Ambitious plans unveiled to grow Herefordshire's tourist economy

The Herefordshire Sustainable Food and Tourism Partnership has launched the county's first Destination Plan since 2010. A Destination Plan (DP) is an overarching strategy designed to help secure long-term funding to manage the economic development and growth of Herefordshire as a tourism destination. This will increase the local economy, generate high quality jobs and grow visitor numbers, but in a measured and sustainable way. Herefordshire's DP builds on the county's assets of culture, heritage, environment and award-winning food and drink and aligns with other local initiatives including the Council's Economic Vision, Herefordshire's Cultural Partnership and the Herefordshire's A Great Place project. However, galvanising the future of tourism in the county can only be realised with the co-operation of Herefordshire's businesses, local authority and organisations working together towards the plan's shared goals.

The county's Sustainable Food and Tourism Partnership was formed in 2014 between key individuals, organisations and networks who work to provide strategic oversight for the food and tourism sectors. Members include the Duchy of Cornwall, National Farmers Union, Visit Herefordshire, Herefordshire Rural Hub, the Rural and Farming Network, Herefordshire Council, the Brightspace Foundation and the Country Landowners Association. On behalf of the partnership, the Brightspace Foundation bid successfully for funding under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) to sponsor the development of the Destination Plan and contracted with Cathy Meredith and Jenny Beard, two Herefordshire-based consultants to write the county-wide plan. EAFRD funding is confined to rural areas, so Visit Herefordshire undertook to write a complimentary plan for Hereford City and the combined results of their endeavours constitute the newly launched Destination Plan.

Tourism is vitally important to the County's economy, generating £450m from over 5 million visitors each year and sustaining the equivalent of 7,000 full time jobs. However, this is relatively low compared to other rural tourism destinations and much could be done to increase the sector's

economic growth. However, the plan is careful to ensure that this will be achieved in ways that do not harm the beauty, tranquillity and environment that makes Herefordshire such an attractive place to live, work and play.

As part of their research the consultants looked at how Destination Plans had supported the growth of the food and tourism economies in other rural areas. One of the most exciting examples was in the Highlands of Scotland where Destination Loch Ness underwent a similar process back in 2013. The resulting Inverness and Loch Ness Tourism BID was developed alongside their Destination Plan and has been the catalyst for a tourism business led model delivering financial sustainability, working with over 450 business and statutory authorities working collaboratively to drive forward tourism, raise the quality of visitor experience and grow the value of tourism in the local economy. Since its inception in 2014 the Inverness and Loch Ness Tourism BID has delivered on its ambitious business plan, investing almost £1m and bringing in significant new funding from other sources and enabling tourism businesses in the area to fully maximise their potential.

Herefordshire's businesses are keen to embrace the concept. Jo Hilditch, who farms locally, produces award-winning cassis and runs a holiday business, said "The shared vision of the Herefordshire Destination Plan will give us all the [economic] opportunity we need to bridge the gap that we have suffered for too long compared with other rural tourism destinations. Herefordshire has so much to offer and this DP is the catalyst we need to kick start all our varied tourism businesses in food, drink and hospitality, to generate more jobs, deliver financial sustainability and breathe new life into one of the most beautiful rural idylls of the UK."