

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

meeting date: 9 SEPTEMBER 2021
title: TOURISM PROGRESS REPORT
submitted by: JOHN HEAP, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
principal author: TOM PRIDMORE, TOURISM AND EVENTS OFFICER

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To receive a general progress report on tourism activity, with particular reference to measures taken to support the visitor economy during the pandemic as well as the priorities as we continue through recovery.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:

- Community Objectives – To sustain a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley
- Corporate Priorities - To encourage economic development throughout the borough, with specific focus on tourism
- Other Considerations – To develop, with relevant partners, measures to support the visitor economy

2 Background

2.1 Tourism and hospitality have been amongst the hardest hit sectors by COVID-19. The resulting restrictions, had a devastating impact on all tourism-related businesses. Some businesses have not reopened, significant refunds have had to be made, and countless staff have been furloughed.

Uncertainty about the implications of social distancing and other restrictions, which to ensure the safety of visitors, presented further challenges to the viability of individual businesses, and to the retail centres.

The sectors most seriously affected were –

- Dining experiences
- Weddings
- Group travel / residential / adventure centres
- Cultural venues including theatre and cinemas
- Events

2.2 Recovery Plan for Tourism and Hospitality

The Council's tourism and promotional activity is usually guided by a destination management plan, the progress of which is reported regularly to this committee. The plan identifies the key target areas and opportunities for action. This plan was suspended, and in an immediate response to the crisis, your officers worked closely with the Ribble Valley Tourism Association to draft a 'Response and Recovery Plan', aimed at supporting tourism through good communication and marketing initiatives.

The plan sought to be positive and took into consideration the opportunities presented now and post virus. It was clear that as restrictions were lifted, post initial lockdown and people would travel more freely again, that competition, in terms of tourism marketing, would be fiercer than ever.

The predictions reported in the plan and to this committee last year have certainly come to fruition,

These include -

- There has been a major boost in the UK domestic travel market
- Visitors like to feel and be safe – both during travel and whilst at the destination
- Huge demand to visit open space and countryside, and experience nature
- Strong interest in visiting and staying relatively locally
- Greater interest in buying locally made products and eating locally sourced produce

The Ribble Valley Borough Council 'Response and Recovery Plan for Tourism and Hospitality' was launched in June 2020 and has two parts: -

Response 'Remaining confident for the period during which closure restrictions are in place' and

Recovery 'Confidently adapting, as restrictions are relaxed'

An update on the progress of the plan will be reported to the next meeting of the committee.

3.0 Forthcoming marketing and promotional priorities

- 3.1 Ribble Valley Tourism, along with much of the country, is currently in a unique situation. Firstly, there has, and continues to be, a major resurgence in tourism and hospitality. In Ribble Valley this is further intensified by the need to clear a huge backlog of wedding business. By contrast there are challenges too, as we move forward, particularly in terms of resourcing the industry, where there are huge problems in recruiting staff. Again, this is not a local problem, and the causes vary, but Brexit, Covid and people changing occupations during furlough are all key factors.

The following priorities, along with those in the Response and Recovery Plan, aim to address these challenges, as well as maximise the opportunities presented by the current situation.

3.2 Ribble Valley – A Place for All Seasons – building on success

This is the name of our next campaign aimed at continuing the success of the summer through into next year. There are a number of strands to the campaign, including food promotion weddings and country walking, especially our popular 'Walks with Taste' series. To mark the campaign launch, we have produced two new guides, namely a general visitor guide and a staycation/accommodation guide. These will be available in hard print copy, virtual brochures, and downloads. The popular Visit Ribble Website will also be refreshed over the next few months. The Tolkien Trail has been relaunched and three new cycle routes will also be available soon.

3.3 British Travel Trade Show - Virtual Ribble Valley – Unique launch

We are attending the first major tourism trade show since the outbreak of the pandemic. Visitors to this year's British Travel Trade Show, (the 'must go to' event for

travel journalists, group operators, etc) will have the opportunity to be virtually immersed in the Ribble Valley experience, as we have teamed up with the company 'Teleport' to provide virtual reality tours on the area. Wearing an immersive headset visitors to the show will be transported to some of Ribble Valley best known landmarks including, Clitheroe Castle, Whalley Abbey, Browsholme Hall and the Trough of Bowland. This unique experience is believed to be the first time that virtual reality of named destinations has been used in this way at this event. We are partnering with Lancaster Tourism in attending the event which aims to share the message that each area and respective business are very much back in business and keen to welcome visitors.

3.4 Ribble Valley Wedding Heaven

Again, to extend business well into the next 3-5 years, an emphasis has been placed on Wedding Tourism. This recently received a boost when Ribble Valley was celebrated in the national media being hailed as 'England's new Wedding Heaven' referring to Clitheroe as 'The most romantic town in England and Wales' These were just two of many national newspaper headlines which appeared following the release of Office of National statistics figures which demonstrate Ribble Valley being one of few local authority areas to experience an increase in the number of weddings over the past 50 years. The figures illustrate Ribble Valley 'bucking the national trend' resulted in widespread media coverage.

Great PR for the area and worthy recognition of all the entrepreneurial activity undertaken by local businesses, especially wedding venues and suppliers, which make this area so appealing to 'would be' couples. Wedding tourism provides benefits to many other tourism businesses, especially dining out, accommodation and shopping, as well as providing a showcase opportunity for first time visitors, who may have never visited before, but then choose to return in subsequent years. We are also lucky to have the Ribble Valley Wedding Partnership, which includes the majority of licenced venues in its membership. Coordinated by the Council the partnership enables everyone with a stake in weddings to work together to encourage more business into area, by promoting Ribble Valley as 'a Wedding Heaven'. It is a partnership which is believed to be unique and the results of this collaborative working' and now being demonstrated.

We are about to launch the latest edition of our comprehensive wedding guide to Ribble Valley.

3.5 Ribble Valley Food Heaven

Another great tourism theme which thrives locally is Food Tourism and this campaign is being refreshed over the next few weeks. Ribble Valley is one of the great 'the food capitals of the north' and we are revamping our popular food website www.ribbonvalleyfoodheaven.com We shall be working with partners to promote local food in a variety of ways including a new promotional video.

3.6 Media and bloggers

We have welcomed yet more press and travel bloggers into Ribble as the area becomes better known nationally as a destination. We have just welcomed yet another award-winning blogger to Ribble Valley last month, and a journalist of a national leisure magazine also spent a week here. More media visits are anticipated.

3.7 Recruitment crisis

Whilst the recruitment of tourism and hospitality staff is a national crisis, we are keen to do our bit locally to promote employment in the industry and we are currently working with partners to produce positive PR including individual success stories to translate online, video and in print.

4 ISSUES

The main issue to note is the way in which the Council has responded and continued to respond to the current crisis. This continues to evolve with the changing circumstances and this change is reflected in the Response and Recovery Plan

5 RISK ASSESSMENT

The approval of this report may have the following implications;

- Resources – The cost of promotional activities are contained within existing budgets and, where appropriate supported by the government
- Technical, Environmental and Legal – None in the context of this report
- Reputation – The Council is an active contributor in terms of strategic and operational tourism service.
- Equality and Diversity – None

6 CONCLUSION

Further progress in Tourism will be reported to future committees

TOM PRIDMORE
TOURISM AND EVENTS OFFICER

JOHN HEAP
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

BACKGROUND PAPERS None

For further information, please contact Tom Pridmore 01200 414496