

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Tourism and Promoting Chorley

Wednesday, 9 November 2011

Present: Councillor Peter Wilson (Chair) and Marie Gray, Steve Holgate, Paul Leadbetter, Marion Lowe, June Molyneaux and Mark Perks

Also in attendance: Chris Sinnott (Head of Policy and Communications), Andy Brown (Parks and Open Spaces Manager), Conrad Heald (Town Centre and Markets Manager), Teri Jones (Communications Manager) and Dianne Scambler (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

07.CCS.11 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absences were received from Councillors Matthew Crow and Geoffrey Russell.

07.CCS.12 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of any interests.

07.CCS.13 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – Tourism and Promoting Chorley meeting held on 12 October 2011 be held as a correct record for signing by the Chair.

07.CCS.14 KEY INTERNAL ASSETS AND EVENTS

The Committee received information from officers of the Council on their areas of responsibility for key internal assets and events. Members asked questions and following discussions suggested improvements that are summarised as follows:

(a) Andy Brown - Parks and Open Spaces Manager

The Parks and Open Spaces Manager explained that his main areas of responsibilities around tourism were the Astley Hall, Park and Coach House complex and Yarrow Valley Park, at Birkacre, Chorley.

Astley Park Complex

Since the re-opening of the refurbished Coach House and Walled Garden this area of Astley Park has become a popular visitor attraction for local people. Astley Hall and Coach House also acts as a tourist attraction and is well visited by people outside the area. The Hall and Coach House Gallery is generally open two days per week, April to December and typically welcomes around 13,000 visitors a year.

Café Ambio is the onsite café operating 7 days a week all year round, serving a wide range of hot and cold produce, the majority made using local ingredients (many seasoned by herbs from the walled gardens).

Since the refurbishment there has been an increase in the number of visitors who reside in the outlying villages of Chorley. Although they may not be tourists in the

traditional sense, they are people who previously were not regularly visiting or being involved in central Chorley activities.

The main draw for the more traditional tourist, i.e. somebody who resides outside of the Borough, is largely Astley Hall and certain cultural events. The Hall itself gets visitors from across the North West, some from other parts of the County and around 200 people per year from overseas. Largely, our overseas visitors are people with family or past connections in the area. The same can also be generally said from those visiting from other counties in the country, largely they are visiting friends and family in the area and are brought to the Hall for a day trip.

The Hall does attract a good number of visitors from other areas of the North West who come to the area to specifically visit the Hall. It is largely people who have an interest in historic houses, who will research first and then plan their visit. The Hall is featured within Simon Jenkins' 'England's 1000 Best Homes where he opens with "Astley Hall is the most exhilarating in Lancashire", it is also great publicity for the Council amongst this particular group of people. Simon Jenkins is the current Chairman of the National Trust, so his recommendation carries particular credibility.

Apart from coverage in some books and guides such as the one already mentioned and promotional activities associated with certain events at the site, the Council does very little in the way of marketing to visitors from outside the Borough.

There had been some recent successes in jointly marketing the coach trips to visit both the Market and the hall as part of a combined day trip. The team are also in the early stages of collating an emailing list from visitors to the Hall in order to promote things better in the future.

The majority of the 25 private guided tours that are run each year when the Hall is closed to the public, are to groups from outside the Borough. The Hall also welcomes around 30 schools per year, who come from across the Chorley borough and Lancashire.

Events such as the Big Drum Day, Nutcrack Night and Derian House's Winter Sparkle also attract a significant number of visitors from outside the area. The Council is also looking to develop its events programme to increase the number of quality events that are staged or hosted.

Car parking for events within the Astley complex is an on-going issue which needs further resources investing in it but there is still scope to develop this side of the attraction of the Park.

Members asked if more could be done to improve on the existing car parking provision.

The art exhibition programme is a fine balance between providing a space for local artists to exhibit and also producing a programme of quality and interest that attracts people to want to visit. The Council stages around 10 exhibitions each year, aiming to concentrate on the best of artistic talent in Chorley and the surrounding areas. The addition of The Coach House Gallery has enabled us to double our capacity in this area and the perfect setting of the gallery has made it a well sought after space for artists from around the North West.

The Hall is also fully licensed to hold small Weddings and other such events like Baby naming ceremonies and the can also be hired out for meetings, small conferences and evening events.

There has been very little in the way of visitor monitoring at the Hall and Coach House over the past few years. Visitor numbers are counted but any information about where

people have travelled from, their ages or backgrounds or how often they visit is purely taken from our visitor books and anecdotal feedback from the front of house team. The Hall plans to increase the monitoring of visitors on site to have some basis and evidence to plan promotional activities in the future.

Councillor Lowe commented that the Friends of Astley Hall had done some research of their own at various events and had discovered that a large number of visitors lived outside the Borough. They wondered if more could be done to capture the visitors contact details, so that information on up and coming events could be mailed out to people that have attended other such events in the past. Perhaps the Council could work together with other event organisers to share and access any information on visitor details.

There is a marketing budget but a 'steer' is needed on the priorities for the Hall and Coach House in the coming years to balance the need for an attraction for local people that is also geared up to attract tourists from outside the area.

Yarrow Valley Park

2011/12 saw a significant increase in visitor numbers in July/August/September 2011 alone there was a 61% increase or an extra 27, 418 visitors. This coincided with the opening of the new natural play facility, Yarrow Rocks.

This facility was brought together by contributions from several partners and is widely regarded to be the finest example of natural play in the region.

These figures are based on the car park counts for the Birkacre Car Park, so therefore excludes visitors on foot and via public transport and those using alternative car parks at Euxton, Dob Brow and Duxbury.

The park covers 300 hectares/700 acres – extending from Euxton Car Park at Tesco to Duxbury Woods including the Birkacre area.

The last visitor survey in 2009 revealed that 26% of visitors came from outside the borough of Chorley, generally in our neighbouring boroughs of South Ribble, Bolton and Wigan.

The site has significant heritage value of national importance, particularly around industrial heritage, links to the industrial revolution and Richard Arkwright. Duxbury Woods and the Duxbury estate has well documented links to Miles Standish and the Pilgrim Fathers.

Yarrow Valley has significant ecological value and interest. The most important feature is the presence of large areas of mature ancient woodland which makes up more than a third of the park (130 ha) and Biological Heritage sites make up 60% of the park (180 ha). The park is also home to a number of rare/nationally scarce plants and animals.

Yarrow Valley has held the Green Flag award for the past 7 years and always receives outstanding feedback from judges. It has been awarded the special innovation award for two projects in succession and has accredited "Country Parks status" from Natural England which is valid for 3 years.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the Council be asked to explore further options to increase car parking provision at Astley Park.**

2. That the Council work in partnership with other event organisers at Astley Hall to effectively collate future contact details of any visitors to the park.
3. That a marketing strategy be devised for promoting the Astley Hall complex and associated events.

(b) Conrad Heald - Town Centre and Markets Manager

The Town Centre and Markets Manager, Conrad Heald explained that his main areas or responsibilities were the Town Centre, the markets and the Chorley Heritage Trail.

Chorley is still considered famous for its markets and have two main areas which make up Chorley Markets:

- The famous Flat Iron (sometimes known locally as the 'cattle market') held on Tuesday's; and
- Chorley Covered Market, with static lock up stalls as well as casual availability.

On the Flat Iron, the old fashioned stalls have been replaced with brand new gazebo's that have red and white striped tops with pelmets saying 'Welcome to Chorley Markets'. The Gazebo's were a recommendation of the Town Centre Vitality Inquiry and the take up by stall holders has been excellent, providing a much improved display and feel for shoppers.

Chorley also holds a monthly farmers market to bolster business for existing traders and hosts a wide variety of specialised markets, from continental to Christmas markets.

The Markets are advertised regularly in a number of publications such as:

- Bus and Coach
- Coach Touring
- Coach Tours, and
- Northern Life

The Tuesday Market attracts coach tours to the Town and the authority has an agreement with the Bus Station to allow for the parking of two coaches at a time.

Anecdotal feedback from traders gives an idea of where customers are visiting from and it would seem that the residents of St. Anne's consider Chorley as a destination to visit.

Events like the Christmas Lights Switch on attract people to the town and this year have been advertised on the roundabout near the Botany Bay complex. The town centre and its markets are also placed in good proximity to Astley Park.

Members discussed whether more could be done to advertise the markets by using the web and social networking sites like facebook and twitter. The markets does have its own page on the Chorley website but Members thought more could be done around linking this page to pages on other sites that shoppers may view and exploring the possibilities of Chorley coming up as a top hit when people were searching for markets information on web search engines such as google.

Advertising at the local train stations was also considered to be an effective way of attracting visitors and although this had proved to be costly in the past, Members felt it was worth revisiting this option to see if this could be achieved at a more competitive price.

The Heritage trail is a step-by-step guide around the town centre, highlighting significant historic monuments that can be seen around the town, it is just under one and a quarter miles and takes approximately one hour to complete. The trail is popular with walking groups and is advertised on the Council's website.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the Council looks into the feasibility of advertising at the local train stations.**
- 2. That the markets page on the Chorley website be linked to various other pages where shoppers are seeking information about different markets etc..**
- 3. That the Council looks into ensuring that Chorley comes up as a top hit in the Lancashire area as a market destination on the various search engines on the Web.**

(c) Louise Finch - Events and Marketing Manager

Chorley has two major events in the calendar.

- Chorley Smile picnic in the park
- Christmas Lights Switch on

The Chorley smile picnic in the park is an annual free summer event that attracts between 1,500 to 4,000 people depending on the weather. The event delivers a mixture of entertainment including street theatre, sports activities, cartoon characters and local performers.

The event gets positive feedback from attendee's who are mostly from within the Borough with some travelling from other parts of Lancashire or Wigan and results in an increase in visitors to Astley Hall.

The Christmas Lights switch on, is the annual town centre winter event that usually takes place at the end of November. It attracts between 1,000 – 2,000 people and is well received by the town centre traders, who also help to plan the event. The traders also arrange activities on the Saturdays in the run up to Christmas.

A survey conducted at the 2010 Christmas lights switch on showed that attendees:

- mostly came from communities surrounding the town centre
- don't spend large amounts in the town centre during the event
- mostly found out about the event through the local paper
- travelled in the car or walked to the event
- liked all aspects of the event

Members commented that these results were disappointing, particularly in view of the fact that people were attending the event but not spending money in the shops. The main reason for this was due to the shops not remaining open for the evening, so although there was support from the traders for the event they were not helping boost the economy of the town on this particular evening.

This year the range of Christmas lights had been extended and through an exchange scheme with Fylde Borough Council, would be erecting lights around the town that last year had been displayed around the town of St. Anne's. There were also plans to hold a night market this year, which was hoped would attract some shoppers to the event.

The Councils continued to encourage the schools and voluntary groups across the Borough to participate in the event and a greater emphasis had been given to these

projects, however Members commented that for schools to get involved more effectively they needed months to plan and asked if they could be approached as early as the start of the school year in September.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the traders be encouraged to remain open for business during the Christmas Light Switch on event.**
- 2. That schools across the Borough be contacted at the beginning of September.**

07.CCS.15 THE WAY FORWARD

It was agreed that at the next meeting, representatives from external organisations would be invited from:

- Camelot Theme Park/ Park Hall
- Chorley Little Theatre
- Lancashire County Council
- United Utilities:

Members would ask them what they do in this area, compare areas of best practice and find out how we could work together in the future. The representatives would be asked questions around the following areas:

- What they do now to promote tourism and events in Chorley
- What are their plans for the future
- How the Council could work with them in this area.

RESOLVED – That representatives from external organisations be invited to the next meeting of the Group.

Chair