

Report on 'Promoting our towns' event

Langport, 30th November 2011

There were three presentations, followed by questions, with a panel Q&A session to finish.
21 attendees.

Alan Stone, Director, Shepton Mallet Tourist Information Centre

[View Alan's presentation here...](#)

Key points were;

- 'what are TIC's for, in today's world?'. TIC's perform a wide range of functions; assisting visitors to plan trips, advising and signposting them when they arrive (Shepton TIC signposts to over 100 local businesses), a 'High Street' hub for local information and events.
- though Shepton TIC now raises 66% of its funding through its own fundraising efforts, a modest amount of local authority funding is necessary to keep this asset which contributes to the local economy.
- misconception that the internet does away with the need for good quality, 'real'/physical information in towns delivered by a trained person. If anything, TIC's services have become more used and needed since our mass use of the internet.
- Alan urged towns to think seriously about their promotion and their information services; towns need to promote at all levels, for instance, reliance on one County-wide website will not be enough to grow tourism in your town.
- Trained and paid staff are very important to keep quality of service.

Questions to Alan were;

- What is the TIC's relationship with the Bath & West Showground? Alan agreed that this could be further developed for mutual benefit, though where the TIC could be promoted on site brings difficulties as the events there vary so much.
 - Charles Wood (Vision4Frome) said that whilst a paid core is essential in a TIC, the use of volunteers can provide a quality service, particularly where there is a good number of motivated people, as can be found in the larger towns. Frome's volunteers, before they were replaced by paid staff, bought their own uniforms, did their training for free, and were very knowledgeable on local issues etc, providing a service that was recognised as being of good quality.
- Alan felt that trained, paid staff were the way to go, though acknowledged that there are other models in other information centres that have successfully utilised volunteers to varying degrees.

Matt Day, Somerset Towns Forum, on the Levels & Moors Tourism Project

[View Matt's presentation here...](#)

[View Matt's notes here...](#)

Bob Smart, Somerset Tourism Association

Bob explained his passion for Somerset's towns, which 'are all wonderful and wonderfully different'. The towns are a strong product in tourism terms. Somerset is the brand; its all about getting people to come to Somerset and enjoy its distinctive features.

Somerset Tourism Association is two years old, and grew out of Sedgemoor Tourism Association.

Somerset County Council forced to retreat from tourism (a non-statutory service); handed over the County accommodation guide then VisitSomerset (VS) website. Bob acknowledged that VS had 'marked time' in the transition period, but STA's web manager was now making progress in making updates and understanding the complex structure they'd inherited and making changes to that.

Bob very keen to see a Somerset towns theme emerge on the site and in print; there were limitations in the Accommodation guide regards amount of space, but the website has more scope to give space to all towns.

Responses to questions to Bob were;

- STA are now promoting themselves across the County, it will take some time for awareness to build

- Bob acknowledged that there were a number of issues with out of date information and also the market towns page of VS that were being addressed

- Towns are one 'product' to promote; other themes will be heritage, arts & crafts, food & drink etc. This is the direction that VS and SW Tourism were heading. [To find out more about the STA, see here...](#)

Panel Q&A session

The 3 presenters were joined by Mary Ostler (Tourism Officer, South Somerset District Council) and answered questions;

Charles Wood (Vision for Frome) asked what the 'added-value' was of STA and VS above the town's individual websites? Bob replied that VS appears at the top of search engine searches for the key words, that STA was engaged in building the Chinese visitor market as well as other international trade, and it gave a single strong voice for tourism.

Alan added that the way the internet works, potential visitors would use several/many websites to plan a trip, and that local sites were an essential part of this.

Mary pointed out that Somerset is place of 'good quality' (with interesting and varied places and landscape) and that the sector needs to retain the quality in everything it does. What people remember about places are the people they meet; so good quality TIC's and LIC's are really important as it will give a lasting impression. Also that we shouldn't get too fixated by buildings and history, because people want experiences (for instance, the starling murmurations).

Charles Wood asked where STA get their money from – Bob replied that there is a small Somerset County Council amount this year, diminishing next; they make some money from adverts in the Accommodation guide and will develop adverts on the website. They run a tight ship and rely a lot on voluntary efforts by their board and members.

Loretta Whetlor (Watchet 2025) pointed out that District/Borough Council Chief Executives meet once a month; they should be badgered into supporting a Local Enterprise Partnership with tourism as a prominent objective to be developed further.

STF would like to thank all attending for their positive contributions.

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