

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 22 OCTOBER 2013
title: UPDATE ON TOURISM AND EVENTS
submitted by: JOHN HEAP, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
principal author: TOM PRIDMORE, TOURISM AND EVENTS OFFICER

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To update Committee on Tourism activities.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities

- **Council Ambitions** - to sustain a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley
- **Community Objectives** - To encourage economic development throughout the borough, with specific focus on tourism, the delivery of sufficient land for business development, and supporting high growth business opportunities
- **Corporate Priorities** - To develop, with relevant partners, measures to support the visitor economy

2 BACKGROUND

The Council is keen to maximise the potential contribution of Tourism and Events to the local economy, and, in order to best achieve this, it undertakes promotional activity, and provides support for tourism-related businesses. This report is an update on the Council's activities in relation to the visitor economy, and the measures it takes to promote tourism growth.

3 ISSUES

3.1 **Headline Data**

Tourism continues to be an important economic driver in Lancashire, and here in Ribble Valley, the visitor economy is buoyant, driven by a strong and entrepreneurial private sector, supported by the Council. The latest figures produced by 'STEAM', the economic model widely used by tourist boards to calculate tourism growth, indicates healthy growth in the visitor economy locally.

Tourism figures for Lancashire

Looking firstly in the County context, Lancashire welcomes 62 million inbound visitors, generating £3.4 billion tourism spend and supporting 54,804 jobs. Some key highlights from the analysis include:-

- Visitor spend increased 3% from £3.24bn in 2011 to £3.4bn in 2012
- Visitor numbers also rose 3% from 60m in 2011 to 62m in 2012
- Jobs supported increased 1% from 54, in 2011 to 54,804 in 2012
- The majority of visitors (87%) are day visitors; rising 3% from 52.29m in 2011 to 54.10m in 2012.

- Staying visitors (accounting for just 13% of all visitors) also rose 3% from 8.04m in 2011 to 8.27m in 2012
- In terms of economic impact, staying visitors are significant, generating 51% of visitor spend, whilst day visitors account for 49% of visitor spend
- The main area of expenditure is on retail / shopping, accounting for 25% of all spend, followed by food and drink – 20% of all spend
- Trends for the last 3 years (2010-2012 inclusive) demonstrate strong resilience within the sector, as we see a continued growth trend set against a weak economic climate. Revenue has risen from £3.25bn to £3.40bn, and visitors are up from 60 million to 62 million.

Tourism figures for Ribble Valley

Within the Ribble Valley, visitor numbers rose 3%, from 3.50m in 2011 to 3.61m in 2012, with a corresponding increase of 7% in tourism spend (from £159.16m to £169.61m). Direct jobs supported rose 3% from 2,541 to 2,618.

This is the latest data available, but there is nothing to suggest that the value of tourism has not experienced further growth during 2013. Moreover, there continues to be sustained investment, both in existing facilities as well as new developments.

3.2 Marketing and Promotion

Since the appointment of the Tourism and Events Officer early in 2012, promotional activity has been stepped up, there having been a period without a dedicated officer in post. All marketing activity is carefully monitored and reviewed, with some activities discontinued.

Unlike many local authority areas in Lancashire, Ribble Valley is a very strong brand that is maximised in all promotional activities. The brand is one of quality, and this is reflected the range of quality experiences on offer at local tourism establishments. In planning marketing activity, the Ribble Valley brand is maximised because of its unique appeal in the region, as a quality destination.

Underneath the 'Ribble Valley brand', and for promotional purposes, there are a number of key themes. These either represent what the area has a reputation for already, or alternatively, where there is new potential. Ultimately, the authority does not have the resources to promote everything available, and must therefore target budgets where the best return will be achieved, usually where partnerships can be forged to share costs and ideas.

The Key themes include:-

- Heritage
- Weddings
- Events
- Food and Hospitality
- Group Travel
- Countryside Pursuits

Tourism is promoted through a variety of channels and, unlike many tourism destinations, there is still strong demand, both from customers and advertisers, for the traditional printed visitor guide.

However, following a thorough review of the guide and how it was promoted and distributed, significant changes were made for the 2013 edition, resulting in a more modern, appealing, and cost effective publication.

In the first instance, following consultation with partners, it was agreed that the guide format should change, to create a 'coffee table' style magazine, something that would be valued and used, not only as a promotional tool to attract people here, but to guide them whilst staying in the area.

The content therefore had to change to become more informative and specific. This made the guide more appealing to advertisers, as the publication had a wider distribution, with copies available in most local accommodation providers, as a bedroom browser.

The way the guide was produced was also changed, by using a company with the capability to not only design and print the guide, but also play a major role in selling the advertising, and moreover managing sales administration. This was achieved with the appointment of JCB design of Southport. The contract submitted by them during a competitive process, was a profit share, splitting income over and above printing and design costs. This meant that it was in the interests of both parties to work collaboratively to sell the guide.

So, in a change to magazine style, rather than generic images of the valley and general messages encouraging visitors to discover the area, the new guide contained the following :-

- Meaningful contents - actual places, walks, attractions etc.
- Distinctive images - memorable, illustrating a range of opportunities
- Real-time experiences - actual ideas for people to enjoy
- People-focussed stories - using local people working in tourism
- More reflective of tourism - moving away from the traditional advertiser, to include Holiday Home Parks, Wedding venues etc

Given the change in format and content, the design of the front cover was critical to the guide's success.

The design had to

- Be Visually eye catching and fresh
- Contain key messages
- Use Images that tell a story
- Be Geographically neutral
- Be Business neutral
- Portray an overall message
- Be different, to stand out when racked

It is fair to conclude that the 2013 guide has been a great success, doubling in size from the previous edition, with significant interest from new advertisers for 2014 already being shown. Also, financially, the guide has moved from being a cost to the Council to becoming project with a small profit, not to mention less demanding in officer time, with resources redirected to selling some of the larger advertising space and creating more interesting content.

The guide realised £1,000 in profit share, and whilst a little less than anticipated, it has set in place the foundations for an even better guide for 2014. Expressions of interests have been invited and it is anticipated the profit share will increase to at least £3,000 profit to the Council, with potentially an even larger guide.

The Visitor Guide has been distributed as follows:-

25,000 Produced

- 10,000 Local Hotels, Caravan Parks, Visitor Outlets
- 7,000 Tourist Information Centres Nationally
- 5,000 Tourism Promotions and Exhibitions
- 3,000 National Advertising Campaigns

Feedback on the guide from the advertisers has been almost all positive, including the following quotes.

- A refreshing change!
- Well Done! Brilliant!
- The quality has improved 100% definitely want to pick up a copy.
- Strong images work very well.
- Great fresh look interesting read.
- Huge improvement. Good job done.
- An improvement!
- It's a winner!
- An excellent production!
- Great magazine, new, exciting and a great reflection of what's happening.
- Beautiful look. Love it! Well done!
- A nice new-look, well done!
- Love the overall design and style!
- Excellent, very happy with the new look.
- First impression very good and informative, a nice change!
- Fantastic!

The only negative feedback relates to individual comments about specific adverts. The front cover has, as expected created some discussion but feedback from shows, promotions and tourist information centres is overwhelmingly positive, confirming its eye-catching appeal to customers.

The review of the Visitor Guide also created the opportunity to review how it is distributed and the guide is now sent out from another external company whose response rates, following an enquiry, is not only quicker than the council but much cheaper, as the company have negotiated better postage rates.

Social Media and website

The different forms of social media and associated technology are becoming more and more important for tourism marketing and the Council has begun to invest time into developing the key media available.

Visit Ribble Valley Website

The website has undergone its first major overhaul, resulting in improvements to images, and a rewrite of most of the content. Also, much irrelevant and out of date information has been removed. This was a first stage in simply 'catching up' but now the task over the forthcoming months will be to significantly modernise the website site, making it more reactive, responsive and informative.

Much of the content of the site is linked to the Marketing Lancashire website, including accommodation and events, but we are keen to try and make these areas easier for visitors and will need to make changes to ensure things like the event search, are easier to navigate.

Social Media

In the last report to this committee, members expressed their enthusiasm to improve the use of social media. Since that meeting various developments have been initiated.

Twitter- 'Go Ribble Valley' Twitter has been launched with almost 500 followers. These tend to be trade contacts and people with a professional interest in Ribble Valley Tourism. Tweets are linked to Facebook.

Face book 'Love Ribble Valley' has been re-launched and now has around 300 followers. Facebook is used more as a consumer page for the public, featuring events and activities, and generally stimulating interest in the area. Facebook makes it possible to look in detail at the way people interact and we are able to analyse usage so it is possible to obtain detailed information about who follows, what is popular and when is the best time to post information. This means that it should be possible to steadily improve the performance of 'Love Ribble Valley' over the coming months.

In addition to the above, a regular '**E-Blast**' is produced. This contains newsworthy information for private sector businesses and professionals involved in tourism, such as journalists, travel writers, bloggers and tour operators. The E-Blast, called 'Tourism Matters', celebrates awards, achievements and highlights new attractions, events etc., all of which helps to portray the Ribble Valley as a fresh, vibrant, quality destination.

3.3 **Press and PR**

Regular contact is maintained with key media contacts, resulting in some positive media, including features in national publications. One journalist who came on a familiarisation trip has written a large feature for Country Living magazine to be published in April 2014 and she has also supplied other features for food magazines following her visit. Other features include Countryfile magazine.

3.4 **Relationships**

Working in partnership to promote and develop tourism creates far more impact and makes promotional activities much more cost effective. Whilst the Tourism and Events Officer has been establishing good working relationships with many individual tourism businesses, there are two organisations key to collaborative working, Marketing Lancashire and Ribble Valley Tourism Association.

Marketing Lancashire

Relations with Marketing Lancashire, the regions tourist board, have improved significantly since the appointment of Ruth Connor as Chief Executive. Regular meetings and information sharing, is ensuring that the Ribble Valley and its tourism businesses achieve the very highest possible profile at County level.

Ribble Valley Tourism Association

A strong local tourism association is vital for effective destination marketing and the Tourism and Events Officer has been proactive in to help reshape and re-launch the Ribble Valley Tourism Association. By reducing running costs and streamlining administration, the association is restoring its reputation and rapidly becoming an influential organisation. More than 60 local businesses have already signed up as members since the re-launch earlier this year.

The Association works on a basic membership fee of £20 and this is attracting many new businesses to join. The Association will soon be an effective and representative group for consultation, networking and collaboration. Beyond the basic fee, individual members can then 'buy into' further joint promotional activity, as appropriate to their individual business.

The Association recently organised training courses in social media for its members, as well as hosting useful networking events. A membership website has been launched, where more information is available www.rvta.co.uk.

3.5 Travel Trade

Whilst group travel is fairly specialist area of activity, and not one historically exploited to any great extent in this area, there appears to be growing interest from tour and coach operators, who are recognising that the profile of the Ribble Valleys is being raised. To this end, the Tourism and Events Officer has been working with those businesses willing and able to encourage group visits. This collaboration is not just about marketing, but is also looking at itineraries routes, product development etc.

A shared approach to attending the premier group travel event the 'Great Days Out' exhibition in Manchester, proved very successful and will hopefully be repeated, sharing stand costs.

Familiarisation trips for journalists and group travel organisers have also been organised and early in 2014, the national conference of Group Travel organisers, will be hosted in Skipton. Whilst the event will focus on Skipton an optional 'Ribble Valley' day has been added to the programme and early indications are that this will be a popular choice.

3.6 Celebration

Working with local business to improve the quality of the visitor experience is an important part of the work of Council Officers. Celebrating success, such as awards and accreditation is a big part of this. It is not insignificant that no fewer than fifteen local businesses are represented in the Lancashire Tourism Awards, some of which are in more than one category.

They are

- Park House B&B, Gisburn
- The Spread Eagle, Sawley
- Hackings Caravan Park, Clitheroe
- The Stirk House Hotel, Gisburn
- Bashall Barn, Clitheroe
- Best Western Mytton Fold Hotel & Golf Complex,
- Browsholme Tithe Barn, Clitheroe
- Eaves Hall, Clitheroe
- Mitton Hall, Nr Clitheroe

- Stanley House Hotel & Spa, Blackburn
- La Locanda Ristorante Italiano, Gisburn
- The Parkers Arms, Clitheroe
- The Stirk House Hotel, Gisburn
- The Assheton Arms, Clitheroe
- The Grand, Clitheroe
- Clitheroe Food Festival

The Tourism and Events Officer works with all these businesses along with other award winning facilities.

3.7 Tourism Developments

The Council is consulted on a wide range of new tourism developments including new facilities and improvements to public transport.

Examples include:-

- Bowland Rambler – new bus service
- Train services- new weekend train services
- Whalley Abbey- Heritage Lottery funding bid
- Chipping- New Tourism development
- Mitton- Refurbishment of landmark Pub
- Along with various accommodation providers, especially self-catering

In terms of Tourism development, there is no recent tourism strategy and this will be addressed soon. This may well include the concept of Tourism Action Plans to help coordinate tourism activity between the different organisations in places such as Longridge and Clitheroe.

3.8 Visitor Information

A variety of printed literature is available to visitors and a review is to be undertaken shortly about what the Council should support, reprint and distribute. Some material produced directly by the Council but much more by other organisations ranging from Chambers of Trade to Parish Councils and voluntary groups. With resources limited it will be important to ensure that whatever is promoted meets quality standards and customer needs.

Beyond distribution through the Platform Gallery and Information centre, there is no structured distribution or recognised outlets for local information. In order to reinforce the Ribble Valley brand, and provide visitors a sense of arrival in one single destination, consideration will need to be given to how and where such information is available. The Longridge Heritage Centre is an excellent facility which will be maximised but there are other outlets such as the Council's Information rooms at Bolton by Bowland and Downham which need to be refurbished. Also, there are an interesting range of new opportunities being suggested. One good example is Hurst Green Church which is looking to open its doors to visitors every day and have a bespoke Visitor Information Point and somewhere for walkers to meet. The Tourism and Events Officer is exploring how this opportunity might be maximised and how, along with the aforementioned information rooms, a network of Visitor Information Points at strategic locations around the borough might be established.

As a supplement to the existing range of tourist information available, work is being undertaken to produce information in foreign languages. Working with a local student studying foreign languages, parts of the website already contain content in French German and Italian.

3.9 Events

Support for events across the borough has continued, with the Tourism and Events Officer providing support, such as marketing and promotion. There is growing interest in developing the tourism potential of events, with events such as the Jazz Festival seeking to grow, as well as hotels looking to develop their in-house programmes. Capturing all the information is always a challenge, but links with event organiser is improving.

3.10 Support

The Tourism and Events Officer has been fortunate enough to obtain the support of student placements from the International Business Academy in Denmark, and is currently talking to staff at Leeds Metropolitan University, with a view to using tourism students to help with live projects. The contribution of these placements, along with numerous work placements from local schools, helps stimulate new ideas, and challenges existing practice.

4 RISK ASSESSMENT

The approval of this report may have the following implications:

- **Resources** – There are no specific financial implications to this report, but issues may emerge with the development of initiatives contained within.
- **Technical, Environmental and Legal** - None
- **Political** – Tourism is highlighted in the corporate strategy as a key contributor to support economic growth in the Ribble Valley.
- **Reputation** – Tourism is an important part of the local economy, and the role of the Council in leading the visitor economy enhances its reputation.

5 CONCLUSION

Committee will be notified of relevant further developments.

TOM PRIDMORE
TOURISM AND EVENTS OFFICER

JOHN C HEAP
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

For further information, please ask for Tom Pridmore 01200 414496

Community Services 22.10.13 / Tom Pridmore / IW