

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 22 MAY 2012
title: TOURISM AND EVENTS UPDATE
submitted by: JOHN HEAP, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
principal author: TOM PRIDMORE, TOURISM AND EVENTS OFFICER

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To brief members of the Committee on the current issues relating to Tourism and Events.

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 a 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

2.1 The Council is keen to maximise the potential contribution of Tourism and Events to the local economy and in order to best achieve this, the relevant areas of activity were co-ordinated into one distinct role as part of a recent restructure of Council services.

2.2 A new Tourism and Events Officer was appointed on 21 February 2012, and this report provides an update of his work, and also identifies some of the key opportunities for the future.

3 ISSUES

3.1 Tourism and Events Officer

The newly appointed Tourism and Events Officer started on 21 February 2012, since when he has been meeting tourism contacts and familiarising himself with the area. The following sections provide a summary of tourism activity, including an early indication about which issues might form future priorities. The informal consultation with the private sector has informed these views.

3.2 Promoting Tourism

As the position of Tourism Officer had been vacant, there has been the inevitable vacuum of tourism promotional activity. That said, the 'Great Days Out' Fair at the Trafford Centre was attended, where travel trade and group tour organisers/operators were targeted for the 2012 season.

Promotional activity clearly needs to be kick-started again and, most importantly, targeted to those areas where limited resources will make best impact. The Ribble Valley Tourism Association is also keen to raise their profile and promote the area, so it is considered prudent to achieve this in partnership with them. Meetings are already being held to identify cost-effective opportunities of working in partnership in ways that not only minimise costs but also reduce duplication and share expertise.

The new 2012 visitor guide has been launched and with a print run of 25,000, and it is being distributed using a variety of channels including national advertising along with brochure drops at tourist information centres around the country.

Future Priorities for Promoting Tourism:

- Raise the profile of tourism by participating in more promotional opportunities.
- Work with Ribble Valley Tourism Association on promotional activities.

3.3 Visitor Information

Over 23,000 visitors have visited the Tourist Information Centre over the past year with very high scores achieved in the independent mystery shopper review. The information centre has been relocated to provide a combined service at the Platform Gallery where it should attract greater footfall.

Whilst the Centre does not fall under the direct control of the Tourism and Events Officer, it does, nonetheless, provide a range of important visitor services and support for tourism development activities, such as distribution and promotions. This support will continue.

In terms of visitor information, three challenges need to be addressed: firstly, the vacuum of printed information for touring visitors; secondly, the patchy distribution of relevant promotional literature within the borough and, finally, the need to refresh the website to make it more effective.

Future Priorities for Visitor information

- Promote awareness about the centre to local tourism operators
- Use the new centre as a focal point for activities in order to increase footfall
- Increase product knowledge amongst the operational staff at the centre.
- Improve the quality of information about local events
- Establish channels for brochure distribution
- Review the need for additional visitor information
- Refresh the website making it more relevant and up to date, exploring where relevant the scope for social media

3.4 Travel Trade

Travel Trade, particularly coach and group travel, is a relatively underdeveloped market, but one which could benefit the Ribble Valley retail sector including our market. In addition it would support heritage attractions and the larger tourism facilities. The Tourism and Events Officer is in the early stages of forming a public /private sector group, including a local coach company, with a view to maximising this market. Clearly, group travel is a potentially lucrative target market, and one that needs to be managed carefully, so as not to impact the more sensitive locations in the Borough.

It is planned to launch a new travel trade newsletter aimed at encouraging group visits to the area. The publication will target group travel organisers and coach companies, and will focus on those tourism facilities most easily able to accommodate groups.

Future Priorities for Travel Trade Promotion

- Develop a partnership approach to encouraging the coach and group market.
- Promote awareness by developing a travel trade newsletter.

3.5 Food Trail

The Food Trail continues to showcase the Ribble Valley and many of the enquiries for short breaks and days out are a result of having read about the trail. There has been extensive media coverage in a variety of publications including the Manchester Evening News and the Sunday Telegraph, along with a range of national magazines.

The trail has been reprinted and it will be re-launched very soon.

In addition, an outdoor interpretative panel is being produced to promote the trail in the roadside car park of one of the food trail businesses.

In spite of its apparent success steps need to be taken to develop concepts around the trail and build on its success in order to maintain the momentum and keep ahead of the increasing number of other food trails now becoming established in the region. Mini trails could be devised such as routes themed around locations or types of product.

Future Priorities

- Investigate ways in which to develop the food trail.

3.6 Research

There is a growing wealth of data available that identifies who our visitors are, where they live and how they find us. Google analytics is but one example of the quality of data now available.

The strong tourism themes becoming evident are

- Food and drink
- Events
- Heritage
- Country walking
- Shopping
- Weddings

Whilst there may be no surprises in this list it does begin to provide us with the evidence to justify more targeted promotions and how we might redesign the website along with other promotional material. Tourist Board research will also help us identify target markets.

3.7 Events

The Ribble Valley has a rich and diverse range of community, sport and cultural activities taking place throughout the year. They play an enormous part in the success of local tourism with an increasing number of private sector operators also now developing programmes.

Each event has tourism potential and yet the supply and distribution of information is far from satisfactory. It is therefore logical that in the first instance that the priority should be to promote existing events and programmes rather to create new events. Over time, there will be opportunities to explore hosting new events, especially around niche activities such as food.

Collating accurate event information for visitors and refining both how and which events are promoted will form a major task in coming months. There is only a limited amount of information on the existing 'Visit Ribble Valley' website, which in reality should be the main point of reference for both local people and visitors to the area.

Future Priorities for Events Promotion

- Collate existing event information and encourage organisers to notify the Council of their plans
- Develop the Visit Ribble Valley Website as the single port of call for visitor information
- Explore the longer-term potential of event-based tourism

4 CURRENT MAJOR EVENTS

The Witches 400th Anniversary, the Clitheroe Torchlight Procession, and the food festival are three of the main events taking place locally. Interest in each of these and other events is gaining in momentum. These examples provide evidence about how events can stimulate tourism. The reputation of the food festival as a major regional event is gaining rapidly and preparations for this year are well under way. The Council is supporting the festival in many different ways. This year's event is expected to draw even more visitors and from further afield, and there are plans to establish a smaller food event around Christmas.

Niche events, such as this year's Clitheroe Jazz Festival, are also proving hugely successful, and the Jazz Festival, in just the second year, offers evidence that people come to stay in the area for events.

As there has been significant interest in establishing a walking festival based around Ribble Valley, it has been agreed to use the 400th anniversary of the Pendle witches to explore this concept. A week called 'Witches Walks and More' will take place between 12th and 19th of August. This will include a walk along the witches trail from Pendle to Lancaster over a four day staggered period. In addition, different walks based from different locations around the borough will also take place. By hosting a 'week of walks' rather than a promoted 'festival', it will be possible to gauge both the level of public interest as well ensure adequate support by local volunteer walks leaders.

Plans are underway to promote the Jubilee celebrations. A beacon will be lit as part of an evening of celebrations at the Castle on June 4th. The castle will host a family festival style event, with live music and entertainment commencing at 2pm with the finale being the beacon lighting at 10.15pm.

2012 is also anticipated to be a busy year due to events beyond Ribble Valley, especially the Open Golf Championships at Lytham St Anne's, which is already bringing bookings to hotels in this area.

5 OTHER TOURISM NEWS

5.1 Lancashire and Blackpool Tourist Board

The business of the Lancashire and Blackpool Tourist Board has been wound down following changes that has seen the birth of a new organisation called 'Marketing Lancashire'. It is understood that this organisation will not focus on Blackpool, where a new marketing company has been created. 'Marketing Lancashire' will continue to provide all the normal support services to the Borough, including the valuable website links, which resulted a significant level of business for the Ribble Valley pages and onto our own website. Mr Paul Heathcote has been recently elected as the new Chairman of Marketing Lancashire, and the new Chief Executive will be appointed shortly.

5.2 Ribble Valley Tourism Association

Ribble Valley Tourism Association held its AGM at Eaves Hall. The association, which is seeking to establish even closer links with the Council, has elected a new committee and a new Chair. The new Tourism and Events Officer is keen to help support the development of this organisation in order to achieve greater participation in promoting tourism. Assistance has recently been provided by the Council to update their constitution, develop their forward plan and introduce their own member's website onto the Council's community portal.

5.3 Local Award Winners

Two Ribble Valley tourism businesses have been shortlisted to the national finals of the Green Tourism Business awards where, if successful, they may achieve the prestigious Gold Star award. Lower Gill Holiday Cottages and Hackings Holiday Caravan Park are the two establishments, and, for Hackings, this is the latest in a string of awards received for their work in environmental sustainability.

5.4 Tourism Strategy

It has been some time now since the Council had any specific strategy or plan relating to the visitor economy. Whilst there is no statutory requirement, it is considered timely now that some form of strategy should be produced, given the appointment of a new officer along with the wider recognition by the Council of the value of tourism to the economy. This will help target resources more effectively, and also ensure that the public and private sectors are working in harmony and to the same set of agreed objectives.

6 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 in.
- **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 visitor economy enhances its reputation.

7 **RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE**

- 7.1 Notes the contents of this report and the progress made by the Tourism and Events Officer and, in particular, the development of partnerships with the private sector.
- 7.2 Supports the key issues identified in the report and the need for the coordination of a tourism policy document to prioritise Council resources in the future.

JOHN C HEAP
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

For further information, please ask for Tom Pridmore 01200 414496