

15 SEPTEMBER 2009

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE / DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

DESTINATION MARKETING - IMPLEMENTATION PLAN UPDATE (APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 2009)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This progress report, updates Members on the activities of the Destination Marketing Office (DMO), and highlights the support being provided to Wirral's business community, to help them through the current national economic downturn. The Destination Marketing Implementation Plan, in place to help these same businesses, has the full support of the Wirral Tourism Business Network; links directly to the annual Destination Management Plan delivered by The Mersey Partnership (ie Merseyside's Tourism Board), and follows the Northwest Development Agency (NWDA) strategy objectives. This strategic approach has been taken to market Wirral Peninsula's tourism and investment offer more effectively, help local businesses increase trade by attracting more spend and visitors to the Borough, and ultimately encourage long-term economic sustainability. Members are requested to note and support the request to Cabinet, to underwrite £300,000 of European Regional Development Funds, from the Council's Matched Funding Budget and Reserve, so that the Wirral element of the "Partners for Tourism Growth" project (ie July 2009 to June 2012) can be delivered successfully.

1. Wirral Tourism Business Network (WTBN)

The Council's DMO continues to support the activities of the WTBN, which is made up of over 250 stakeholders, and is currently assisting a number of individual tourism businesses with marketing, training and funding opportunities. This is being delivered in partnership with the Council's Strategic Development Division, The Mersey Partnership (TMP) and the Mersey Rural Leader (ie a new and active partnership supporting businesses within the rural economy).

Members are asked to note that the DMO has been working closely with TMP, and the other Merseyside boroughs, to develop a joint three-year "Partners for Tourism Growth" project for European funds (ie July 2009 to June 2012), to help businesses through the current national economic downturn. The Wirral element of the project, now secured from the NWDA's operational programme, is comprised of three elements (ie "Play, Eat and Stay in Wirral" marketing campaigns to directly support tourism businesses, two new events and visitor research). The events are a new Wirral Golf Classic (ie a golf event specialist is currently being procured to deliver the Classic in the autumn of 2010), and a new Christmas Gourmet Fair in Port Sunlight. This will also to be delivered in 2010, by the Port Sunlight Village Trust, and the experts behind the Wirral Food and Drink Festival. If successful, all of these activities will directly help local tourism businesses better market their services to potential and existing visitors. A Cabinet report, approved on the 28 May 2009, highlights the total cost of the Wirral element of the three year project to be £600,000, of which £300,000 is European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), matched against £300,000 from the Council's existing budget (ie DMO staff time and marketing budget). Members are asked to note a further Cabinet report is currently being drafted to underwrite the total cost of the project from the Council's Matched Funding Budget and Reserve.

The WTBN is comprised of six Partnerships including Golf, Chaired by the Royal Liverpool Golf Club Secretary, David Cromie. This new Partnership is helping to strengthen the existing WTBN, which includes the accommodation, attractions, coast, history and heritage, and quality food sectors, as well as help steer the planned Wirral Golf Classic mentioned above. In addition, the WTBN received a record 11 nominations at this year's sub-regional TMP Tourism Awards gala at the BT Convention Centre in Liverpool. The Network and Partnerships are currently free to join; however this is currently being evaluated. All are in place to increase visitors and related spend in the Borough.

2. Intelligence Led

Investment Market Intelligence and Campaign Activity

Market research experts, Ipsos MORI have been procured to undertake a robust research study throughout the North West of England, to help inform the Wirral Investment Strategy and related marketing campaigns. The research study is designed to measure levels of awareness of Wirral and its key developments; assess effectiveness of current information channels; investigate strengths and weaknesses of Wirral as a business location, and establish which sectors/regions are priorities for future promotion. The research is now complete and is currently being evaluated by both the Strategic Development Division and the DMO. Once findings and conclusions have been agreed and presented to Members and relevant partners/stakeholders, they will inform all future investment marketing, to target sectors/regions more efficiently and effectively, so encouraging more businesses to develop in or relocate to Wirral.

Tourism Market Intelligence and Campaign Activity

Following Cabinet approval on the 19 March 2009, a very successful "call for action" spring marketing campaign (ie "What are you doing this weekend?") was advertised in the quality, northwest press including The Guardian, Independent and Observer travel supplements; BBC Country File magazine; Good Travel Guide and, Cheshire and Lancashire Life magazines. Also, a select number of outdoor northwest rail poster sites and Manchester city centre buses were targeted to take advantage of the high commuter passenger footfall. Informed by VisitBritain's national research, highlighting the increase in domestic holidaying, while reflecting the current economic downturn, the campaign steered visitors to a high-end competition for a free weekend in Wirral on www.visitwirral.com/freeweekend. The campaign has generated almost 300 entrants to the competition and will be drawn shortly. It includes an exclusive tour of Wirral's beautiful coast; an indulgent afternoon tea at Taste England's Northwest winning, Roses Tea Room in Heswall; a delicious dinner at last year's Chef Shine winner, The Cowshed restaurant in The Wheatsheaf Inn, Raby; and a two night bed and breakfast stay at the luxurious 5 star Mere Brook House in Thornton Hough, all kindly donated by our WTBN partners. Plans for next year's campaign, funded through European funds, are currently in development.

Visitor Research

A full existing and potential visitor research study, to mirror the work done in 2006 by Ipsos MORI, and evaluate the proposed Wirral Peninsula "Play, Eat and Stay" marketing communications and activity (see 1.2), is planned throughout 2011. In addition, Officers from the DMO and Cultural Services are currently working together, to identify funding for a research project at Wirral Country Park, to help understand visitor needs and steer future development of the proposed Visitor Centre at Thurstaston.

3. Year of the Environment - European Capital of Culture Legacy

Following the massive success of the Liverpool City Region's European Capital of Culture last year - 2009 is designated Year of the Environment. The DMO have taken advantage of this opportunity by

launching four new Walk and Cycle Trails (ie north, south, east and west), and a planned Nature Trail, to be launched later in the autumn. These have been developed in conjunction with Officers from Cultural and Technical Services, and with grant support from the Mersey Waterfront Regional Park. The Walk and Cycle Trails were recently promoted through a northwest wide newspaper competition, with Hillbark Hotel (ie recently awarded the Gold Standard by VisitBritain) kindly donating a two night bed and breakfast stay. This has already generated over 300 entries.

A small grant has also been secured, to promote a Wirral element of the wider Liverpool City Region legacy project, called “Go Penguins”. The grant will be matched with funds from Wirral’s attractions, to purchase replica penguins (ie individually designed and so following the “Superlambanana” model), so forming a unique trail that will be promoted through the press and other marketing literature. The trail is sure to be of interest to visitors both sides of the River Mersey and will run from December 2009 through to January 2010.

Also, a number of key environmentally aware events were given a unique platform this year by helping to highlight the “green message”. These included the annual Coastal Walk, the International Kite Festival in New Brighton, as well as the Food and Drink Festival at Claremont Farm, Bebington and the RNL Open Day in Hoylake.

4. Fantastic Food

This year there are six Wirral Chef Shine evenings, taking place each month from May, in local restaurants. The theme is “home-grown”, focusing on seasonal and locally produced ingredients, and also linking to the Liverpool City Region’s Year of the Environment. Award winning, renowned chef Brian Mellor, had the difficult task of choosing the six finalists from the 13 nominations submitted. The finalists prepare a three-course meal, using locally sourced produce, at a very competitive cost of £14.95. Diners vote on quality, presentation, menu balance, etc, with the highest scoring being awarded Chef of the Year at this year’s Wirral Tourism Awards for Excellence in November.

As well as the “What are you doing this weekend?” campaign already mentioned (see 2.2.1), the DMO have put together a number of web-based competitions, in the local/regional press, to drive existing and potential visitors to Wirral’s eateries and accommodation. These have included Mother’s Day, Easter Break, Father’s Day, Summer Holidays, with Halloween, Bonfire Night and Christmas competitions planned for later in the year. All prizes have been kindly donated by Wirral’s tourism businesses, and the competitions themselves are put together by the DMO and promoted through www.vistwirral.com, to help Wirral’s stakeholders during the current economic slump.

In addition, the DMO worked with personnel from Wirral Farmers’ Market and Claremont Farm, to help launch this year’s Wirral Food and Drink Festival. At the time of this report being written, this year’s Festival is yet to take place, however Members will recall it attracted over 28,000 visitors from around the northwest last year. An Asparagus Celebration took place this May, at the award winning Hillbark Hotel in Royden Park, attracting positive northwest wide media coverage. Wirral’s quality food offer directly links into TMP’s, and Visit Chester and Cheshire’s (VCC) Destination Management Plans, as a vital aspect of the tourism experience. It also mirrors a key NWDA priority to develop the regional offer, and with this in mind, the Wirral Year of Food is currently being planned by the DMO and partners for 2010, including an all-new Christmas Gourmet Fair in Port Sunlight (see 1.2).

5. Encouraging Business Tourism

The WTBN Stakeholder Update event took place in July at the new Leverhulme Hotel and Spa in Port Sunlight. Over 50 representatives from Wirral’s tourism business community attended and the

updates are now held twice a year to stimulate discussion and feedback on planned and live tourism projects.

In addition, the WTBN Partnerships have recently started a process of combining their meetings (eg Food and Accommodation) to great effect, culminating in new business opportunities and management efficiency. The DMO are also supporting a number of tourism businesses during the current financial crisis through the planned activities mentioned (see 1.2).

Officers from the Corporate Services Department have met with their counterparts, from Cheshire West and Chester, to explore mutually beneficial strategic develop and visitor economy opportunities. This was seen as an important step to working more closely with our neighbours beyond the Liverpool City Region. In addition, DMO Officers continue to develop a productive working relationship with Visit Chester and Cheshire, including shared campaign intelligence, complementary links on tourism-dedicated websites and developing hotel and spa packages. Officers also continue to work with the Liverpool Film Office, to attract film crews, production companies and directors, and so raise the positive media perception of Wirral as an attractive filming location.

6. Make It Easy

The following initiatives aim to better inform Wirral visitors, stakeholders and partners (internal and external) and so improve business/customer connectivity:

www.visitwirral.com

After a successful re-launch of visitwirral, the DMO has seen a significant increase of people visiting the site, and indeed this August saw almost 19,000 visits against 11,500 visits in August 2008 (ie a 65% increase). The site has been actively promoted through the “What are you doing this weekend?” spring marketing campaign, which is a short break led competition as already mentioned, all generously donated by Wirral’s tourism sector. The most popular pages are “Restaurant of the Month”, “Gastro-pubs” and “Activities”, and it is this last section that hosts the newly launched Walk and Cycle Trails, which visitors can download.

Tourism Signage and Interpretation

A bid for NWDA funds is currently being developed for a project to update Wirral’s coastal signage. If successful, the project aims to help raise the positive profile of the coast, safely inform and disperse existing and new visitors/residents, and encourage visitor spend in the Borough. The scheme mirrors all the necessary Health and Safety criteria, incorporates the new Wirral Peninsula branding, and naturally links to the North West Coastal Trail initiative, currently being led by the NWDA.

Officers are also working with Technical Services Department colleagues to update existing and develop new “brown” tourism signage. Phase 1 work has already been delivered in Port Sunlight, Woodside, Seacombe and New Brighton, and Phase 2 is currently being developed to continue the project throughout the Borough, budgets allowing.

Promotional Literature

A Wirral Peninsula branded tourism guide is also currently in production and new images have also been commissioned. The guide will be launched in the New Year, to link with the “Play, Eat and Stay in Wirral” marketing campaign, and highlight Wirral’s full tourism offer through themed sections (eg attractions, food, accommodation, etc).

To actively promote the Wirral Year of Food, a new food guide, "Taste of Wirral 2010" (part sponsored by The Grange and Pyramids shopping centres), is also currently in production. It will build on the success of the past Gourmet Trails, however it will feature more food related events, workshops and themed activities; more places to eat; more food producers, and hence stimulate more business for the whole of Wirral's food sector.

Following the successful bid for funds, from the Mersey Waterfront Regional Park programme, a sub-group of the Wirral Coast Partnership has been brought together to project manage the development and delivery of the all-new Wirral Nature Trail leaflet. Work is well underway and it is hoped that the Trail will be in circulation by this autumn.

This year's new Attractions leaflet has now been produced, and the DMO has been instrumental in helping the Partnership improve the document by including discount vouchers and a competition, kindly donated by the new Leverhulme Hotel and Spa in Port Sunlight village. This year it also includes two new members ie the Floral Pavilion Theatre and Conference Centre, and Wirral Archives.

Exhibitions, Familiarisation Visits and Itineraries

Officers from the DMO attended the two-day "Kids Fun Ideas Show" at the Manchester Central Convention Complex on the 27 and 28 June. The event was extremely well attended last year with huge amounts of interest shown about Wirral. In addition, the team are exploring the opportunity of bringing over Norfolk Line ferry staff, based in Belfast and Dublin, as well as developing a more personalised visit for TMP managerial staff. Familiarisation Visits give Wirral tourism businesses the opportunity to raise their profile. Feedback from those visiting, and those Wirral businesses who participated, has been excellent.

The DMO also hosted visits from "Coast" and "Food and Travel" magazines. The travel journalist from the latter visited several key areas of Wirral's food offer including Michelin rated, Restaurant Fraiche in Oxtou, and Claremont Kitchen at Claremont Farm, Bebington, and positive articles have subsequently resulted. More press visits are planned for October.

Tourism Talk e-newsletter

The next edition is currently in development and the DMO is always looking at different ways to refresh the newsletter including more stakeholder involvement. Tourism Talk has been developed to better engage partners and stakeholders, on current activities and developments, and allows for regular feedback.

7. Excellent Events

The majority of the Core Events programme this year has now been delivered including the Wirral Show, International Kite Festival in New Brighton, Chef Shine at various Wirral venues (see 4.1) and Wirral Food and Drink Festival, with the Wirral Tourism Awards for Excellence at Thornton Hall Hotel planned for November. Unfortunately, the poor weather conditions had a severe impact on visitors to the International Kite Festival, therefore having a negative impact on visitor spend also.

Following the agreement of the Supported Events Panel in December 2008, grant support has now been allocated, to this year's select programme of Supported Community-led Events. These events are the Hoylake RNLi Open Day, Coastal Walk, Secret Gardens of Oxtou, Folk on the Coast and Port Sunlight Festivals, Wirral Egg Run, Wallasey Motor and Historic Vehicle Rallies. The Supported Events Panel includes representatives from the three main political parties and Officers from Cultural Services and the Tourism and Marketing Division. Decisions are made on visitor research conducted by TMP's England's Northwest Research Agency and advice from the division.

In addition to the Supported Events Panel, the Wirral Events Advisory Group, administered by the DMO and including Officers from Corporate Services; HR, Law and Asset Management; Regeneration and Technical Services, advises and supports various community groups, to develop and deliver their own activities and events in a safe and sustainable way.

8. Superb Shopping

A staffed Information Point, within The Pyramids shopping centre in Birkenhead, has now been open for almost one year, and they have reported over 1,000 visitors per week, with a surprising number coming from outside the area. The Pyramids are now undertaking visitor research, the results of which will be shared with the DMO, who are in regular contact and continue to replenish tourism literature supplies.

9. Financial implications

There are no additional financial implications to the Council arising out of this update report.

10. Staffing implications

There are no additional staffing implications arising out of this report.

11. Equal Opportunities implications

The target group for the Implementation Plan is all visitors and businesses, and is fully inclusive. The Destination Marketing Office will endeavour that all Council core events and attractions are accessible to everyone regardless of age, ability, and social and/or ethnic background. A number of events/activities will be offered free of charge, however where a charge is necessitated to help sustain the activity, concessions will be made available.

In terms of those with physical disabilities, and accessing Council events and related activities, provision will be made available wherever possible. The Council is committed to being an equal opportunities service provider, so all Council visitor attractions, and public buildings are accessible, or are reviewing and improving their accessibility requirements. This relates directly to the duties placed upon it, by the Disability Discrimination Act 2004, and is provided in conjunction with the Council's Access Officer.

12. Community Safety implications

All events are evaluated by the Wirral Events Advisory Group, which includes Merseyside Police and, Merseyside Fire and Ambulance Services. Public health and safety is of the highest priority and is evaluated by the Group, as well as through individual event plans, and risk assessments.

13. Local Agenda 21 implications

There are no Local Agenda 21 implications arising out of this update report.

14. Planning implications

There are no planning implications arising out of this update report.

15. Anti-poverty implications

There are no anti-poverty implications arising out of this report.

16. Human Rights implications

There are no human rights implications arising out of this report.

17. Social Inclusion implications

The target group for the Implementation Plan is all visitors, and all Council events and activities will aim to be culturally sensitive, all embracing and fully inclusive.

18. Local Member Support implications

The Implementation Plan hopes to benefit all of Wirral by increasing businesses, visitor numbers and related spend in a sustainable way, so encouraging the regeneration of the local economy.

19. Background Papers

The Destination Marketing Office, within the Tourism and Marketing Division, holds all background papers in relation to this update report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Economic and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to:

- i) Note and support the request to Cabinet (as detailed in 1.2 above) to underwrite the £300,000 of European Regional Development Funds, from the Council's Matched Funding Budget and Reserve, so that the Wirral element of the "Partners for Tourism Growth" project (ie July 2009 to June 2012) can be delivered successfully despite the current economic crisis.
- ii) Note and support the contents of this progress report.

J. WILKIE

Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Corporate Services

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