**HEBDEN BRIDGE WALKERS ACTION RESPONSE TO SAVINGS OPTION**

Review of alternative Service Delivery and Digital channels for Visitor Centres

**Tourism in the Upper Valley**

“Tourism is an important and growing part of the Calderdale economy contributing around £3000m a year”

Tourism is a central part of the local economy of the Upper Valley and Hebden Royd area in particular. There over 60 B&Bs and self-catering establishments in the area which feed a lot of visitors into local shops, cafés etc. The centrality of tourism in the area is reflected by the local Visitor Centre getting over 25,000 visitors every year. This is not just about Hebden Bridge, it includes Mytholmroyd and Luddenden as well as the hill top villages.

This is **quite different to Halifax and the East end of Calderdale** where tourism is quite marginal to the economy (perhaps the Piece Hall being an exception).

The growth in Tourism as quoted in the submission is mainly in the Upper Valley and is partly a result of several local initiatives such as Heart of the Pennines, Tour De France, Ted Hughes, Hardcastle Crags, Heptonstall, Hand Made Parade, Arts Festival, Piano Festival, Pennine Way Loop etc.

**Moving the existing location**

The suggested move of Hebden Bridge Visitor centre from existing premises makes no financial sense. The current premises are rented at a peppercorn rent and Pennine Prospects pays substantial rent for the upstairs, so breaking the lease for the centre would result in a loss of income to Calderdale.

The alternative of using the Town Hall raises issues about available space and the ability of Town Hall staff to deal with enquiries (they have nether the time or the specialist knowledge). The fact that the Town Hall has not been consulted over the issue is telling and as a community asset, they may not agree to moving the Visitor Centre there.

The Town Hall is also closed on Sunday which is the busiest day for visitors coming to the town.

If this proposal is still felt viable, it should be pointed out that Calderdale already rents a room in the old Town Hall that is under-used.

**Providing more information on-line**

An excellent idea would be to explore improvements to on-line information such as touch screen, chat line etc. However, the current version of Visit Calderdale website, is not fit for purpose. Heart of the Pennines recently conducted a ‘mystery user’ exercise testing the site with questions about walking. Although the response was small, the overwhelming view was that it was very difficult to navigate (several gave up trying) and much of the information was inadequate or out of date. The one query that is common is accommodation, but Visit Calderdale only carries a very small sample of (paid for?) info about accommodation.

Because of this, the Heart of the Pennines website is the only comprehensive on-line source of information about accommodation.

An analysis of the enquiries that come into the Hebden Bridge centre show that a static unstaffed provision of leaflets will not meet many people’s needs. The questions asked often need comprehensive local knowledge of the area, the points of interest, the facilities and transport.

**Options for saving money in the Tourism budget**

1. We agree that the very limited Visitor Centre in Halifax could be closed and possibly assimilated into the Piece Hall information Centre which is a much better location.
2. Reduce days or hours of Hebden Bridge, perhaps varying hours in winter, summer, weekday and weekends. There doesn’t seem to be a consistent daily pattern of visitors but closing an hour early each day (reduced winter hours was the pattern a few years ago) wouldn’t seem to be a drastic reduction of service. If a touch screen was installed so people can find information out of hours, then that would ameliorate any effect of reduced hours.
3. Have a mixed staffing arrangement involving paid staff and volunteers (as they have in Todmorden). We are sure there would not be a problem with finding volunteers with the necessary skills and knowledge of the local area.
4. If Halifax was closed, it would provide an opportunity to streamline the administration systems. Our experience of providing printed information to Visitor Centres is the systems are very cumbersome (unlike Todmorden) and therefore there is the opportunity to save central admin hours.
5. In all the initiatives we (and other organisations) have taken to promote the area for walking, we feel we have had little support from senior management in tourism. It seems like the vision for the future of tourism is very unclear (or it has been badly communicated). With so little proposed Calderdale Council visitor infrastructure, what is the need for the current number of central staff?

There should be consideration of reviewing the management of Tourism and the centres. This should include the removal the in-house management roles (as Bury Council has done) with specific big events, and perhaps the web management contracted out or done in conjunction with nearby authorities.

An alternative is to transfer the Visitor centre management to Hebden Royd Town Council with funding for some paid staff. This model is similar to that used in Todmorden.

**Income generation**

1. The point about receiving rent from Pennine Prospects, has been made earlier, but the lease is up in December 2018, so one could assume that a rent rise would be expected.
2. The space in the Hebden Bridge Visitor Centre is not well used. The area for generating income, although improved, is still quite unattractive and doesn’t generate as much income as it should do. There is enough retail talent in the town to generate ideas for improving its usage and therefore income generation.
3. Halifax and Hebden Bridge Visitor centres operate a frustrating financial system whereby sales money does not go back into the tourism budget and at certain times of the year staff are not allowed to replace items that are sold out. This results in empty shelves which makes no income at all. Todmorden doesn’t have this problem.
4. The Visitor centre used to be a local ticket agent for events. A decision has been made to scrap this provision because the Council’s admin systems couldn’t cope. So now people have to book on line or go to Todmorden Information Centre to buy tickets for events in Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd. Similarly, the decision to stop selling Charity Xmas cards should be reversed – lots of extra footfall just before Xmas! In both cases, profits have been lost.

**Conclusion**

We accept that there have to be savings, but it seems that the proposals as outlined are flawed and very unthought-out.

We suggest that the next step should be a meaningful consultation including groups involved in promoting the area, organisers of cultural events, owners of visitor accommodation and interested retailers. We believe that we can provide some ideas to maintain a good service (or even improve it) as well as helping to make savings.

Hebden Bridge Walkers Action

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