

The region's tourism partnership Visit Hull & East Yorkshire is preparing to roll out the red carpet to welcome its 1,000th business partner.

The organisation offers support in all sorts of ways, including promotion locally, nationally and internationally through a wide range of campaigns, as well as training opportunities. And best of all, it's free!

The partnership scheme is open to any business with an interest or involvement in the visitor economy, including accommodation providers, suppliers to the tourism industry, visitor attractions, cafes, restaurants and retail outlets, leisure activities and entertainment businesses.

"Becoming a VHEY partner is really easy and we've just launched a sign-up form online (www.visithullandeastyorkshire.com)," said tourism manager Anthony Yates. "There's no cost and the benefits are immediate."

Partners receive a free listing on the VHEY website, viewed by visitors to Hull and East Yorkshire from all over the world, plus free customer service and product knowledge training, the opportunity to promote their business through tourist information centres, and the opportunity to participate in VHEY campaigns, publications and website promotions and advertising.

"Throughout the year we also organise regular events designed to provide networking opportunities and keep businesses up to date with the latest industry news, products and activities," said Mr Yates.

Companies already benefitting include The Deep, restaurants such as 1884 Dock Street Kitchen in Hull and The Westwood in Beverley, food and drink suppliers such as Wold Top Brewery and Staal Smoke House and attractions such as the RSPB Visitor centre at Bempton.

As Elaine Robinson, of another VHEY partner business, the award-winning Broadgate Farm Cottages, of Walkington, said: "Joining in a no-brainer. It brings lots of opportunities to promote your offering to a wider audience," she said.

"I often get people starting out, or who are a new business, approaching me for advice and one of the things I always recommend is becoming a VHEY partner. Often they are unaware of the scheme but quickly realise the benefits.

"We have taken advantage of the various training initiatives such as the Yorkshire Passion scheme and others, covering things like customer service. They are very good courses and make you rethink just how you do things and how you can enhance the experience you offer to the customer.

"It also gives you an opportunity to meet and talk with others operating tourism businesses; to swap ideas and gain from their successful experiences."

Broadgate Farm is owned by Elaine Robinson and Stephen Holtby, who runs his own building company, in 2006, opening their first holiday cottage in a converted farm building two years later. They now have seven cottages, some of which can be linked, sleeping a maximum of 41 people at any one time.

Winners of the 2013, 2015 and 2016 local tourism awards, the REYTA's, and finalists in the Yorkshire White Rose awards 2013, 2014 and 2016, Broadgate Farm Cottages have taken advantage of marketing opportunities in Europe, which is now bringing results. "So far this year we have seen an upsurge in the number of visitors from Germany, for instance, and I'm confident this will continue," said Elaine.

Visitor numbers to Hull and the East Riding, currently on a high because of City of Culture, is currently worth £797 million to the local economy and supports some 17,500 jobs and Mr Yates

revealed VHEY's ambition was to build on the success of 2017 and swell the value of tourism to £1 billion over the next five years.

One of the newest tourism partners is Hull craft beer and cider bar Furley & Co., which opened on Prince's Dock Street 18 months ago. Ian Allott, one of three co-owners along with with Nick and Rachel Watts, said being a VHEY partner was an important part of the company's marketing strategy.

"We became a VHEY partner very early on. Business has increased massively so far this year and I'm sure being able to take advantage of VHEY's marketing support has been a contributing factor," he said.

"VHEY make it possible for national travel journalists to visit the area and we've been delighted to welcome many of them here to Furley's. These are very important people in helping spread the positive story Hull and the wider region has to tell and as a result of these visits we have enjoyed exposure both nationally and internationally."

He continued: "We've also been able to take advantage of the training opportunities offered completely free to VHEY partners and we are looking for some help in formulating grant applications to expand our business.

"We've applied for planning permission to expand on to the top floor of the building as well as make use of the outside space and a building to the rear," he revealed. "Exactly what will happen and when is difficult to say at the moment; we have many exciting ideas to make full use of the space we have," said Mr Allott, who also owns the successful Chequers micro pub in Beverley.

Another relatively new Hull business, Liquid Jade, a tea and coffee shop in the heart of the Old Town, says being a VHEY partner has been a massive help in establishing itself. Owned and managed by Claire Buffey, Liquid Jade opened in September 2015 and is relatively hard to find, tucked away in Custom House Yard, off Whitefriargate and accessed via an archway linking two major outlets (Boots and The Works).

"We can be hard to find but once people discover us they keep coming back," said Claire. "But VHEY has supported us right from the start - they got in contact shortly after we opened and suggested we become a VHEY partner.

"Since then we have had lots of journalists visit us and we have basked in the publicity they've given us. We've featured in The Guardian newspaper and lots of national travel guides as well as support online. It's been brilliant and business has been growing ever since; we've had people from all over Europe as well as Australia and New Zealand."

Hull City Council Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Tourism, Cllr Terry Geraghty said: "Businesses signing up to become a VHEY Partner really do get a great deal not just with promotion, but with fantastic training and networking events too.

"The Hull and the East Yorkshire region tourism offer is continuing to boom through our year as UK City of Culture so it's a great time for new partners to join. To have a scheme like this available for free is an excellent opportunity and I would encourage all businesses not yet signed up to get involved."

And Cllr Richard Burton, cabinet portfolio holder for leisure, tourism and culture at East Riding of Yorkshire Council, commented: "Since its inception, the Visit Hull & East Yorkshire (VHEY) Tourism Partnership has achieved the many goals of this council, working alongside Hull City Council and private sector partners, to promote the region locally, nationally and internationally as a must-visit tourist destination.

"Working through VHEY, the council is committed to its strategy that aims to grow tourism locally by 5% annually. Thanks to the support of VHEY partners, this target has been exceeded year-on-year."

To find out more about becoming a VHEY partner and to sign up for free membership visit <http://www.visithullandeastyorkshire.com/business/join-vhey.aspx>