational subjects to 16 - 18-year-olds who attend school)

1. It is argued that one advantage of changing the summer holiday will extend the high demand season, and that, looking at Scotland, a different term time does not affect people’s holiday plans. At first this looks like an attractive argument but it is worth closer examination.

Changes to the school year affect the family holiday market: It is hard to argue that the adult-only market will see any significant shift. However, in Wales, WG published data reveals that the domestic family market claims a higher share of the overall market than it does in other parts of the UK, making the impact of any change to the school year more pointed.

From our very diverse membership, we hear that some sectors are more concerned than others about the direct impact on them, but all recognise the ripple effect. For example, if demand drops in the final week of August and is not replaced in October, retail, hospitality and transport operators will see a drop in income, not just accommodation and attractions.

It is hard to identify any confidence in the idea that families welcome the chance to take their ‘long’ holiday in Wales in mid-autumn rather than high summer. Instead, we predict a higher density of family visits in the summer as they are compressed into a shorter break, thereby increasing pressure on honey pot destinations as we saw in the “covid summer” of 2020. That may be accompanied by higher prices, something which accommodation providers in particular might welcome after a period of heavy discounting post-pandemic (not least because of the 182-day rule) - but which will not be popular with some families who will look elsewhere. Higher prices would be necessary, however, to mitigate against the loss of a peak week, the benefits of which would not simply be replicated by a week when days are shorter, colder and wetter.

While it is possible that some Welsh families would view a longer October break as an opportunity to take their main holiday at home, the greater likelihood is that they would opt for the reliable weather of a trip overseas, at a time when flights and accommodation are cheaper than the summer; the number of families for Wales able to take longer breaks at that time of year will not be so significant as to change international destination pricing structures. This new opportunity for a holiday abroad when the weather is poor at home also has the potential to distract more affluent families away from the current option of a top-up short break nearer home in October.

1. Turning now to the argument that it’s already different in Scotland and, indeed, other countries. You will already know that Wales performs comparatively less well than other parts of the UK when it comes to overseas visitors; our market remains reliant on domestic visitors, with, as we say, a slightly extra bias towards the family holiday. By far, that means visitors from England - and for that reason it is the disconnect with the English timetable which especially concerns our members. (Only 3% of visitors to Wales come from Scotland across the whole year, so the numbers taking a family holiday will make up an even lower proportion.)

This also applies to proposals for the Easter break, especially when Easter is later and the days are longer and warmer. The idea of settling the Spring half term at a given date has produced mixed views. If families holiday in Wales at all at Easter, it is rarely for as long as in the summer and visits coalesce around the bank holidays - presumably as it is easier for parents to get time off.

It has been suggested by some that disaggregating the bank holiday and the school holiday will create two bites of the short break cherry in years where they do not co-incide. While it is not impossible to see why such a situation may give rise to more day visits by Welsh families, fed up of a long winter, this is the period when they (and English families) are accumulating the resources for their summer holiday, including time off work. A disaggregation may create the opportunity for two bites of the cherry but families will only bite once - and the cherry gets no bigger, just bitten at marginally different times every few years.

1. We are aware that you have received evidence from WAVA and PASC which gives you survey data and comment as to the impact on particular sectors, and we draw your attention to those rather than repeating them. We also draw your attention to the most recent business survival data for Wales <https://www.gov.wales/business-demography-2022>

and point out that further job losses in tourism will affect families who depend on this industry for their income, with inevitable negative consequences for their children and capacity to learn. More people in Wales are employed in tourism than in the steel industry, just to underline the importance of tourism to family and community stability not just the Welsh economy.

As we said above, it is perfectly reasonable to ask the question as to whether it is still appropriate to structure the school year as it is, and we accept that the drive behind the potential policy change is a need for better learning experience and outcomes for our young people. We do not challenge the aim.

However, it is an experiment, and one in which the likelihood of impacts elsewhere has been recognised - again, thank you. From the tourism perspective, now is not the time for an experiment which is unknown in terms of improving learning but which has identifiable consequences for the tourism industry. That is, specifically, in terms of customer behaviours in the autumn but, also and critically, when accumulated into the growing snowball of other policies which is crashing down the hill towards an industry which is already cracking.

Suzy Davies

**Suzy Davies**

Chair *–* Wales Tourism Alliance

February 5th 2024