

Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group – Tourism and Promoting Chorley

March 2012



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1. PREFACE

The Scrutiny inquiry into Tourism and Promoting Chorley was requested by Members of Chorley Council.

We collected evidence from a number of different sources including interviewing internal officers about Chorley Council's assets and events which contribute to the promotion of tourism within Chorley. We also spoke to representatives from external organisations to find out what they do in this area, to compare areas of best practice and find out how we could best work together in the future.

We also revisited the findings and recommendations of the Town Centre Vitality Scrutiny Review, particularly in relation to attracting more visitors to the town centre and its markets, to evaluate the progress made and to ascertain if there was anything that could be further improved on

The Group set out to identify Chorley's main assets for tourism around the Borough and the key events in the calendar that might attract people to visit Chorley. We sought to look at the opportunities, including partnership working that may exist to maximise the promotion of Chorley and encourage more visitors to its town centre and surrounding villages in the best possible way.

I would like to thank the Task Group Members for their deliberations, the Officers and external representatives who made a contribution to this report.



Councillor Peter Wilson
(Chair)

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee asked the Task Group to undertake a scrutiny inquiry to look at Tourism and Promoting Chorley.

Objectives

To further develop Chorley as a tourist destination by promoting the Borough's key assets and events and identifying other opportunities for making the Borough more attractive to outside visitors.

Desired Outcomes

A corporate directive for promoting Tourism in Chorley.

Task Group Membership

Councillor Peter Wilson (Chair)
Councillor Matthew Crow
Councillor Marie Gray
Councillor Steve Holgate
Councillor Paul Leadbetter
Councillor Marion Lowe
Councillor June Molyneaux
Councillor Mark Perks
Councillor Geoffrey Russell

Officer Support:

Lead Officer

Chris Sinnott Head of Policy and Communications

Democratic Services

Dianne Scambler Democratic and Member Services Officer

Meetings

The meeting papers of the Group can be found on the Council's website:

www.chorley.gov.uk/scrutiny. This includes the inquiry project outline and other relevant information on policy and procedures.

Contribution of Evidence

The Task Group would like to thank all those who have provided evidence and contributed to the Inquiry, including:

Sandra Demsey – Camelot Theme Park
Andy Brown – Parks and Open Spaces Manager, Chorley Council
Chris Bryan – Astley Hall and Arts Officer, Chorley Council
Louise Finch – Events and Marketing Manager, Chorley Council
Conrad Heald – Town Centre and Markets Manager, Chorley Council
Ian Robinson – Chorley Little Theatre
Marianne Howell - Cultural Services, Lancashire County Council
Diane Scarborough, Cultural Services, Lancashire County Council
Ian Watson – Head of Cultural Services, Lancashire County Council
Jeanette Marshall – Park Hall
Hazel Gregory – Co-ordinating Ranger, United Utilities
Neville Kidd – Rivington Manager, United Utilities

Recommendations

The Executive Cabinet is asked to consider the following recommendations:

Town Centre/Markets:

- That the Council look into the feasibility of advertising at the local train stations.
- That the Markets page on the Chorley website be linked to various other pages, where shoppers are seeking information about different types of markets.
- 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.

Astley Hall:

- That the Council be asked to examine the potential to improve car parking facilities for the park to encourage larger events, this to include working in partnership with Lancashire College/Woodlands regarding the use of their car parks as an overflow facility for Astley Park, on major events. In addition, to developing a traffic management plan for major events in the park.
- That the Council develop and monitor visitor demographics to Astley Hall and Park.
- That a development plan be devised for the Hall, complex and park to encourage the use of the park and increase visitor numbers.
- That the opening hours of Astley Hall be more flexible to be able to respond to seasonal changes in the weather.
- To improve the presence on the councils website with a distinct feel to promote the Hall, park and other attractions.
- Develop marketing materials for the Hall and complex to promote weddings, conferences and other events.
- To exchange our promotional leaflets with other authorities, to better advertise our key attractions in like for like venues.

Promotional:

- Examine options for better marketing attractions in the borough on the internet, for example through the Councils website.
- Review existing literature that promotes the borough and ensures that local attractions and accommodation have easy access to it so they can encourage visitors to stay in the area.
- To consider the provision of additional signage relating specifically to tourism across the borough.

- To exchange our promotional leaflets with other authorities, to better advertise our key attractions in like for like venues.
- That Chorley Council does more to promote itself at Rivington Barn and surrounding amenities, eg, distribution of the Chorley Smile magazine.
- That Chorley Council consider becoming a member of the Tourist Board under the new arrangements, in line with other district Councils.

Partnership Working:

- That the Council investigate the possibility of providing Council support to United Utilities following Good Friday to tidy around the Rivington Pike area.
- Work with partners to improve public transport links to the Rivington area to ease traffic problems.
- That the traders be encouraged to remain open for business during the Christmas Light Switch on event.
- That the schools across the Borough be contacted before the summer break to allow them to be more involved in the Christmas Lights Switch on event.
- That Chorley Council consider working with partners like United Utilities to encourage the use of the locality for one off events.

3. METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Evidence

The Group received and considered several reports and documents, these included:

1. The Final Report of the Town Centre Vitality Review.
2. The Executive Cabinet's response to the suggested recommendations of the Town Centre Vitality Task Group.
3. The latest monitoring report providing an update on the implementation of agreed actions by the Executive Cabinet to the recommendations of the Town Centre Vitality Task Group.
4. List of key tourism assets and events in Chorley.
5. Comparative statistics between Chorley and other districts in Lancashire available on the Visit England website.

Received presentations on

1. Astley Hall, Park and Coach House Complex and Yarrow Valley Park
2. Chorley Town Centre and its markets
3. Chorley's major calendar events.

Witnesses

The Task Group interviewed:

Sandra Dempsey - Camelot
Andy Brown - Chorley Council.
Chris Bryan - Chorley Council.
Conrad Heald - Chorley Council
Ian Robinson - Chorley Little Theatre
Marianne Howell - Lancashire County Council
Diane Scarborough - Lancashire County Council
Ian Watson - Lancashire County Council
Jeannette Marshall - Park Hall
Neville Kidd - United Utilities
Hazel Gregory - United Utilities

4. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4a) INTERNAL ASSETS AND EVENTS



Chorley Markets

Our thriving markets are a key part of the town's heritage, serving the people for more than 500 years and today the markets still continue to add a lot to the appeal of the town. There are two main areas which make up Chorley Markets:

- The famous Flat Iron (sometimes known locally as the cattle market) held on Tuesdays; 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 had been 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. All the markets are advertised regularly in a number of publications and the Tuesday Market attracts coach tours to the Town.

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 Light Switch on also attract people to the town and this year had 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.

The Group looked into 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 that 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 are 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 on the past, the Group felt, it was worth revisiting this option to see if this could be achieved at a more competitive price.

Recommendations:

- **That the Council look into the feasibility of advertising at the local train stations.**
- **That the Markets page on the Chorley website be linked to various other pages, where shoppers are seeking information about different markets.**
- **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.**

Chorley Council Events

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 the 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 Light 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 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 event showed that attendee's:

- 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.

The Group felt that these results were disappointing, particularly in view of the fact that people were attending the event but not spending any money in the shops. The main reason for this was due to the shops not remaining open, during the event. So, although there was support from the traders for the event they are not helping to 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, lights had been erected around the town that had last year been displayed around the town of St Anne's. A night market was also held, to attract some shoppers to the event.

The Council continued to encourage the schools and voluntary groups across the Borough to participate in the event and a greater emphasis had been given to those projects. The Group commented that for schools to get involved more effectively they needed more time to plan and asked if they could be approached as early as the start of the new school year in September.

Recommendations:

- **That the traders be encouraged to remain open for business during the Christmas Light Switch-on event.**
- **That the schools across the Borough be contacted before the summer break to allow them to be more involved in the Christmas Lights Switch on event.**

Astley Hall and Park



The ‘Jewel in Chorley’s Crown’, Astley Hall is one of the most historical buildings in the North West of England. The magnificent 400 year old stately home is notable for its astonishing mid-17th century interior. Astley Hall provides a fascinating history of the families who lived there and is consistently rumoured to be haunted. It is also believed that Oliver Cromwell stayed at the Hall during the Battle of Preston in the 1600s. Astley Hall is located just minutes away from the town centre and is set in the beautiful grounds of Astley Park.

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 food the majority made using local produce (many seasoned by herbs from the walled garden).

Since the refurbishment there has been an increase in the number of visitors who reside in the outlying areas 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, ie. somebody who resides outside the Borough, is largely Astley Hall and some cultural events. The Hall itself gets visitors from across the North West, some from other parts of the County and around 200 people a 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 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 with in 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 creditability.

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

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. The Group felt that there was an opportunity here to exchange our promotional literature with other authorities. Research found that visitors tend to stay longer if there is a coffee shop, although most attractions in Lancashire do not retain the visitor for the whole day.

Lancashire County Council have also considered the production of one publicity booklet to advertise all the various attractions across Lancashire, or a number of theme booklets, for example, walking, and historic houses.

There have been some recent successes in jointly marketing the coach trips to visit both the Markets and the Hall as part of a combined day trip. The team are also in the early stages of collating an email list from visitors to the Hall in order to promote things better in the future. Although there is a forward plan, there is currently no business plan for the Hall.

Now that the coach house and walled garden have been refurbished, there is now the potential to cater more for weddings as the whole event can be held within the Park. There is also the potential for customers to hold their reception in the Lancastrian Room at the Town Hall. The Council's wedding package is currently being redesigned to better promote the facilities that are now available.

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, which 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.

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 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.

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 way of marketing to outside visitors from outside the Borough.

Car parking for events within the Astley complex is an on-going issue which needs further investment but there is scope to develop this side of the facilities of the park.

Recommendations:

- **That the Council be asked to examine the potential to improve car parking facilities for the park to encourage larger events, this to include working in partnership with Lancashire College/Woodlands regarding the use of their car parks as an overflow facility for Astley Park, on major events. In addition, to developing a traffic management plan for major events in the park.**
- **That the Council develop and monitor visitor demographics to Astley Hall and Park.**
- **That a development plan be devised for the Hall, complex and park to encourage the use of the park and increase visitor numbers.**
- **That the opening hours of Astley Hall be more flexible to be able to respond to seasonal changes in the weather.**

- **To improve the presence on the councils website with a distinct feel to promote the Hall, park and other attractions.**
- **Develop marketing materials for the Hall and complex to promote weddings, conferences and other events.**
- **To exchange our promotional leaflets with other authorities, to better advertise our key attractions in like for like venues.**

Yarrow Valley Park

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

2011/12 has seen a significant increase in visitor numbers which 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.

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

Yarrow Valley has held the Green Flag award for the past 7 years and always receives outstanding feedback from the judges and has accredited "Country Parks status" from Natural England which is valid for 3 years.

4b) EXTERNAL ASSETS AND EVENTS

Camelot Theme Park/ Park Hall Hotel

Camelot Theme Park is located on a 140-acre site near the village of Charnock Richard, 3 miles west of Chorley and set within the grounds of the Park Hall Hotel complex. The hotel offers visitors to the park the chance to stay overnight to make the most of their experience. The park is home to medieval shows, birds of prey and many rides, taking a target audience of families and younger children; the park also boasts numerous thrill rides and a rollercoaster.

Visitor numbers for 2011 were around 225,000, which had been down on the previous year, this was mainly down to a poor summer and there had been a trend for a decline in visitor numbers over the years.

Camelot have no plans to change the offer, as such to their target market as it has spent many years establishing itself as a 'family attraction'. They do not presently

promote any other places of interest within the borough, although they do work closely with Park Hall Hotel to offer the overall stay package, including the attraction Battlefield Live who are based at the same site.

Camelot had detailed records of where visitors come from by postcode, with their prime catchment area being an hour to an hour and half drive time away.

In previous years when Chorley Council had a designated Tourism Department, they had worked closely together to promote Camelot and Chorley whether this was in guides, at exhibitions or joint promotions. Camelot also felt that a more prominent presence on the Chorley website would be helpful as they had struggled recently to get any presence.

Along with Camelot Theme Park, the Hotel does promote other attractions available in the North West areas, although admittedly not many are Chorley based. The company felt that a better working relationship could be maintained between the local hoteliers and Chorley Council if better links were provided on their website.

Chorley Little Theatre



Originally opened as Chorley' first electric cinema in 1910, Chorley Little Theatre has become a thriving arts venue in the centre of the town. Since 1960 it has been owned and operated by the amateur dramatics group CADOS, who have been putting on high-quality productions for over 75 years.

The theatre has recently undergone major restoration work that has seen a £150,000 face lift.

The majority of people that attend the performances at the theatre are largely from across the Lancashire area, although they do have visitors from as far as Wales.

The theatre has been recently successful in attracting a number of well known touring comedians, this has helped to put the theatre on the map and people are now coming from further afield for these shows. The theatre sends out information about up and coming shows and events to previous customers via email.

Another success has been the showing of 'An Inspector Calls'. This has been on the school GCSE syllabus and the show has generated a large number of school based coach trips. It is not always possible to run this type of show, due to a number of different factors, but the theatre are considering showing Romeo and Juliet next season.

The theatre have tried to negotiate a deal with the local restaurants, whereby they will offer a nominated discount if the theatre recommended them. People often ask for this kind of information when attending one of the theatres performances, however after many efforts on behalf of the theatre, the take-up from the restaurants has been poor.

They also commented that they thought that the Councils website tourism content was poor and that more could be done to promote the town assets around the town, particularly around the use of the community noticeboards.

Botany Bay

Botany Bay is a unique mix of retail and heritage, just off junction 8 of the M61. Botany Bay is the sister mill to Bygone Times: a renovated and restored cotton mill, harking back to the Crimean War. Today, it offers five floors of independent retail outlets, complete with a garden centre, various restaurants and a coffee bar. For the kids who don't find shopping as entertaining as their parents, there's Puddletown Pirates, a large indoor play centre. If you're in the mood for a party, you can hire a barge from Boatel Party Cruises and take a trip down the canal.

The Waterways

The Leeds-Liverpool Canal runs through the heart of the borough and once upon a time was the lifeblood of the industrial revolution — carrying supplies to and from the mills. Today it is transformed. Rich in wildlife, the canal has some lovely tow paths to explore. A popular destination during the summer months is the Johnson's Hillock Locks. It is a series of seven consecutive locks and watching the narrow boats negotiating them all is an impressive event. The Leeds-Liverpool is the longest canal in the country and is linked to 2,000 miles of inland waterways. The recently opened Ribble Link joins the Leeds-Liverpool to the Lancaster Canal.

Rivington County Park

Rivington Country Park is easily accessible for all residents and visitors to the North West region and is approximately 4 miles from junction 6 of the M61. Rivington is steeped in history and has many areas of interest including Rivington Terraced Gardens,

Liverpool Castle and Rivington Pike. There are many footpaths and bridleways enabling a variety of recreational pursuits from easy family walks, gentle bike rides through to rambling on the moors and the recently established Go Ape course. The Park also has toilets, café and parking facilities.

As Rivington is extremely popular with visitors, the area cannot cope with the vehicular traffic that already visits. As a result, United Utilities who are responsible for the Park do not actively promote the area to attract additional visitors. Information is available on their website on all of their sites, including Rivington and they are in the process of updating the information available at Rivington, both in terms of onsite interpretation and on the website.

Public transport is poor and it was felt that the provision of a regular bus service to the area would vastly improve access for those without their own transport and help reduce the number of cars in the area.

United Utilities works closely with all the Local Authorities within the West Pennine Moors Partnership, including Chorley. They provide reports and attend the various Local Advisory Group meetings. United Utilities reported that they worked extremely close with the Council's Conservation Officer at Chorley and the Neighbourhoods Team, to deal with any lost dogs, dog fouling and fly tipping issues.

The Public Rights of Way in the area are the responsibility of the Council to maintain and more work on these would improve the visitor experience and make it safer for visitors. Rivington Pike is also owned by Chorley Council and this is visited by thousands of people on Good Friday every year, yet it was noted that there are no staff from the Council present on the day to assist with the clean up that is involved on the Saturday.

Recommendations:

- **Examine options for better marketing attractions in the borough on the internet, for example through the Councils website.**
- **Review existing literature that promotes the borough and ensures that local attractions and accommodation have easy access to it so they can encourage visitors to stay in the area.**
- **That the Council investigate the possibility of providing Council support to United Utilities following Good Friday to tidy around the Rivington Pike area.**
- **Work with partners to improve public transport links to the Rivington area to ease traffic problems.**
- **That Chorley Council does more to promote itself at Rivington Barn and surrounding amenities, eg, distribution of the Chorley Smile magazine.**
- **That Chorley Council consider working with partners like United Utilities to encourage the use of the locality for one off events.**

4c) LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

The Tourism Boards hold a lot of data that can be provided upon request to Lancashire County Council. Although the various Boards have now been dissolved the focus will be on marketing Lancashire as a whole. This fits in with the Lancashire Enterprise Board and its aim of raising the profile and visibility of Lancashire.

Chorley is fortunate to be situated just south of the M6 motorway with the use of the brown signposts, of which Chorley has a good provision. There are lots of potential visitors to be won and it was recognised that extra signage could benefit visitors upon their arrival at their destination and needed to be more widely targeted to include pedestrians and cyclists.

There are three tiers of information given at a Tourism Information Centre (TIC), information, advice and guidance. Lancashire County Council is planning to move Chorley's Tourism Information Centre into the local town library. The staff would need to receive training as the role of the library assistant differs from that of the tourist information assistant, but as the visitor economy is becoming more important this is necessary to ensure good service provision.

Recommendations:

- **To consider the provision of additional signage relating specifically to tourism across the borough.**
- **That Chorley Council consider becoming a member of the Tourist Board under the new arrangements, in line with other district Councils.**

5. CONCLUSION

Chorley has a good range of attractions that provides the variety needed to attract tourists. However, there is a need to be sensible about targeting these visitors, to realise our strengths and capitalise on them effectively. Chorley is more likely to be a secondary location for a day trip or a weekend away.

Chorley has the potential to lend itself to niche activities, like cycling or adrenaline sports and this is something that the Council may wish to consider exploring.

By improving on the content and providing better links, It is anticipated that the current redevelopment of the Councils website will help to improve our relationships with external providers and organisations that have a key stake in tourism within the Borough and help us to build on and create new partnerships to better work together to promote Chorley.

Chorley Council



2008-2009
*Transforming Services:
Citizen Engagement
and Empowerment*



2009-2010
Cohesive and resilient communities



2009-2010
Better outcomes for people and places