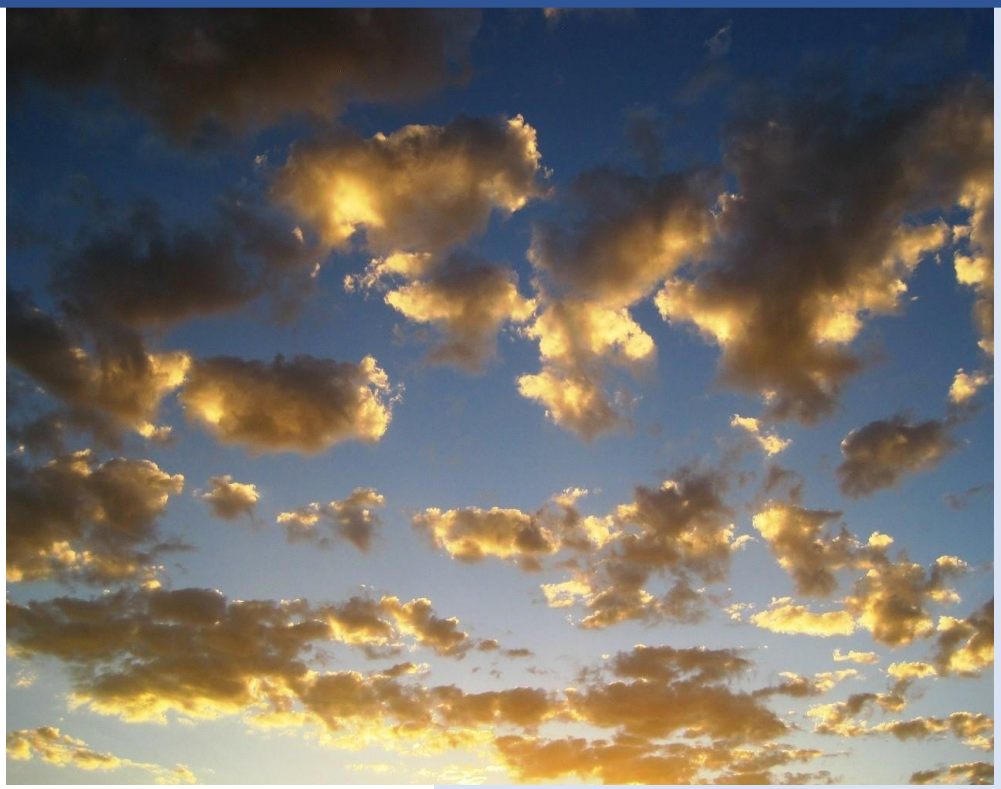
Trends in visits to ALVA sites and the drivers of those trends 2004 to 2019



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Scattered Clouds

June 2020

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1 Introduction

This report examines high level trends in the number of visits to ALVA member sites over the period 2004 to 2019 before going on to consider some of the factors that may help account for changing patterns of visitation.

After looking at what has happened to the volume of visits to attractions in Section 2 the report describes changes in the overall level of population in the UK (Section 3) and the level of disposable income (Section 4).

Recognising that consumers have a choice in how they spend their leisure time Section 5 investigates what has happened to the volume of outbound holiday trips across the past fifteen years, whereas Section 6 considers the other side of the coin, namely inbound holiday tourism.

The final two sections of the report cover the prevailing weather conditions that have shaped each of the summers since 2004 and the influence that external 'shocks' can have on how many people visit attractions.

2 Trends in visits to ALVA sites

First the health warnings.

The analysis presented in this section is based on data for attractions that are, or have been, ALVA members, and that have been willing to release their visitor figures.

For those sites that have not provided data to ALVA every year an effort has been made to 'populate' the respective time-series by using figures from other public sources, primarily national tourist board information.

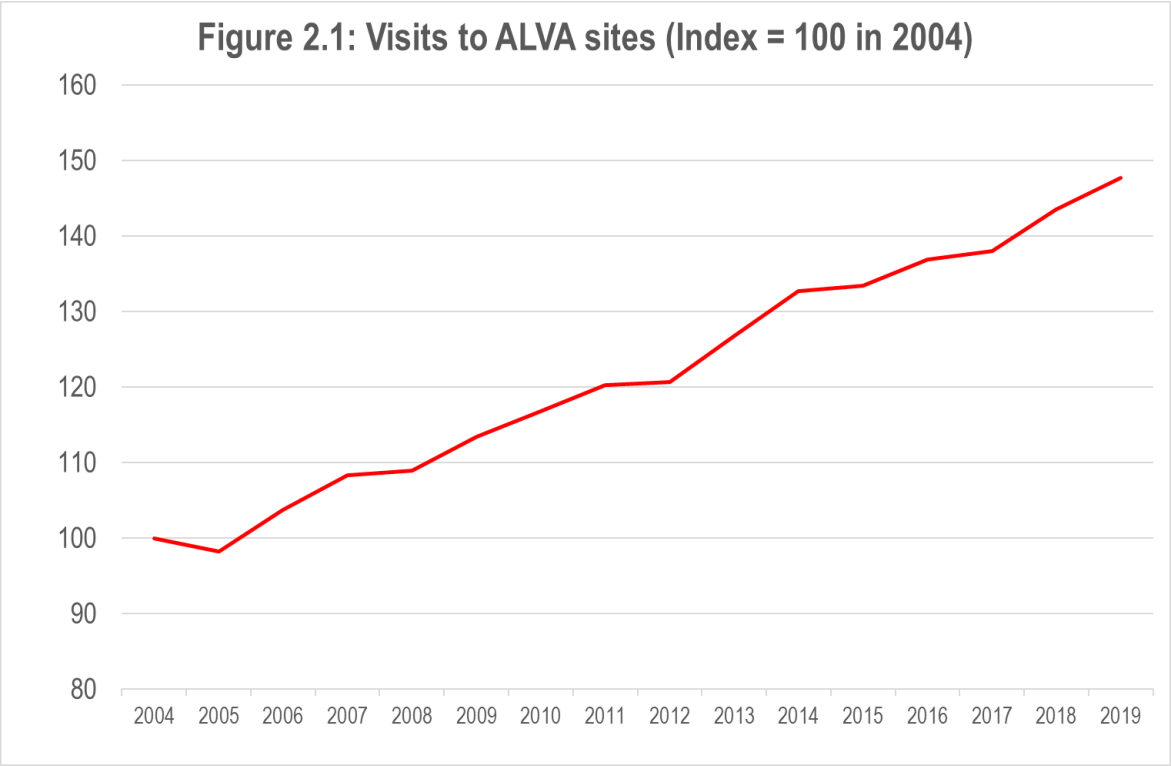
As the number of sites for which data is available from one year to the next varies it is necessary to remove the effect of this 'churn' from the analysis, otherwise an apparent trend for higher or lower visitor numbers may in reality be a reflection of changes in the size of the attraction population.

To overcome this a year-on-year change has been calculated just for those sites where data is available in the respective 'year pair'. For example, change between 2004 and 2005 is based solely on sites providing data in both these years, change between 2018 and 2019 is based on sites providing data in both these years, and so on. On average across the period year-on-year change is based on 230 sites for which data was available.

Figure 2.1 presents the evolution of visits between 2004 and 2019 and reveals that on a 'like-for-like' basis visitor numbers in 2019 were around 50% higher than was the case back in 2004. The average annual growth rate during the past fifteen years has been 2.7%.

In only a single year, 2005, was a decline seen at the aggregate level, but 2008, 2012, 2015 and 2017 were years when growth was distinctly modest, being less than 1%.

By contrast 2006, 2007, 2013, 2014 and 2018 were years during which growth exceeded 4%. It is perhaps no surprise that some of the years with stronger growth immediately followed years that were comparatively weak, suggesting that the growth was in part 'bounce-back' from circumstances which may have dampened demand the year before.



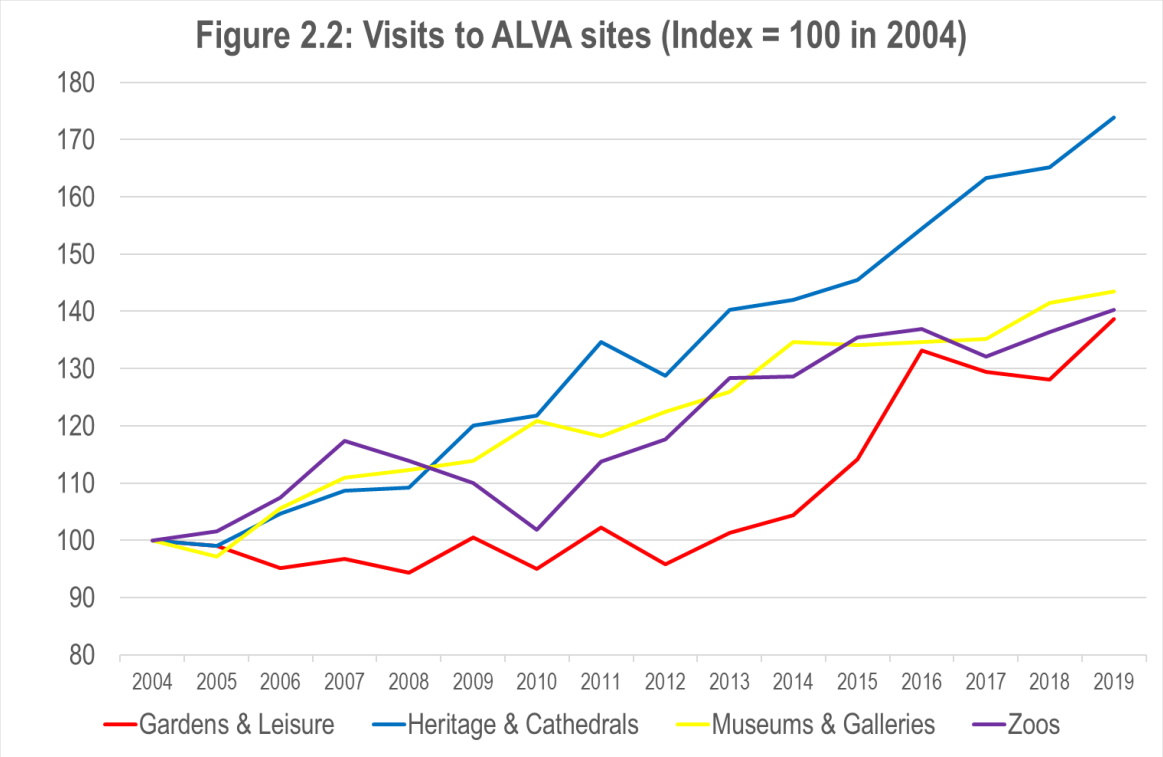
It is possible to mine the data a little further, by looking at trends in different category of attraction. There are unquestionably shades of grey when it comes to classifying some attractions, for example a zoo is quite straightforward, but many sites offer a more nuanced offer, with for example a stately home with landscaped gardens offering 'garden only' admission or 'house and garden' admission.

As ALVA has separate categories for 'Heritage & Cathedrals" and "Gardens & Leisure" such a site can only be placed into a single pigeonhole, requiring a degree of judgment.

Figure 2.2 looks at the evolution of visits to each of four major ALVA categories of attraction since 2004. Although the routes they take to get to their 2019 destination follow different paths, it can be noted that Gardens & Leisure, Museums & Galleries and Zoos all end the period under review with roughly 40% more visits (on a like-for-like basis) than they saw back in 2004.

The 'odd man out' is the category for Heritage & Cathedrals where growth has been at a swifter pace, reaching close to 75% above 2004 levels in 2019.

It is interesting to note that in no single year did all four categories suffer declines, and that the only years in which all four categories enjoyed growth exceeding 1% were 2007, 2013 and 2019.



Another way of cutting the data is by geography. Limited numbers of sites reporting data in certain areas means that we can only look at trends for London, 'Rest of England' and Scotland, but doing so throws up some useful insights.

There are no years during which all three geographies recorded declining numbers, while 2007, 2014 and 2018 are the only three occasions when each area experienced growth exceeding 1%.

The pattern for London and Rest of England do not deviate substantially, with the notable exception of 2017 when London suffered a decline of 3% and yet other areas of England saw growth of roughly 2%.

Scotland has chosen to plough its own furrow, with a weaker performance than sites south of the border in the period 2008 to 2010 being replaced by consistently faster growth across much of the period from 2011, leading to a 2019 tally that (on a like-for-like basis) is 65% ahead of where it was back in 2004.

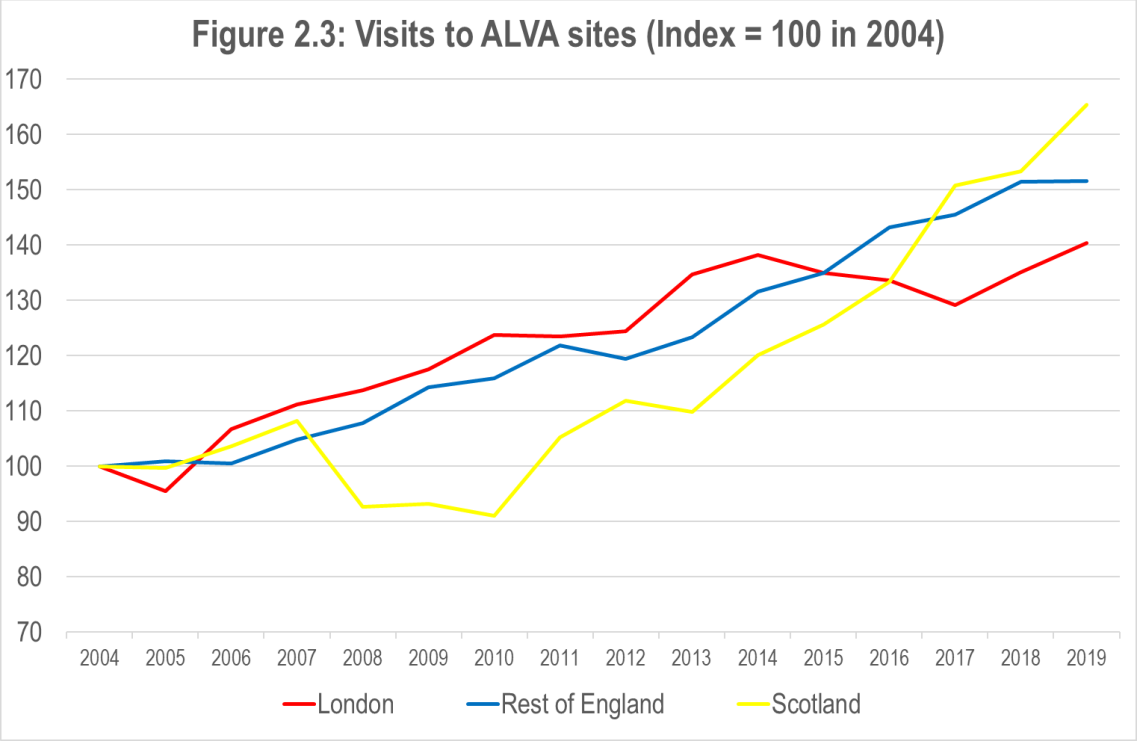


Figure 2.3: Visits to ALVA sites (Index = 100 in 2004)
170
160
150
140
130
120
110
100
90
80
70
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
London
Rest of England
Scotland

3 Population trends

All other things being equal it is reasonable to expect that the number of visits to visitor attractions will respond to changes in the size of a nation's population.

Since 2004 the population of the UK has increased by close to seven million, to stand at 66.8 million as at the middle of 2019. Growth, however, has not being geographically uniform in nature as can be noted from Table 3.1 which looks at the change from 2004 to 2018 (the most recent regional estimates) for different areas of England as well as for the other UK nations.

Table 3.1: Growth in resident population 2004 to 2018 (% change)

North East	5%
North West	7%
Yorkshire and The Humber	8%
East Midlands	12%
West Midlands	10%
East	13%
London	20%
South East	12%
South West	11%
Wales	6%
Scotland	7%
Northern Ireland	10%
United Kingdom	11%

Source: ONS

The standout insight is that the population of London has increased by one-fifth over the period, well ahead of any other area. Wales has seen its population jump by just 6%, marginally behind growth of 7% in Scotland. The area with the slowest pace of population growth has been the North East of England at just 5%.

It is not just how many people there are that matters of course, those of different ages will gravitate towards different types of visitor attraction.

Figure 3.1 plots the resident population by age band in 2004 and 2019. Among the insights that emerge from the chart are:

- Whereas in 2004 the most populous age group was 35-39 by 2019 it was those aged 50-54 (of course these will largely be the same individuals but fifteen years older)
- The number of children aged 0-9 has increased by roughly one million during the period but the number of older teenagers is over a quarter of a million fewer
- There are some 800,000 more residents aged 25-29, reflecting both ageing of those 10-14 back in 2004 but also inward migration by young working-age adults
- The numbers aged from 35 to 44 have seen the steepest declines, with almost 800,000 fewer people between these ages in 2019 than in 2004
- Every age band from 45-49 and older has seen a rise in population including almost one million more residents aged 50-54 and a further million aged 70-74
- The number of people aged 90 or older has risen by around one-half over the past fifteen years

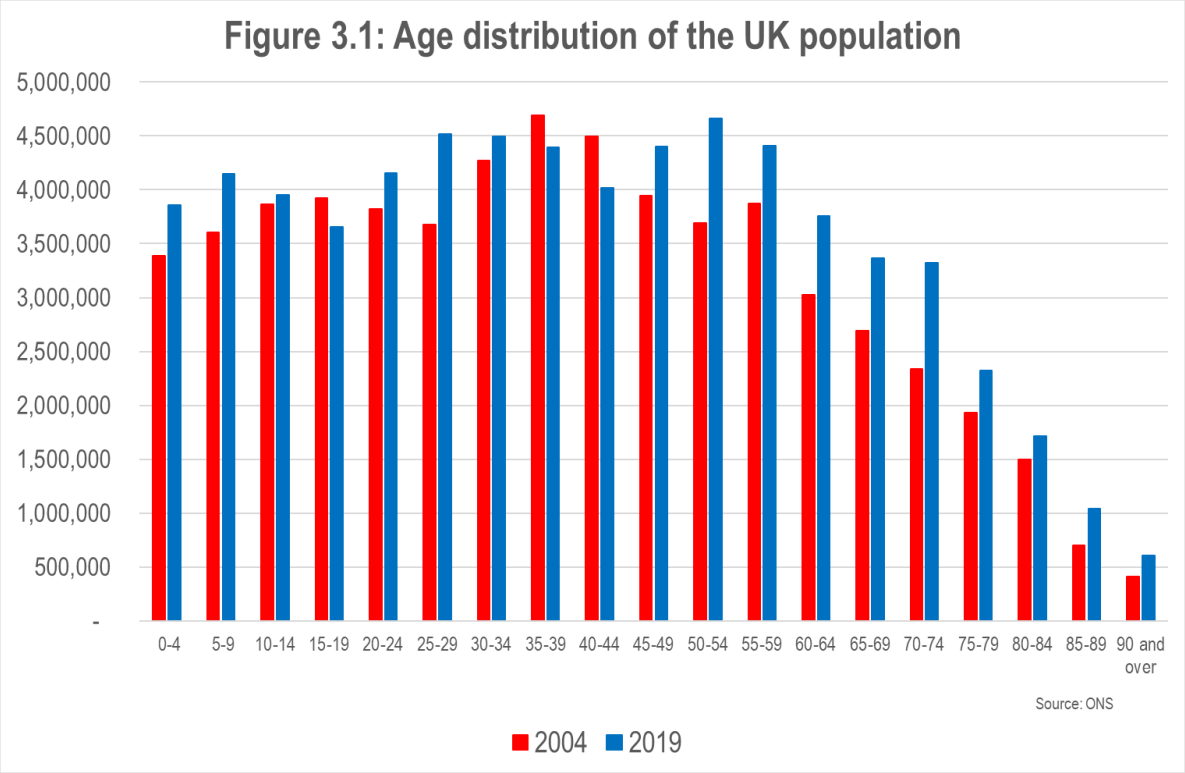


Figure 3.1: Age distribution of the UK population
5,000,000
4,500,000
4,000,000
3,500,000
3,000,000
2,500,000
2,000,000
1,500,000
1,000,000
500,000
-
0-4
5-9
10-14
15-19
20-24
25-29
30-34
35-39
40-44
45-49
50-54
55-59
60-64
65-69
70-74
75-79
80-84
85-89
90 and over
Source: ONS
2004
2019

4 Income trends

It is one thing to know that there are either more or fewer people, but visiting an attraction will typically incur costs; even if admission is free those visiting will likely need to spend money on transportation, food and drink and so on.

That means it is important to look at trends in the amount of disposable income per head available to the population. This is done in Figure 4.1 which shows the annual change once figures are adjusted for inflation.

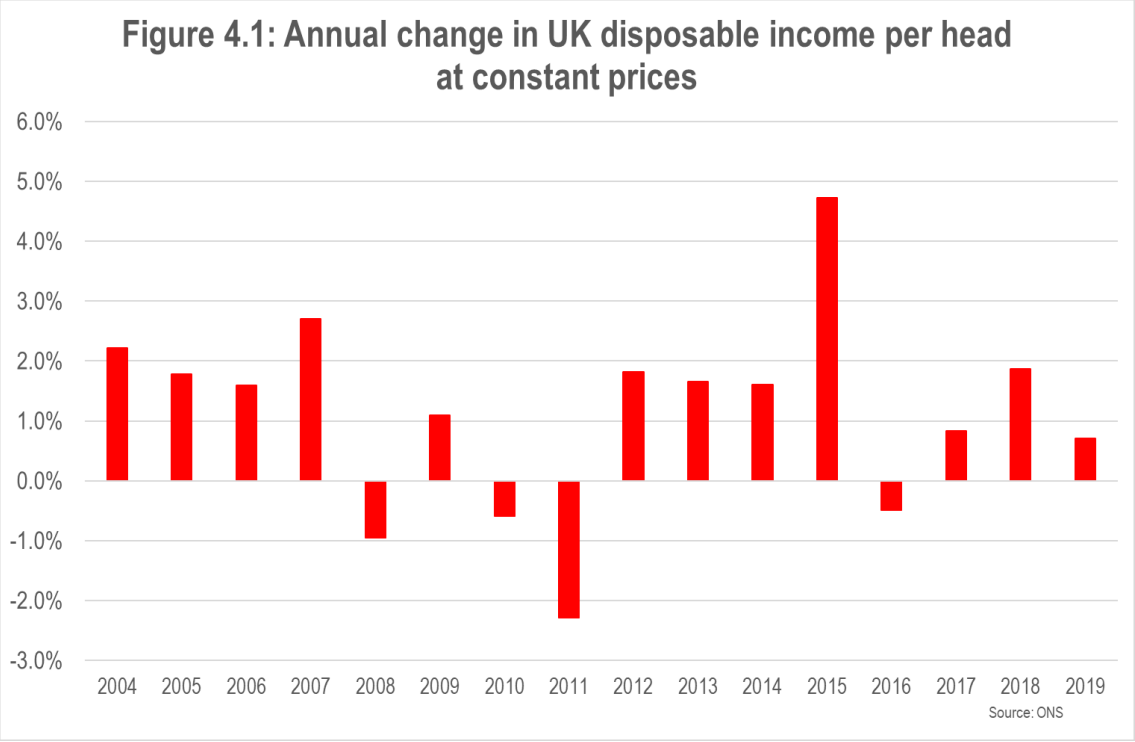
Historically incomes have tended to rise by about 2% per annum in real terms, and as can be seen from the chart this was the case in the first few years of the period under the spotlight.

However, this all changed during the global financial crisis with incomes retreating in 2008 before a very modest increase the following year. Then starts what has been termed a decade of austerity, and disposable income declined in real terms in both 2010 and 2011.

After three years of positive, if muted, growth, 2015 saw a quickening in the pace with a near 5% jump in disposable income per head, but this was not to be the start of a new era of high growth, with 2016 seeing a return to negative territory.

Even ahead of the enormous economic dislocation caused by the pandemic and consequential lockdown of 2020 we can see that in real terms disposable income per head in 2019 was a mere 0.7% up on the year before.

As such since 2004 the average Brit has seen her or his disposable income rise by about 20% in real terms, whereas the 'rule of thumb' growth for earlier decades would have led us to expect growth in the region of almost 50%.



Courtesy of data from the annual Household Expenditure Survey it is possible to take a look at how the way in which income is spent has evolved.

This shows that since 2004 the proportion of total expenditure devoted to housing costs has risen from 12% to 14%, reflecting a growing private rented sector and increased levels of rent.

Back in 2004 2% of household expenditure was accounted for by 'Communications', but it is probably not that big a surprise to learn that this has doubled to stand at 4% by 2019. Recreation represented 11% of household expenditure fifteen years ago, but this has now risen to 13%, indicating that despite the pressures on household incomes, the past decade and a half has witnessed consumers choosing to spend more on 'discretionary' goods and services associated with 'recreation'.

There are those that worry about household spending growing, not per se, but because of it having been fuelled by the increased reliance on 'credit'.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics indicate that the so-called Households' saving ratio has been at less than 6% in each of the past three years, something that last happened fifty years ago at the end of the 1960s.

5 Outbound tourism

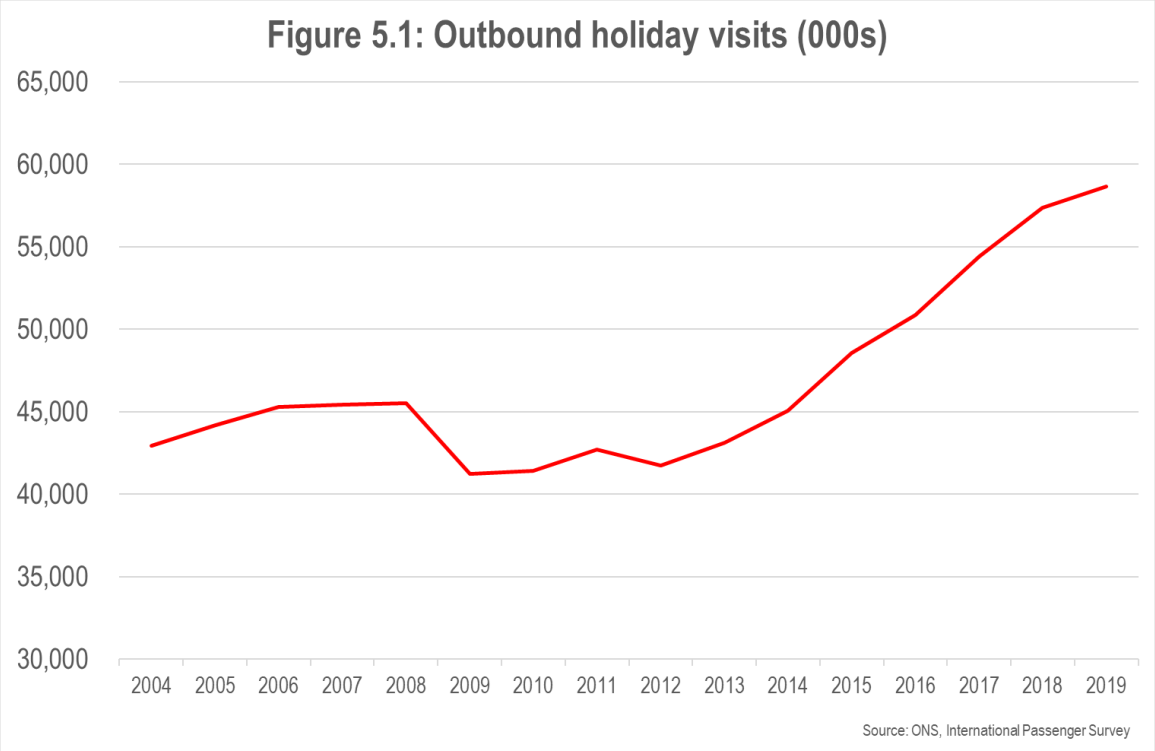
Having disposable income and an appetite for holidays does not guarantee demand for UK visitor attractions. Since the 1990s the ease and affordability of booking a foreign trip has risen dramatically thanks to the symbiotic relationship between widespread access to the internet and emergence of low-cost airlines.

At the start of the period under review in this report easyJet and Ryanair were already well established and much of the shift from domestic to foreign holiday taking had taken place, but during the past fifteen or so years more players have entered the airline industry such as Wizz Air and Norwegian, further expanding competition and helping to keep fares low.

Near universal ownership of hand-held devices has meant that booking has become ever easier, and as can be seen from Figure 5.1 the number of outbound holiday trips has increased by almost 40%.

Growth has not proceeded at a uniform pace across the period, with a noticeable reduction in foreign holidays at the time of the global financial crisis and a subsequent period of 'flat-lining'. In fact, it is the more recent period from 2013 to 2019 that has delivered the 40% growth thanks to year-on-year increases in the region of 5%.

We established earlier that the UK population is around 11% higher now than at the start of the period being considered, and had outbound holiday trips grown in line with population we would expect to see a figure of roughly 50 million in 2019, but evidently growth in outbound holidays has far outpaced that of the population, having reached almost sixty million trips in 2019.



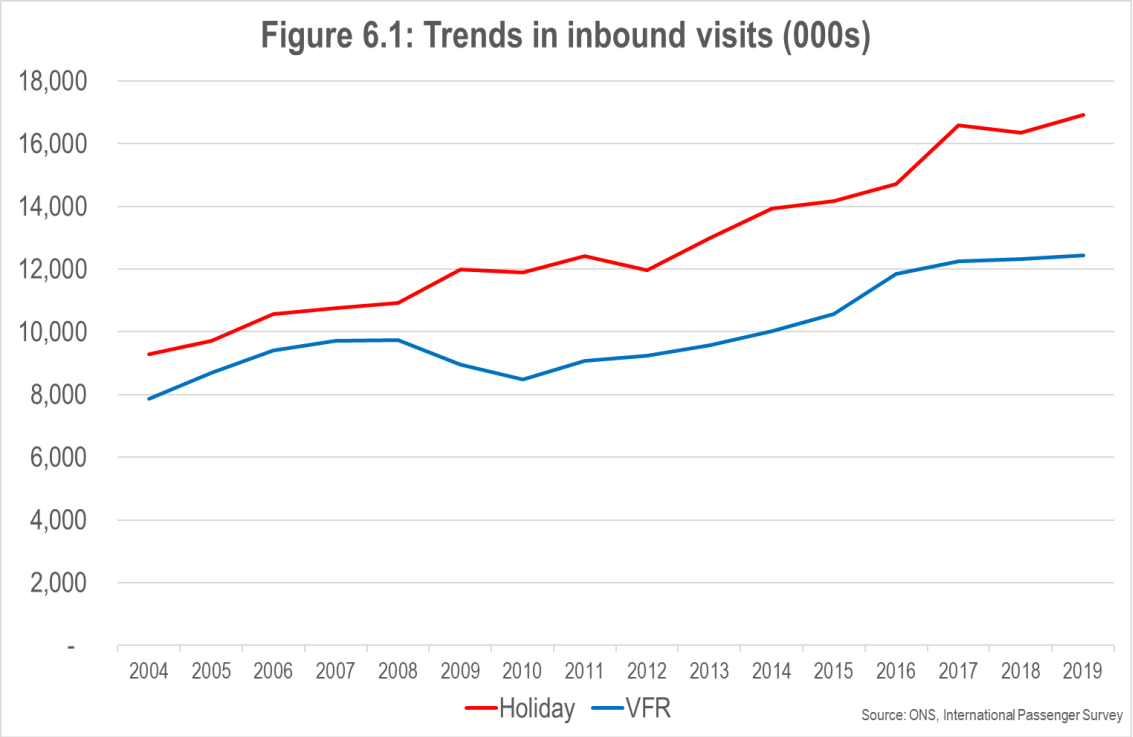
6 Inbound tourism

For some attractions a large proportion, in some instances a majority, of visitors are from overseas rather than being UK residents taking a domestic trip.

People travel internationally for many different reasons, and while it is certainly the case that those making a business trip may have sufficient spare time to take in an attraction or two, the bulk of international visitors to attractions will be on a leisure trip.

Figure 6.1 shows how the number of inbound visits to the UK either for a holiday or to visit friends or relatives has evolved since 2004. Growth is readily evident in both series, with an 80% jump in the number of inbound holidays and near 60% increase in visits to friends and relatives.

We can identify a number of changes in the pattern for holiday visits, with steady growth until 2009, then a period of consolidation until 2012, followed by a real growth spurt through until 2017. The story for VFR trips is largely similar, but with a noticeable reduction in visits between 2008 and 2010.

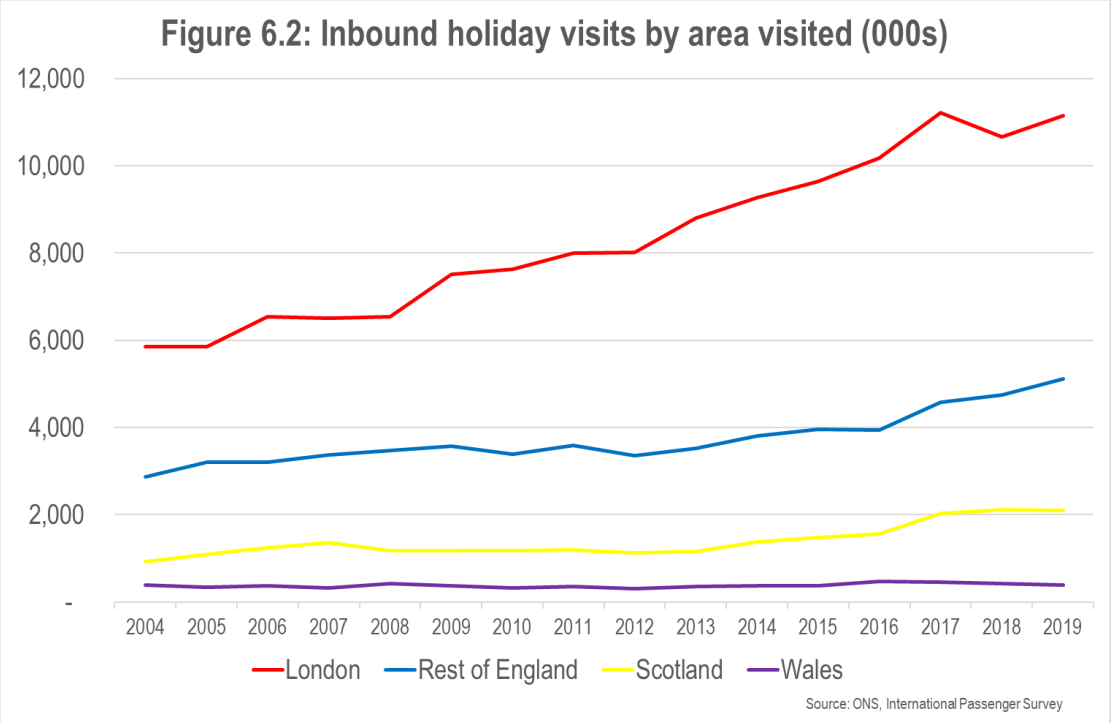


Inbound holiday visitors have a wealth of different places to explore once they have chosen the UK as their destination, but where do they go?

Figure 6.2 depicts trends in inbound holiday visits since 2004 to London, other areas of England, Scotland and Wales.

The first insight to jump out from the chart is that London is by far the most visited area, accounting for more holiday trips than all the other areas combined. At first sight it would appear as though London has also seen the fastest growth, which while true in terms of absolute volume, is not so when looking at the relative change.

It is Scotland that has seen the fastest growth with inbound holiday visits up by nearly 130% over the period, ahead of London's 90% rise. Areas of England outside London have witnessed an increase of close to 80% whereas there has been little change in the number of international visitors holidaying in Wales.



The source markets with the largest absolute increase in holiday visits to the UK over the period 2004 to 2019 are shown in Table 6.1, and we can see that they are spread across three continents. While there has been a significant focus on the opportunities presented by the burgeoning Chinese outbound market it is visits from the USA that have managed to grow the most since 2004.

Table 6.1: Growth in inbound holiday visits to the UK 2004 to 2019 (000s)

USA	686
Italy	654
Spain	581
China	566
Germany	450

7 Weather

Any discussion relating to trends in visits to visitor attractions would be incomplete without reference to the role played by the weather.

There are two broad issues in play, the first is that Britain has seasons, and because of its northerly latitude sees far more hours of daylight in the summer than in the winter. This is one driver of the trend that many attractions opt to close during the winter months. There is evidence that gradually this trend is changing, with more sites recognising the opportunity to provide festive activities in December, although it will doubtless always be the case that some entirely outdoor attractions will be seasonal in their opening.

Perhaps in fairness this first issue is one of climate rather than weather, whereas the second is very much about the prevailing weather on a day to day basis.

Britain can have spells of mild sunny weather in winter and spells of perma-drizzle in summer. As one would expect, this can influence the choices people make about how they spend their time.

While not made of sugar, meaning there is no danger of dissolving, for most people being out in the rain is not high on any wish-list meaning outdoor attractions may see their potential custom drift towards indoor alternatives during persistently wet periods.

By contrast a keenness to enjoy fine weather can act as a deterrent to enter into indoor attractions when the sun is shining brightly, but on occasions excessive heat can transform certain indoor attractions into an oasis of cool away from oppressive outdoor conditions.

Weather is varied not just from day to day but very often from place to place too, if this were not the case weather forecasts would be an awful lot shorter than they are.

That means it is tricky to generalise regarding weather impacts on attraction visits, but the following charts explore the weather that characterised the crucial summer months in different areas of the UK over the period 2004 to 2019.

Starting with Figure 7.1 we can observe that England, and especially the south of England, has consistently drier summers than other UK nations on the metric of days when measurable amounts of rain fell. Summers with the fewest rainy days were 2006, 2013 and 2018, whereas 2012 and in some areas 2007 saw a larger number of wet summer days.

Figure 7.2 looks at the number of hours of bright sunshine recorded during the summer months and reveals that the south of England typically experiences around 200 more hours than does Scotland. Years with the greatest amount of recorded summer sun are 2006, 2013, 2014 and 2018 – largely a result that we might expect having determined that these were some of the summers with the least number of rainy days.

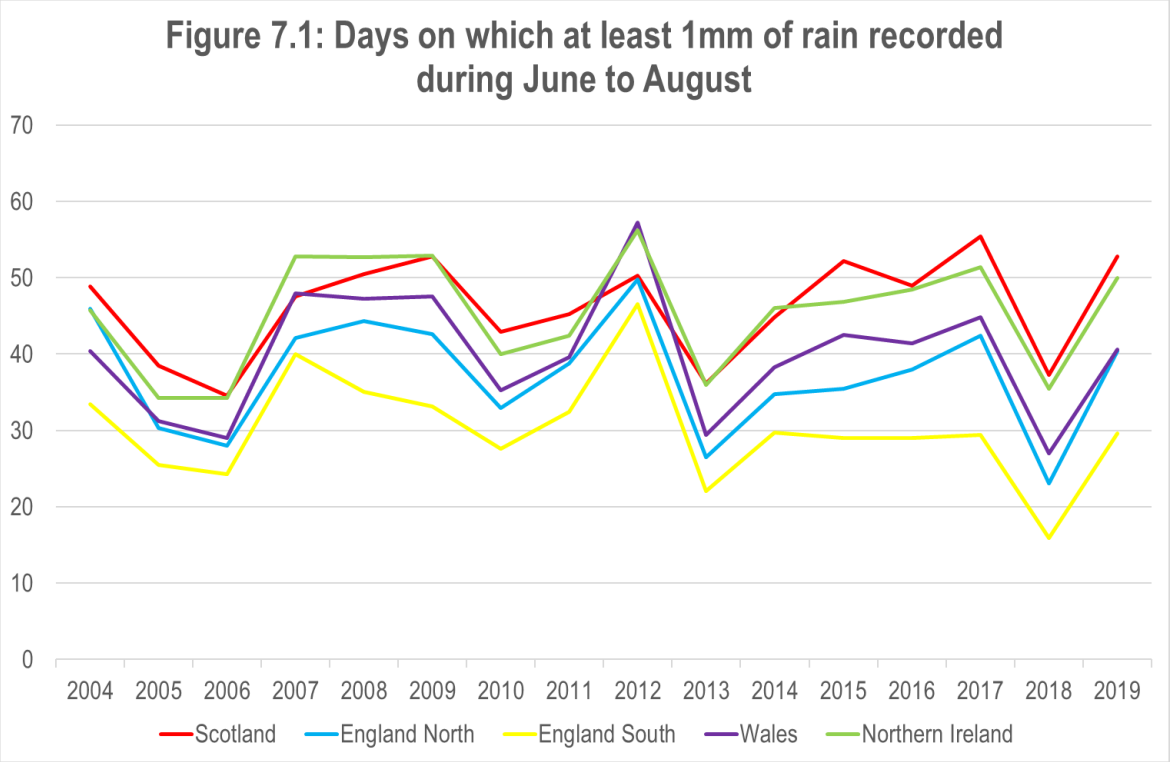


Figure 7.1: Days on which at least 1mm of rain recorded during June to August
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019
Scotland
England North
England South
Wales
Northern Ireland

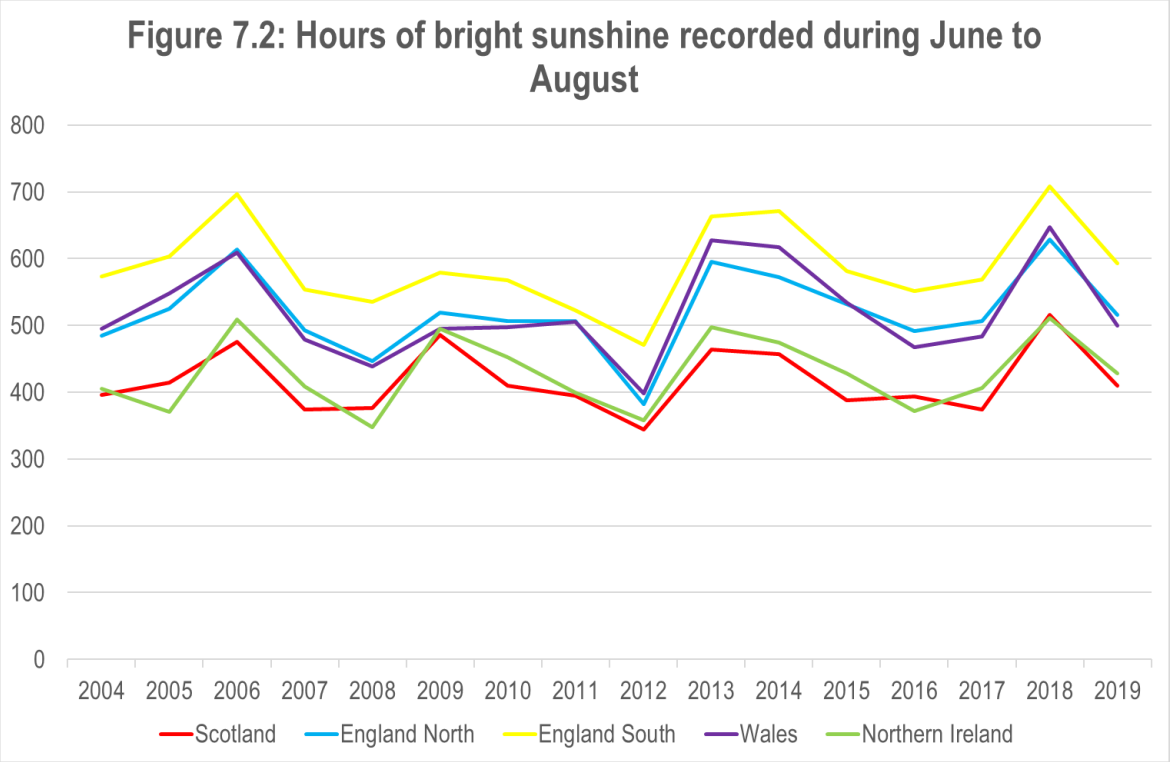


Figure 7.2: Hours of bright sunshine recorded during June to August
800
700
600
500
400
300
200
100
0
2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019
Scotland
England North
England South
Wales
Northern Ireland

8 External shocks

As the saying goes, 'stuff happens', and very often that 'stuff' has an impact on the tourism sector.

We have looked at some of the omnipresent demand drivers, but what about the one-off happenings over the past fifteen years?

Shocks can be broadly grouped into categories, one of which builds on the topic of Section 7, namely the weather. While day-to-day variations, or warm or wet spells come and go and have a measurable but not dramatic impact on visitation to attractions, more exceptional weather can pose much more of a challenge.

The commonest form of disruptive weather is heavy rain, not in and of itself, but due to the risk of flooding that it brings with it.

Floods can be devastating to those whose property is inundated, making homes uninhabitable and businesses unviable for many months after the waters subside. Clearly flooding tends to be local in nature, meaning that just because one visitor attraction may have suffered from flooding another a mile or two away may not.

A few of the more significant flooding events since 2004 include;

- Boscastle in 2004
- Carlisle in 2005
- Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Yorkshire in 2007
- Midlands and North East England in 2008
- Cumbria in 2009
- West Wales in 2012
- Many parts of southern England, in particular Somerset Levels in 2014
- Cumbria and Yorkshire in 2016
- Midlands, Yorkshire and other parts of northern England in 2019

More rarely periods of extreme cold can lead to disruption, although these are at a time of year when fewer visitor attractions are open, but some will have been impacted by prolonged cold during the winter of 2010-11 and the exceptionally cold spring of 2018 colloquially known as the 'Beat from the East'.

'It's too hot' is a phrase that has perhaps been heard more frequently in recent times, and it could well be that on occasions people are deterred from going to visitor attractions when the mercury starts to climb. There were notable heatwaves in 2013 and 2018.

Terrorism can impact the way people behave, especially in the immediate aftermath of an atrocity. Some of the most significant incidents that may have impacted the trends presented in Section 2 have included:

- The London attacks of July 2005
- Glasgow Airport attack of June 2007
- Westminster Bridge attack of March 2017
- Manchester Arena attack of May 2017
- London Bridge attack of June 2017

The threat of terrorism has been seen to exist in many different nations in the past couple of decades, with some of the worst incidents taking place in France, and it is worth noting that by and large this has not led to reductions in the number of international tourists choosing to visit the country.

Civil disorder is rare in Britain, but in August 2011 there were a series of riots in towns and cities across England, most notably in the London area, which resulted in five deaths. The disorder was widely reported overseas.

Britain is fortunate that aside from those induced by extreme weather it is not susceptible to natural disasters. However, there has been one occasion during the period under review when international travel to the UK was severely dislocated.

In April 2010 the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull led to a cloud of volcanic ash grounding aviation across northern and western Europe for several days. Those visitors who had been intending to visit the UK couldn't and those already here were stranded.

Few would dispute that the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games were a sporting success and that the event provided a marvellous showcase for Britain. But the impact the Games had on the visitor attraction sector at the time was far more nuanced, with concerns that 'normal' visitors shunned London that summer and that Brits chose to stay at home and watch the sport rather than venture out to visitor attractions.

Two years later Glasgow hosted the Commonwealth Games leading to similar uncertainties regarding the level of demand for sites typically visited by tourists to the city.

Another category of external shock needing a mention is health scares. The current year has seen the most substantial and damaging shock to hit the tourism sector in living memory, but we will need to wait many months before being able to fully gauge just what impact it will have had on visitor numbers.

Since 2004 there had not been too many notable health scares, with Foot and Mouth Disease predating the period under review here.

Shocks can be either global or local in nature, and have transient or long-lasting impact, but their impact on the number of visits to attractions should not be underestimated.