

SOWING THE SEEDS FOR TOURISM GROWTH IN THE FOREST OF DEAN DISTRICT– 2010 to 2012

Tourism in the Forest of Dean District faces a challenging future with the impact of the credit crunch having a devastating impact on the local economy. 7% of the district's employment is supported by tourism business, a constant since 2006, however the national average is only 4.3%. Our domestic tourism visitor numbers are increasing, but average individual spend is on the decline.

The national tourism industry, consumer expectations, methods of communication and patterns of holiday taking are ever changing demands on the marketplace and with constant need to compete for a share of disposable income there is a need to ensure that as a destination we keep up with this pace.

A healthy tourism sector helps to maintain a healthy local economy, however the Forest of Dean District must keep up with the pace of change and help the industry to move the economy into a growth phase. This is fully supported by key stakeholders who are willing to meet the challenges head on and to achieve the key objectives identified.

The current marketing approach is

Annual Visitor Guide

52 page, A4 brochure, distributed via a brochure request facility on the tourism website and by 'pick up' from tourist information centres, libraries, attractions and hotels around the UK.

visitforestofdean.co.uk

Alongside the visitor guide, the tourism website is the main promotional channel. This was recently redeveloped.

Cotswolds and Forest of Dean Destination Management Organisation

Regular press releases are distributed to national and international media. Journalist visits and contacts are covered.

Exhibitions

Attendance as part of Gloucestershire at two key UK travel and tourism exhibitions held in London and Manchester.

A New Vision for Forest of Dean District Tourism

The vision for the Forest of Dean District is to become an all year round sustainable visitor destination, benefiting local business and the community by working in partnership, resulting in increased investment, whilst preserving and enhancing the natural character of the environment.

Key Objectives

This strategy has four key objectives for its focus:

- Getting to know our customers
- Growth in domestic visitor numbers with emphasis on staying visitors
- Arrest the decline in average visitor spend
- Re-position the District of the Forest of Dean from an outdoor activity destination to a place to visit whatever the weather

Key Challenges

Looking forward these key challenges have been identified:

- Increasing competition
- Continuing recession
- Increase brand awareness of the Forest of Dean District as a destination and its location
- Attracting new visitors
- Increase in town shopping as a reason to visit a destination
- Reduction in length of stay impacting on visitor spend

Strategic Priorities

To achieve the vision and key objectives these strategic priorities have been identified:

- Increase partnership working to improve efficiency
- Develop new products and packages that are visitor focused
- Attract a greater volume of visitors from broader target markets
- Website development to improve information and feeds to kiosks

The Destination

Situated in Gloucestershire, the Forest of Dean District is made up of 27,000 acres of mixed leaf woodland mostly managed by the Forestry Commission, with four market towns Lydney, Coleford, Cinderford and Newent and a host of smaller villages all offering a diverse mix of retail and commercial business, however without considerable investment into town regeneration, the natural scenery and wide variety of attractions and activities in the Forest District are the key assets to delivering the vision and objectives.

Moving forward, a priority in establishing the Forest of Dean District as a destination in the minds of the domestic tourist is to enforce its location in the UK. Opportunities exist in the fact that it is neighbours with Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Cotswolds, Malvern Hills and the Wye Valley, places that already have strong brand presence and location awareness. This can be achieved by continuing to work closely in partnership with the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Tourism Association, local businesses and the community.

The Product Packages

With tourism in the Forest of Dean District being seasonal, many attractions and activity places close between October and March and with the majority being weather dependant, there is spare capacity during off-peak, weekdays and wet weather days. Increasing competition from other destinations shows a need to become more creative with product package development. To keep the Forest of Dean District as an attractive proposition requires creating a compelling visitor experience. Successful product development combining experiential days with accommodation and transport can create that compelling reason to visit, therefore bringing the different elements of the tourism offer into one single product.

There is a requirement to evaluate market trends and undertake market research to ensure that the development is visitor focused and that there is the infrastructure in place to support the product package.

The following themes are put forward for development into flagship packages as offering the most potential to go some way to using the spare capacity:

- Heritage Breaks
- Cycling Breaks
- Creative Breaks (arts & crafts)
- Local Food & Drink Breaks
- Events and Festivals

Heritage Breaks

Fascinating geology and landscape, a history of mediaeval hunting, an industrial heritage including fishing, blacksmithing, coal mining, railways and steam power are all natural assets that can be integrated to broaden the visitor experience and enhance the local economy. To be developed through business and associations working together to create rounded packaged breaks.

Cycling Breaks

For families there's cycle paths away from the traffic. For those traveling around there's good links via roads, tracks and forestry paths and for the more adventurous the mountain biking terrain in the Forest holds some wild opportunities. There is a need to bring this together with accommodation providers, public transport and cycle hire to create 3 specific packages. Encouraging more midweek activity from those looking for breaks outside the school holidays and wetter weather fun for the more adventurous off road riders.

Creative Breaks

Special interest holidays are fast becoming the 'thing to do' and the Forest District is a haven for arts and crafts of all kinds. An area that is currently under utilised by the craftspeople themselves and which could become a flagship promotion for the area. Courses, workshops and holidays combined with friendly hospitality, a lust for learning or just a relaxing, peaceful getaway.

Local Food & Drink Breaks

The increase in cookery shows on television highlights the growing interest from the public about what they eat and drink. The Forest of Dean District is home to a rich larder of goodies, whether it's a local food trail, cookery workshop or wine tasting its already here waiting to be enjoyed. There is a need to bring together local business to produce a cohesive package of events and activities that can be promoted to increase the volume of 'foodies' to the area and enhance the economy.

Events and Festivals

There is a great potential to facilitate further development of community based and commercially viable events and festivals to create PR and attract new visitors to the District.

The following have been identified as priorities to enable growth:

- Heritage Open Days
- Wyedean Forest Rally
- Forest Food Showcases Spring & Autumn

By focusing on 3 higher profile events, improving communications, public relations, promotion and facilitating the development of the events this will enable packages to be worked up in conjunction with the relevant traders to add benefit to the economy.

Quality

Quality is a key issue in the national and regional tourism strategies and must be embraced at destination level. Poor service and standards can harm very quickly. Everyone involved directly or indirectly in tourism; attractions, accommodation providers, transport, retail, catering need to appreciate the growing requirement to raise the standards of service by embracing skills training, personal and business development.

These are key actions identified to encourage growth:

- Actively promote all national quality accreditation schemes
- Introduce visitor feedback surveys to monitor ongoing performance
- Embrace PR and use it to highlight positive achievements

Sustainability (Smart Growth)

This means effectively managing the interaction between the needs of visitors, industry, community and the environment. Ensuring visitors are better informed of ways in which to love our ancient woodland and help it flourish by looking after the environment, eating and buying local produce and leaving the car behind. This plays a core part in the national strategy and from this the following are focal points for development for the Forest of Dean District:

- Providing reliable information for all
- Reducing seasonal demand
- Encouraging the development and use of sustainable forms of transport

Marketing

In addition to the existing Visitor Guide and exhibitions, a new approach is needed to effectively communicate reasons to visit the Forest of Dean District. Knowing who the visitors are and introducing a marketing and public relations campaign that places emphasis on online marketing, recognising the power of the Internet and the changing way in which visitors choose destinations.

During the period of this strategy we will concentrate on:

- Invest in improving knowledge of our visitor via research and improved data management and usage
- Improve natural Search Engine Optimisation
- Introduce seasonal online campaigns with Pay Per Click promotions
- Review paid for banner advertising
- Introduce a visitor communication schedule to encourage repeat visits

Public Relations

Working closer with the Cotswolds and Forest of Dean DMO to increase the prominence of public relations as a marketing tool for the destination and introduce an effective campaign to ensure that the Forest of Dean District is at the forefront of the minds of VisitBritain and the media when considering destinations. This will also assist in raising the general awareness of the location of the Forest.

TOP 5 KEY ACTIONS

1. Improve data gathering, analysis and reporting on visitors and tourism in the Forest of Dean District
2. Develop and enhance the website to provide additional relevant information and increase its prominence within Search Engines
3. Facilitate Product Packages wherever possible
4. Working with the DMO increase PR activity to raise awareness of the destination brand
5. Introduce a 12 month rolling marketing campaign to bring visitors into the Forest