

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

meeting date: 25 MARCH 2021
title: Tourism progress report, including the response to the pandemic.
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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, through the implementation of the Response and Recovery Plan.

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 TOURISM REVIEW

2.1 Background

Up until the pandemic, tourism and hospitality was contributing over £260 million into the local economy. In recent years, and certainly up until the current crisis, it had been a rapidly expanding sector, in which both the economic impact and visitor numbers were rising by over 7% per annum with employment figures growing by more than 6% p.a.

Tourism and hospitality continue to be amongst the hardest hit sectors by COVID-19. The changing restrictions have had an enormous impact on all tourism-related businesses, most of which have had to close for period, or operate under restrictive conditions. This has impacted the food and drink sector, wedding venues, accommodation, and attractions, along with a wide variety of support services and other supply industries. Some businesses may yet not reopen, and there has been significant disruption to the employment market, which may yet impact on the future availability or relevant skills.

2.2 Recovery Plan for Tourism and Hospitality

Given the ongoing pandemic, the normal performance plan for tourism, 'the Destination Management Plan', was suspended, and replaced with a 'Response and Recovery Plan', aimed at supporting tourism through good communication and marketing initiatives. The new plan was launched in June 2020 and continues to be an effective management tool in promoting tourism and supporting local businesses.

The **Response** part of the plan addressed the following-

- Consultation - involving people and businesses in the content of the plan
- **Communication** – ensuring clear and consistent messages about the pandemic
- **Protect and support business** – measures to help local businesses

- **Maintain brand awareness** – keeping in touch with visitors, with clear messaging
- **Stay engaged with communities** – keeping positive messages about tourism to the fore

The **Recovery** part of the plan addressed the following –

- **Creating safe and welcoming tourism** – supporting practical measures
- **Promote new tourism themes** – reflecting changing public opinion
- **Eight new campaigns** -in response to changing visitors behaviour
- **Business communications** – keeping in touch and supporting
- **Stay in touch with customers** – keeping marketing channels open

The plan is designed to be positive, taking into consideration new, post-virus, opportunities. Predictions in June 2020, about a post virus tourism revival are likely to prove accurate, as it is now very clear that once restrictions are lifted, people will keenly visit again.

The Council was recently invited by the **Local Government Association** to present its work on 'Response and Recovery', as a case study to their national 'Culture, Tourism, Leisure and Sport' annual conference.

The Council's work was well-received and it was suggested that domestic tourism may now face a unique opportunity

What good had come out of the pandemic?

- **Local government** has responded well in terms of support for communities and businesses
- **Reputation** of tourism and hospitality has come to the fore on political agendas
- The **economic importance** and contribution of these sectors has been recognized
- **Tourism structures** have been challenged, including the viability of certain regional organisations
- **Local identity** has been reinforced, with the popularity of local tourism organisations receiving a boost
- **New bill of health** for many businesses with enhanced standards required
- **Greater environmental awareness** has been created by the public
- **Demand created** with the public longing to return and experience the British Product.

Looking ahead, the future was summarised as follows

- Still on a challenging journey, the crisis is far from over
- Forecast is for growth in domestic tourism
- Staycations set to boom
- Competition in terms of overseas destinations is temporarily weak

Above all else,

- There is currently '**A unique opportunity**'

It is clear that there is currently a unique opportunity for British domestic tourism to make its mark, with an estimated 18 months in which to achieve this whilst competition remains weak.

That is why it is so important for Ribble Valley, a place where tourism and hospitality are integral to the local economy, to not only to restore post Covid levels of business but moreover, to grow from and fully exploit this unique opportunity.

Furthermore, research suggests some other very distinct consumer trends are emerging from the crisis, from which Ribble Valley could benefit -

- An increased desire to visit open space and countryside, and to experience nature
- Greater interest in buying locally made products and eating locally sourced produce

The performance table for the Response and Recovery Plan is attached to this report, for the purposes of reviewing progress. It illustrates the types of activities which have taken place in response to the crisis, which has included the Tourism & Events Officer delivering the following: -

- Regular on-line meetings for business representatives (over 100 businesses reached)
- Business advice seminars delivered with partners on specific themes –
 - Legal
 - Finance
 - Marketing
 - Human resources
 - Health and wellbeing
 - Social media
- Regular Tourism Update newsletters providing information to 230 businesses
- Bespoke promotion of business as they re-opened which engaged (involving over 250 social media posts)
- Taking calls for advice from over 100 business representatives

2.3 Implications for mainstream marketing and promotional activity

The crisis has necessitated a significant change in the way we work, and this situation continues to evolve.

In summary

- Many events, including tourism promotional activities out of the area, were cancelled
- A much larger amount of time has been devoted to providing advice and assistance to business owners
- A much greater emphasis has been placed on electronic communication and promotion

2.4 Resources to support tourism

A lot of what the Council does has a direct or indirect impact on tourism, although we have one Tourism and Events Officer, the Council also provides the Tourist Information Centre in the Platform Gallery. Plus, the parks and open spaces including removal of litter/fly tips, planning approvals for new tourism ventures and latterly covid related grants all help to ensure the Borough is an attractive place for people to visit. There has been an absence this year of students on placement, which have previously provided valuable assistance to the Council's tourism work, working with officers on a variety of projects.

2.5 Visitor Guide

At the present time it is not possible to produce a printed guide in the usual format or timeframe. Your officers are also particularly mindful of the very challenging time that many businesses are experiencing, so the guide is being produced initially as an on-line resource, incorporating last year's advertisers within advertorial features rather than as advertising. This document will in turn will be produced in hard copy format once we approach the true end of lockdown, as at this point, the state of the local tourism market will be clearer. The print run will be much reduced as national distribution is one of the longer-term casualties of this crisis and it is anticipated costs will be contained within existing budget.

2.6 Websites

The anticipated updating the main visitor website www.visitribblevalley.co.uk cannot proceed as the Council has not yet met the accessibility standards for its main Council corporate site, which thus remains the priority. The content of www.visitribblevalley.co.uk will still be updated to a certain degree, but no major improvements are possible.

2.7 Social media

The various social media channels have continued throughout the pandemic, albeit at a reduced content level, it is anticipated that traffic levels will be restored as and when restrictions to the different parts of tourism industry are lifted.

3 ISSUES

- 3.1 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. It is significant the Local Government Association used Ribble Valley as a case study.
- 3.2 There is currently a national review of Destination Management Organisations which, for our County, is Marketing Lancashire. The Council contributes £5k p.a. to this body, for which we are included in their County wide marketing initiatives. It is difficult to assess accurately the impact of our contribution in terms of visitor numbers and the national review will undoubtedly lead to some changes which will be reported to members as they emerge.
- 3.3 A few businesses in the Borough have ceased to trade, e.g. Seafood Pub Company and it is too early to assess the full impact of the pandemic on the viability of others in the sector. However, at the same time new businesses are being established, indicating that there is optimism in the sector. No doubt boosted by the prospect of an increased level of domestic tourism in the short to medium term.

4 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

5 **CONCLUSION**

The progress of the Response and Recovery Plan has been steady – as is appropriate – so far, and has maintained strategic momentum within the Ribble Valley tourism sector. The Recovery element of the Plan will be critical in the coming weeks as visitors return to our area.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS None

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