

# RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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meeting date: THURSDAY 2 NOVEMBER 2023  
title: WEDDING TOURISM  
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## 1 PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of the report is to note the importance of weddings to the local economy and the measures taken by the Council, with the support of the Ribble Valley Wedding Heaven Partnership to maximise its tourism potential.

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 ISSUES

### 2.1 BACKGROUND

Weddings, along with the themes of food and walking, are amongst the priorities of Ribble Valley's current tourism strategy. This report reviews the Ribble Valley Wedding Heaven brand campaign launched in 2014 and considers the value and changing nature of this niche tourism market.

### 2.2 WEDDINGS AND THE RIBBLE VALLEY ECONOMY

Weddings form an important part of the visitor economy, not only in direct spend at venues but also in supplementary accommodation, wedding suppliers, dining and retail. Given the diverse range of business which benefit from weddings, the full economic value is hard to measure. Moreover, it is also quite challenging to measure how many weddings actually take place. For example, weddings recorded by the Registrar, for which statistics are readily available, account only for civil ceremonies and do not include religious ceremonies. Then there are those weddings where the ceremonies take place outside of Ribble Valley, but the reception or celebration is hosted here, and visa versa. Of course, the actual economic benefit of weddings relates as much to the reception/celebration as it does the actual ceremony.

It is estimated that 2,000 and 3,000 weddings now take place annually in Ribble Valley and, given that 2022 recorded the highest national average cost per wedding at just over £19,000, the economic value of wedding tourism as an economic driver begins to be appreciated. Also, this average cost per wedding figure does not include additional guest accommodation, local dining and retail benefits.

Weddings account for more than 40% annual turnover at many mixed purpose venues and 100% at the increasing number of bespoke venues. They provide certainty of cashflow and in addition to the 26 licenced venues in Ribble Valley there are countless places where receptions and wedding celebrations take place.

The North West is now the third most popular region in which to get married, and it is believed that Ribble Valley hosts more than a third of all Lancashire weddings and three times as many as the next highest district.

### **2.3 RIBBLE VALLEY WEDDING HEAVEN**

Recognising the emerging potential of wedding tourism, the Council launched an initiative in 2014 to develop this niche market. It invited all the licenced wedding venues to form a partnership under the banner of the Ribble Valley Wedding Heaven brand. The partnership meets 2-3 times a year and includes the majority of licensed venues. Whilst it is referred to as a partnership, it has no legal status as such nor does it influence budgets. It is solely a consultative group which occasionally pools funding for promotional initiatives. The partnership was not only launched to encourage more business to venues, but it also recognised the wider economic value of the tourism industry in supplementary sectors especially accommodation, dining, supplies and retail. Moreover, there was also recognition that a large number of accommodation providers were already reporting repeat holiday bookings resulting from wedding guests being introduced to this area.

The primary purpose of the partnership was to develop the promotional brand 'Ribble Valley Wedding Heaven'. In the nine years since its inception, the partnership has launched a website, [www.ribbonvalleyweddingheaven.com](http://www.ribbonvalleyweddingheaven.com) and hosted visit by specialist journalists and bloggers. Under the collective banner of Ribble Valley Wedding Heaven it has attended a number of national wedding fairs, with contributing venues sharing the promotional costs. It organised the first valley wide wedding fair, which has now become an established biannual event, hosted at Stonyhurst College, and now run by a private sector operator. Some of the members of the group also host joint open evenings, called 'One night in Heaven' enabling prospective customers to make the most of their time in Ribble Valley and be able to visit several venues in one visit.

To help with promotions, the group produce a high-quality publication, which has proven particularly appealing to customers, as it offers a one stop shop for Ribble Valley venues. Again, costs for this are covered by participating venues.

Soon after its inception the partnership recognised the merit of involving Lancashire County Council registration service and their participation has proved a valuable element ever since. So, in addition to developing the promotional brand the group now also discusses wider issues affecting the wedding industry locally.

The laws relating to weddings in England have recently been the subject of government review and the weddings partnership were amongst a small number of consultees nationally to be invited to present evidence at the Law Society consultation event in London.

The Ribble Valley Weddings partnership is believed to be the only one of its kind in the UK, where venues worked together with the local authority to develop a brand, based on a reputation of a perfect place to get married. Since its inception there has been a rise in the volume of weddings in Ribble Valley. How much this can be

attributed to the partnership and how much to the entrepreneurial activity at individual venues, is impossible to determine.

The success of the initiative can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, the strong brand identity of Ribble Valley, a place with great landscapes and a reputation for quality. Next, a local authority committed to working collaboratively. Finally, by working together the group recognised any wedding in Ribble Valley could potentially benefit any partner, whether that be through dining experiences, or overflow accommodation, and that working together had great potential. The offer at every wedding venue in the partnership is different, therefore the options available to customers are wide, and whilst each is unique, they share values of quality and outstanding customer service.

Finally, as a direct result of the promotional activities of the partnership, Ribble Valley featured in a TV programme/documentary called 'Wedding Valley' which highlighted an amazing range of local businesses, including venues and suppliers.

## 2.4 THE CURRENT WEDDING MARKET AND FUTURE TRENDS AND POTENTIAL

The pandemic and other economic factors have significantly changed behaviours in relation to weddings, and it is important to keep abreast of market trends in order to sustain and continue to develop the levels of business. A recent national study undertaken by one of the market leaders in the wedding industry highlights latest trends. It is important that we use these trends to develop future marketing strategies.

Wedding trends are summarised in the table below, together with commentary relating to future opportunities. **(Source The UK Wedding Report - Bridebook 2023)**

| <b>Trend</b>   | <b>Comments</b>  |
|--|--|
| Ceremonies at wedding venues rose to their highest ever level in 2022 and now that outdoor weddings are legal at licenced venues, one quarter took place outdoors. | Many Ribble Valley venues are developing their offer to include outdoor options. |
| Most popular venue types are still Hotels, Barns and Country Houses.   | Clearly relevant to Ribble Valley.   |
| Couples still continue to prioritise grounds, romantic vibe, outdoor space and scene views in their choice of wedding venue.                                       | Clearly still relevant to Ribble Valley.   |
| Good service by friendly staff at a venue is an important decision maker.  | An aspect frequently mentioned with respect to the Ribble Valley venues.         |
| The average number of guests is now returning to pre pandemic levels.  | This bodes well for the return of business.                                      |
| The most popular engagement dates are those around those around Christmas, particularly Christmas Day, with Christmas Eve the next most                            | This information provides a good information for targeting marketing activity.   |

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| popular. Also popular are those dates around new year, Valentine's Day and 29th February in a leap year. |  |
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| <b>Trend</b>   | <b>Comments</b>   |
|--|---|
| Half of all couples choose their wedding venue within 3 months of engagement, and two thirds within 6 months.  | This further strengthens the point above.   |
| Higher budget venues are usually booked within 2-months and lower budget 12 months plus.   | Further evidenced to support target marketing.  |
| The period of time between engagement and venue booking is becoming shorter.   | As above.   |
| One quarter of all couples now get married in a different county from where they live.   | This demonstrates the value of external promotion.  |
| North West venues offer good value, being less than the national average for the cost of a wedding, this is mirrored to a degree by supplier costs.                                    | This reinforces the future potential which is backed up by the trend of couples seeking better value for money.   |
| Two thirds of couples' view venue websites before their first contact demonstrating a desire to explore more about a venue digitally before visiting.                                  | A clear indication of the importance of web-based information.  |
| Websites are chosen ahead of social media pages.   | As above.   |
| Online viewing is primarily to determine price range, view photos and particular real-life photos of other weddings as opposed to stock images. Couples are assured by visual imagery. | This provides evidence that we should encourage transparency of costs on venue websites and also demonstrates the type of imagery which should be demonstrated. |
| Reviews are becoming an increasingly important as a source of information for couples.   | Important to bear in mind for our own website as well as encouraging venues to include.   |
| Nearly all couples use their phone for wedding planning.   | A good tip for website design – ensure marketing is optimised for mobile platforms.   |

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| Venue pricing must be transparent, couples don't like to be surprised by add-ons. | This provides evidence that venues should encourage transparency of costs on venue websites. |
| The majority of couples still hire professional suppliers.                        | This highlights the importance of promoting local suppliers.                                 |

## 2.4

| <b>Trend</b>   | <b>Comments</b>  |
|--|--|
| Pricing is the most important piece of information to couples, followed by food options location, capacity and photos. | This provides evidence that we should encourage transparency of costs on venue websites. |
| Photos of interior and real weddings are desired most.   | Further evidence for the type or imagery which should be used in promotional activity.   |
| There is a steady increase in demand for midweek and Sunday weddings.  | Highlights the opportunity, and to encourage venues to be accordingly flexible.          |
| With a national average venue cost of £8,045, Friday is currently the most expensive day to get married.               | A point to note.   |
| Two thirds of couples still choose venue where food is included in the price and pay an average £3k for that service.  | A point to note.   |

## 3 **RECOMMENDATION**

Members are invited to note the report.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS None

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