Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should be done?

Sussex Community Rail Partnership works to promote rural tourism and support rural economies in communities close to the railway stations on lines that we work on, to this end we produce a series of informative guides giving clear information on how to access destinations by sustainable travel rather than by car. These guides promote a wide range of visitor attractions; the national parks, castles, gardens, seaside resorts, wildlife reserves, heritage railways, historic towns, shopping destinations, race-courses, sporting venues and cycling and walking routes that can be accessed with ease from railway stations. And we also advise on other transport methods if the locations are a slight distance from the stations. These guides are available in paper form at stations and other outlets, and are also available to download from our website which also provides information on community events of interest being held at towns and villages near the stations. Greater support of Community Rail Partnership work would allow us to increase activity and increase rural sustainable tourism and action plans could be developed in conjunction with funding requirements.

To celebrate our connections with Gatwick Airport we have further produced a leaflet for visitors staying at the Gatwick Airport hotels using Gatwick railway station as the transport hub. This guide lists visitor attractions and destinations with travel options, journey times and a note of any walking involved. We deliberately chose not to include London and Brighton but promoted the wider countryside and towns. The hope is that the leaflet will encourage holiday makers to make the most of their stay in the UK without going to the trouble of hiring a car.

We consider that whilst leaflets are always best they are however expensive to provide and with fewer outlets can be difficult to find. Website provision is very good but there are so many competing providers that finding the correct information can prove difficult. A quick internet search will reveal current, but also lots of out of date information. The information providers are funded others are for profit, which for a destination/accommodation/travel provider must pose a confusing decision as to which is best to advertise with and for those searching to know which to use and trust can be challenging.

With regards to the ‘Visit’ organisations there are a variety of ways in which the running and structure are managed and this can mean a lack of consistency in effectiveness and activity.

* Access: What changes, if any, are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?
By investing in rural transport the risk of travel inconvenience, disruption etc is removed. This would allow people to explore the many more locations.

Train lines closed for weekend engineering work is a problem, this can totally isolate a community and very often happens at bank holiday weekends thus dissuading visitors to visit by train. Live bus information provision where possible is a great addition which is proven to increase use of services. Far better rural internet and mobile phone provision is vital as it would allow people to access information on the go. Promotion of joint travel/entry tickets for ease of use and financial benefit. Maybe a rural Uber style taxi service.

* Funding and fiscal policies: How can public funding be best targeted to support new rural tourist businesses?

Help with promotion/advertising, travel access information and travel provision as detailed above.

* Planning and regulation: What, if any, changes are needed to regulations covering special rural areas?

Planning permission for accommodation provision needs to be made easier as staycations and ‘alternative’ accommodation becomes increasingly popular – Yurts, Glamping, farm stays. In many seaside towns the hotels have been divided into flats or are in a very rundown state is there an appetite/support to re-furbish them. A big problem is that most properties are worth more as residential units than visitor accommodation, so in Hastings for example, serviced visitor bed stock has declined from 8 000 in 1951 to around 1 000 today. They continually get planning requests for change of use from visitor accommodation to residential, which is resisted, but not always successfully. This makes finding accommodation difficult, especially difficult, for one night only.

* Infrastructure and skills: What measures are needed to ensure infrastructure meets visitor needs?

Better supported rural transport provision especially on Sundays and Bank Holidays when there is increased risk of train lines being closed due to engineering works.

* Local environment and character: How can policies balance the needs of tourism and the environment?

Better provision for tourists results in better provision for the local population. Tourism does after all equal income often for local people. Encouraging the use of and better provision of public transport leads to less traffic congestion/parking issues and therefore better relations with the residents of smaller towns and villages that are not able to cope with an increase in road traffic. However, without rural transport and provision to encourage use of local environment in a sustainable manner the special character can be damaged.

* Defra role: Should Defra play a role encouraging other government departments to support rural tourism?
Yes, we need a joined-up approach from central, regional and local government to address rural issues. For example, in terms of public transport provision at the moment the train service is set by the DfT, rural ‘bus services are funded by county councils, commercial ‘bus services are provided by the operator. A more joined-up approach may well be both more efficient, cost effective and result in better services. Partnership working, engagement and investment in CRPs could help to achieve more than just the Transport and Tourism objectives, as demonstrated in Association of Community Rail Partnerships report: http://acorp.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/140916_Value-of-CRPs-and-volunteering_final-draft-v3.17.pdf

September 2016