

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Tourism and Promoting Chorley

Wednesday, 22 February 2012

Present: Councillor Peter Wilson (Chair) and Matthew Crow, Marie Gray, Steve Holgate, Paul Leadbetter, Marion Lowe, June Molyneaux and Geoffrey Russell

Officers: Chris Sinnott (Head of Policy and Communications) and Ruth Rimmington (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

Also in attendance: Chris Bryan (Astley Hall and Arts Officer), Ian Watson (Head of Cultural Services, Lancashire County Council), Neville Kidd (Rivington Manager, United Utilities) and Hazel Gregory (United Utilities)

12.TPC.22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Mark Perks.

12.TPC.23 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

Councillor Marion Lowe – Chairman of the Friends of Astley Hall.

12.TPC.24 QUESTIONS TO THE REPRESENTATIVES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the representatives who had been invited to attend as witnesses. These were Chris Bryan, Astley Hall and Arts Officer, Chorley Council, Ian Watson, Head of Cultural Services, Lancashire County Council, Neville Kidd, Catchment Manager, United Utilities and Hazel Gregory, United Utilities.

Discussion with Chris Bryan, Astley Hall and Arts Officer, Chorley Council

1. Do we currently gather any information about where visitors to the Hall and events in the walled garden travel from? If not, do you think it would be practical to do this?

We do not collect monitoring information on visitors to the Hall. Although, there is a visitors book and anecdotal evidence from staff which suggests visitors are mainly from Chorley. There have been visitors from USA/Australia in the past. Going forward monitoring information will be collected.

In relation to events in the Walled Garden the Big Drum Day event attracted 25% of visitors from outside the Borough and 25% came from outlying areas within the Borough. In total 2,000 people came which is excellent considering there isn't much advertising undertaken.

For the Shakespearean play one third of visitors came from outside Borough (for example Wigan and Bolton) and the rest were split equally from the urban core and parishes within the Borough.

2. Have you got any suggestions for how the Hall could be marketed to visitors from outside the borough?

There is a need to increase the quality of the visitor experience, the profile of the Hall and to increase publicity surrounding it. There is potential to develop links with Lancashire Life and to improve the content on the Council's website.

Visitors do give negative feedback on the website as they find it difficult to navigate and the content is not always in reader friendly format.

There are plans to revamp the website and to improve the experience of visiting the Hall up to the standard of other museums.

3. Are there any plans to use the Hall and coach house more extensively for weddings and conferences?

Last year there were 15 weddings. The weddings package is currently being redesigned as in the past we could only offer facilities for the ceremony itself. Now that the coach house and walled garden had been refurbished the whole event could be held within the Park. There was potential for customers to hold their reception in the Lancastrian in the future.

Up to this point there had not been a huge amount of promotion on the conference facilities, but this would be increased going forward.

4. What are the key limiting factors for hosting events in Astley Park?

The biggest issue is the car parking capacity. We have tried different parking strategies for the picnic in the park event but have not yet found an ideal solution.

The second biggest issue is finding good event co-ordinators.

5. Do we do work with accommodation providers in the surrounding area to encourage people staying in hotels to visit the hall and park?

Not at the present time, but we would welcome some literature and the opportunity to work with accommodation providers.

6. Does the Hall and surrounding area have a business plan used to secure visitors?

There isn't a business plan, but there is a forward plan. This is mainly for the purpose of retaining accredited museums status and includes the conservation of the Hall and an integrated events programme. It is not focussed on publicity.

Members asked Chris several supplementary questions.

Could more orchestra concerts be held?

If over 500 people attend there are parking issues. If events attract local people there are increased difficulties with parking, whereas it is easier to direct visitors who do not know the local area to town centre car parks.

Would it be possible for some of the artefacts that are held by the Hall to be displayed?

With the refurbishment of the Coach House we now have more room to display items. There is an exhibition entitled "Portrait of Astley" coming this year.

Could the field at the bottom of the Park be used to create a car park?

A variety of car parking facilities have been considered, but not the use of the field as of yet.

Could the Hall and Park have it's own website?

A section of the Council's website could be set aside specifically for the Hall and Coach House that could have its own look and feel. Something that befits a high quality tourist attraction.

Councillor Marion Lowe advised that assistance with car parking during events could be given by the Friends of Astley Hall.

Chris confirmed that it was possible to erect a marquee in the walled garden and that weddings could be held outside the season. Chris noted the ideas suggested to host a food festival and the creation of a DVD for publicity purposes.

The Chair thanked Chris for his attendance and input into the inquiry.

Discussion with Ian Watson, Head of Cultural Services, Lancashire County Council

1. What do you think the key asset is in the borough to encourage tourism (visitors from outside the borough)?

I have some statistics about visits within Lancashire gathered by the Tourist Board which shows the spread of visitors and what they want to do.

Eating out	38%
Shopping	34%
Illumination	31%
Walking	30% (town trails)
Visiting coastal	27%
Family attractions	22%
Friends & relatives	19%
Car touring	17%
Countryside walks	16%
Visiting	12%
Museums historic house garden	8%
Music events	8%
Other	?
Cycling	2%

The North West Development Agency did look into how to capitalise on the attractions within Blackpool and how to divert visitors to stop off at other areas around Blackpool. Additional information is available from the Arts Council.

We need to make the best of the assets we have in the County. The Tourist Board looked at heritage across Lancashire on the basis that if people are interested in one historic house they are interested in others.

Research has found that visitors tend to stay longer if there is a coffee shop, although most attractions in Lancashire do not retain a visitor for a full day, unlike Blenheim Palace for example.

Lancashire County Council (LCC) has set up a joint task group, consisting of 6 Lancashire County Councillors from Preston, Lancaster, Blackpool and Blackburn Councils.

Previous arts was funded locally and it was unclear where the split of responsibilities lay but Lancashire County Council will be taking a strategic approach. There is a pot of £500,000 funding and LCC are reviewing where the money is spent. The focus going forward will be niche marketing.

The aim was to increase visitors and the amount of cash they spend when they come. If visitors stay overnight they will visit more things. A single borough might consider joining forces if they have not got enough to attract visitors for a 2 night stay.

The Tourist Board have lots of data if the Task Group would like any more information, although now the Tourist Board has been dissolved the focus from LCC will be on marketing Lancashire as a whole. This fits in with the Lancashire Enterprise Board and it's aim of raising the profile and visibility of Lancashire.

2. Is there anything that the Council is doing at the moment that you think hinders tourism?

There is nothing adverse that the Council is doing and Chorley does not have an image problem, it's more about reinforcing the image. Some places have a reputation

and identity. Chorley is somewhere visitors would go for a day rather than overnight stay in my opinion.

3. How could we better work together to encourage tourism in Chorley?

The use of brown signposts within Lancashire could be improved and Chorley is fortunate to be situated just off the M6. There are lots of potential visitors to be won.

County Councillor Jim Laurenson has set up a task group to investigate this and has spent time considering brown signs with the highways department at LCC and Highway Agency on this. LCC highways are being more relaxed on this issue than in previous times. Chorley has good provision in relation to brown signs.

Chorley has a range of attractions, like Botany Bay and Astley Hall. Variety is a good thing when it comes to attracting tourists.

Consideration has been given to producing one publicity booklet with all attractions with it or producing a number of themed booklets, but there is no one solution. Potential themes were walking, historic houses etc. A heritage trail for Lancashire has been considered, to publicise the 400 year anniversary of the Pendle Witch Trials.

Annual festivals, such as music festivals have been considered, but the weather would be a concern and the right kind venue would be needed. There is potential to review the funding currently received by theatres and fund festivals instead.

Ian confirmed that the information gathered by the Tourist Board incorporated questionnaires and telephone interviews from across Lancashire, but not Bolton or Wigan.

Members queried how use of the canal could be maximised and Ian advised that he had met with British Waterways the previous day. They are becoming a trust later in the year and would retain responsibility for boats using the canals and tow paths.

Members noted the signage needed to be focussed on pedestrians and cyclists as well as cars. There is a need for signage when visitors arrive at their destination, not just on the route in.

Attempts are made to get repeat visitors, by providing a good arrival experience, toilet facilities, well positioned and appropriate street furniture and information finger boards on poles etc.

There is a need to be sensible about targeting visitors, to realise the strengths of the district and capitalise on these. Chorley may be a secondary location for a day trip or weekend away i.e. the first being Blackpool.

There is a niche for certain activities, e.g. cycling or adrenaline sports. Lancaster has heritage to offer.

4. What is the role of Lancashire County Council in providing tourism information in the local library?

There are three tiers of information given at a Tourist Information Centre (TIC) – information, advice and guidance. Libraries could provide information, but staff do not currently have the background knowledge to give advice. Libraries also hold information on bus routes.

It is possible and likely that the role of the libraries will be increased to include the TIC. LCC are not planning to close any further libraries or reduce opening hours. If this change is implemented it will be at the top tier of information (guidance). There are some practical differences in the role of library assistant and tourist information

assistant, it is a difficult one, but the visitor economy is becoming more important. This wouldn't be at all 74 libraries, just the main ones.

The Chair thanked Ian for his attendance and input into the inquiry.

Discussion with Neville Kidd, West Catchment Manager, United Utilities and Hazel Gregory, Co-ordinating Ranger, United Utilities

Neville gave some background to the involvement of United Utilities in Rivington and advised they were, in the first instance, a water company. They were also an extensive land owner (around 142,000 acres).

1. What links do you have with other local authorities?

We have a long standing working relationship with Rivington and Brinscall Local Advisory Group and the WPM in general. This includes Chorley Council but also all other local authorities involved in this area.

2. Do you have any ways of working with these Councils that we could benefit from?

Each area has its own LAG, the Rivington and Brinscall group covers this area. We have a good relationship with Ian Heywood, Senior Planner (Conservation) here at the Council although our relationship with other groups could be described as strained.

3. Do you have strategy in place to encourage visitors/the use of the Rivington area? If so, what are the main objectives?

There is no strategy as Rivington is at capacity for the number of visitors it receives. We don't advertise at all.

As there is no charge for car parking no income is generated from the visitors by United Utilities, yet the visitors use the toilets, footpaths and bridleways which need to be maintained. There are plans to replace the top road to the Barn which will cost United Utilities £100,000. We also spend around £90,000 a year on clearing up litter, including fly tipping.

4. What do you think the key attributes of the Rivington area are that attracts visitors?

It is beautiful countryside and doesn't cost anything to visit.

5. Is there anything that the Council is doing at the moment that you think hinders tourism?

There is a lack of public transport as the buses don't run any more. They used to run on a Sunday and Bank Holidays. We do get a lot of visitors from Horwich as well as Chorley and surrounding towns.

6. Is there anything that the Council could do to help encourage more tourists to visit your attraction?

We have enough visitors! It is a honeypot site. There is a need to improve the car parking facilities.

Members asked Neville and Hazel a supplementary question. Are there facilities for sailing?

Yes, there are facilities for sailing. United Utilities are paid a small rent from Lancashire County Council for use of Lower Rivington Reservoir and the Anderton Centre. Activities are organised through clubs as United Utilities do not have the staff to facilitate activities.

Members noted several points:

- Rivington did not necessarily attract high spending visitors, but there was a wish to divert them to Chorley before or after their visit to Rivington.
- The facilities at Go Ape did attract high spending visitors.
- There had been high expectations of the impact of the Commonwealth Games, but these had not materialised.
- The Bowling Club and Chapel are privately run cafes.
- The area was quiet during the week with traffic congestion and parking issues.

Members noted that Rivington was a wonderful asset to the Borough.

Neville requested that it would be extremely helpful if the Council could provide assistance at busy events, such as on Good Friday particularly as the Council owns the Pike. For example, litter picking / ranger / staff help, on Good Friday possible supply of skips and or litter pick on Saturday before the fell race commences or supply / contribution to porta loos that are hired in for the weekend.

The Chair thanked Neville and Hazel for their attendance and input into the inquiry.

Chair