

MINUTES OF THE TOWN PROMOTION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 28TH OCTOBER, 2014

Present: Councillor E Bell (Chair) and
Councillors B Allen, Mrs B E Allen, R Arthur,
Mrs J A Bell, Mrs G Bleasdale, B Burn Snr,
Mrs H Cahill, S Cudlip, Mrs S Forster,
Miss S Morrison, N R Page, I Paul, K Shaw,
C Snowball, K Younger

Apologies: Councillor B Burn Jnr

1. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Members were reminded prior to the start of the meeting of the need to disclose any interests, prejudicial or personal, in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

2. PRESENTATION

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Ms Melanie Sensicle the Chief Executive of Visit County Durham who was in attendance to address Members on the continuing work of the organisation.

Ms Sensicle introduced herself and thanked Members for the opportunity to attend this evening's meeting. She advised that Visit County Durham is a public/private partnership limited by guarantee and it is a Destination Management Organisation (previously known as Tourist Boards). Visit County Durham has a Board of Directors made up mainly of private sector operators from the tourism industry and there are also 2 public sector members from the County Council. There are 21 Board members in total in addition to Project Staff. The main aim of Visit County Durham is tourism development (product and people); destination marketing county wide for consumers, visitors and industry and delivering information and services to visitors. The remit of the organisation is strategic leadership and co-ordination of tourism within the County and additionally marketing the County to other audiences, i.e. nationally and internationally to inward investors. Core funding is obtained from Durham County Council however they also have other sources of funding from their own activities. The budget from the County Council is £800k per year and their turnover is between £1m and 1.2m each year.

Visit County Durham works at a national level to the Government's tourism policy which was issued in 2011. Out of that has come a strategic framework for tourism in England which has a set of action plans which they have adhere to. The Town Council would have been consulted upon the Tourism Management Plan for County Durham probably two years ago. This long term plan takes us up to 2020 to grow the economy of the County which enables Visit County Durham to lever funding in from external agencies.

There are eight priorities in this plan; these are:

- To make Durham City a viable 48 hour stay. The average length of stay in Durham City is just 2 hours at present.
- To increase the 'spend' of visitors – we do this by focussing on quality of the product and that we offer.
- Trying to make Durham stand out from the crowd using the brand This is Durham to highlight all the attractions such as Beamish, World Heritage Site, Seaham – our only coastal town.
- It's important to extend the season and we try to attract people into the area outside of the main seasons by using events.
- Giving Durham a national profile through marketing.
- Extending the stay of visitors by using attract and disperse model – city to attract, town centres and market towns to disperse.
- Managing and maintaining the public realm – visitors don't just stay in a place they walk along our streets, go into our shops, visit attractions. Maintaining cleanliness and ensuring appropriate signage is in place is very important.
- Increase the contribution of Durham's rural areas by animating it so there is more to see and do.

The County is divided up by visitor friendly areas, Durham City, the Durham Dales, the Vale of Durham, Durham Heritage Coast (in which Seaham sits as the focus of that area. These are used to pull people out of the central corridor to the east and west of the County.

Within County Durham there are 473 accommodation providers which provide 15,815 bed spaces. 27% of these are bed and breakfast accommodation, 10% hotels, 50% self catering, 10% caravan and camping, and 3% campus and hostel. There are 70 visitor attractions and 34 activity providers. The latest visitor figures for 2013 indicate 17.8m visitors, 1.5m of which are 'staying' visitors which is a substantial amount and shows a 13% growth in total numbers of 10 years. The age profile of visitors is getting younger. Latest research shows that the vast majority of visitors are over 45 years of age as opposed to over 55 some 8 years ago. The overall value of the visitor economy is £743m.

Visit County Durham has focussed over the last 18 months on customer service through a programme called “Welcome to Durham” which has been successful with businesses who then achieve a world host accreditation.

They have focussed on Taste Durham – improving the quality of our produce. There were initially just 4 products in County Durham that had ‘great taste’ awards, this is now up to 25 food products from the County which shows that progress has been made. Monies from Visit England has been used to promote Durham within their publication ‘This is dramatic This is Durham’ and imagery of Seaham’s coast has been included in the marketing materials.

The ‘This is Durham’ website attracts about 1m visitors each year. This converts to about 60% coming into the County.

The Destination Development Plan for Seaham was produced some years ago, and indeed was one of the first Plans of six in total put in place. Since that time the plan has helped Seaham develop its offer. The Northern Lands programme is currently administered by Visit County Durham. DEFRA provided £500k and a good profile has been created. Ms Sensicle stated that from this Seaham is to receive some electric bikes which are to be located at the marina and the Durham Heritage Coast Partnership are involved with this. A Member stated however, that no-one at the Town Council had been made aware of this.

Ms Sensicle stated that Durham is the current visitor destination in the North East of England and is above York and Bath in the latest Guardian poll of best cities. There has been a major step up in culture, i.e. the Lindisfarne Gospels and Lumiere which were positive attractions. There has been a major redesign of brand in respect of services – 6 Tourist Information Centres have closed but there are now 30 Information Providers throughout the County. £220k has been gained for destination marketing. There is now a County Council Tourism working Group for the first time ever which is still in its infancy but it brings together a lot of different departments and all of this has a significant impact on visitor economy.

Going forward it is intended to extend the Northern Land project with DEFRA and ascertain what they are interested in spending money on, however this won’t happen until well into next year. Taste Durham has been extended to supply a network of food providers. Next year sees the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta and there is to be a national exhibition in the run up to the anniversary on 15th June and Durham will be included in that national profile.

Visit County Durham’s main communication tool to the rest of the world is through the ‘This is Durham’ website. Seaham is one of only 5 towns in Durham that has its own page under the ‘Explore Durham’ section. It has 3 main images and editorial linking through the site under ‘features’ and ‘places of interest’ and is mentioned as part of the Durham Heritage Coast. The marina has its own page on the site. Seaham Hall Hotel runs a competition on the website. The ‘Tommy’ sculpture and the WW1 anniversary event are also mentioned.

Currently being promoted are the accommodation providers, 7 attractions, 13 activities, 5 shopping opportunities and 2 visitor information points. Within the 'Durham Pocket Guide' Seaham is one of only 5 towns featured in the editorial section that has produced a Destination Development Plan and also features walking and cycling routes around the town.

At this point views and comments were invited from those present and below is a summary of the comments made:

- One of the Members of Seaham Town Council is keen to try and establish a museum for the area in conjunction with Bowes and Beamish and local heritage groups. Ms Sensicle was asked whether he could obtain any assistance with this idea to try and develop that programme. Ms Sensicle stated that associated with the Tourism Management Plan is a process that people can use to develop their ideas.
- A Member queried whether the working group mentioned involved leisure and in particular the sporting aspect, and in relation to the Durham Food and Drink Guide does it rely on the local businesses themselves getting in touch to have themselves included? Ms Sensicle stated that this document is produced and funded through revenue and local businesses are contacted to ascertain if they want to participate.
- A Member queried in relation to some of the comments made on visitors staying in the area and Durham being the main destination, how much progress has been made. Some years ago it was noted that the average person could not afford to stay in Seaham Hall and it was recognised that more affordable accommodation was required and there was going to be a push to attract more B and B's and hotels. Ms Sensicle stated that nothing had happened because of the recession and lot of hoteliers and bed and breakfast providers were no longer trading.
- It was commented that one of the main attractions in the area is the marina, however he felt that one of the main attractions is the 7th century church and it barely gets a mention in some of the leaflets.
- A Member stated that in the fact sheet there are a number of attractions showing visitor numbers for last year, i.e. Sedgefield Race Course. Seaham has an annual programme of events which provides significantly more visitor numbers, for example the Carnival which attracts numbers in excess of 10,000 and it was his belief that Seaham was being undersold. Ms Sensicle explained that the problem they have is quantifying visitor numbers and due to budgetary constraints they have lost half of their research people who would conduct such research across the whole county.

- A Member commented that the picture of Seaham shown on the back of the publication should have had Seaham's name included. Ms Sensicle explained this was a Government decision.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 25TH JUNE, 2014

RECOMMENDED the Minutes of this meeting, a copy of which had been previously printed and circulated to each Member, be approved and signed as a correct record by the Chairman.

4. PRESS OPPORTUNITIES

RECOMMENDED the promotion of Seaham on the 'This is Durham' website and in printed publications should be notified to the press