Background

The Pewsey Vale is a very rural area in the mid-east of Wiltshire, to the north of Salisbury Plain and forming a large part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Many villages are earmarked as conservation areas. The Pewsey Vale Tourism Partnership (PVTP) is a local, not-for-profit organisation, set up by the Pewsey Community Area Partnership in 2015 in response to, and in collaboration with, local businesses.

Having run a number of workshops and meetings with local businesses before, during and since the launch of the PVTP, and from meeting regularly with our members, we feel we have a good understanding of the challenges facing local business. We also work closely with the Parish Councils (through our work in the Pewsey Community Area Partnership) and so have a strong understanding of the local communities and their priorities as well.

The Pewsey Vale has two mainline stations – Pewsey and Bedwyn – and the Kennet & Avon Canal runs through the Vale in an east-west direction.

Marketing: How well do agencies promote rural destinations across England? What more should the Government do to support this work?

- The Pewsey Vale and the PVTP are supported well through VisitWiltshire (VW). However, the Pewsey Vale cannot compete with VW’s larger clients, such as Salisbury and Stonehenge, in terms of amount and frequency of coverage – we just aren’t as big and don’t have as much news as they do. Although this is frustrating from time to time, we appreciate the situation.
- Free advertising through Great Western Railways is a fairly new initiative that is very worthwhile and we have made use of it on behalf of our members.
- We are extremely well supported by the North Wessex Downs AONB and being located in the AONB is a very strong selling point for the Pewsey Vale.
- Getting the message out is hard work. We have a lot of high quality content, but need to make sure people are finding it. If there are well-followed hashtags or Facebook pages that we could be contributing content to, it would be good to know – could a list be maintained by VisitEngland or VisitBritain? We already make good use of VW’s hashtag #Timeforwiltshire.

Access: What, if any, changes are needed to give people better access to the coast and countryside?

- The Pewsey Vale is not far from the A303 and the M4 and is also well-connected through rail links to London and the South West. The Kennet & Avon Canal runs across the length of the Pewsey Vale in an east to west direction – this is well-used by walkers, cyclists and boats.
- However, public transport once you are in the Pewsey Vale is somewhat more difficult. We have worked with the Public Transport Unit at Wiltshire Council for the last two years to save and enhance bus services in the Pewsey Vale. What has been achieved is remarkable, given the
current financial climate, but limited, and unless we want to run a voluntary bus service ourselves (which would be unsustainable) it is unlikely to be expanded or improved upon.

- The biggest issue is rolling stock – the buses are old and frequently break down, the service therefore costs more as replacement vehicles have to be hired. As breakdowns often occur whilst the bus is in use, the service is unreliable which is irritating to users and difficult for us to market. Support for capital investment for public authorities where an economic need is identified (such as tourism) would help this situation greatly.
- The balance between the rural environment and the tourist footfall is a difficult one to strike. Communities who are on a tourist route but who don’t benefit from tourism are understandably protective about the place in which they live. Impacts on local communities should always be a consideration.
- Over the years there have been threats to the two railway stations serving the Vale, ranging from complete closure to reductions in service. This is very worrying not just for daily commuters, but for local businesses who rely on the visitor economy – a consideration that is seemingly overlooked or of low priority.

Funding and fiscal policies: How can public funding be best targeted to get new rural tourist businesses off the ground and keep them going? Are changes needed to tax levels and business rates?

- The Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) funds are distant and large. In an area such as the Pewsey Vale, almost all the businesses are micro rather than SME’s, normally owner run and managed. Therefore a local grant system, for smaller amounts would be more accessible for start-ups and local organisations.
- Funding for capital projects tends to be easier to access than for revenue projects which has halted some of our work over the last couple of years or has meant it has been done voluntarily.
- One idea we have had is to implement a cycle hire system for the Vale. Although a case could be put together to create the system, buy the bikes and so on, the running costs would not be funded through any grants that are currently available to us. A means for seed-funding running costs over a 3 to 5 year period would be very useful.
- The Sustainable Development Fund from the AONB works very well – a simple process, quick and accessible with clear priorities.
- The Area Board grants (from Wiltshire Council) are useful and easy to apply for, but are restricted to capital only costs so are very restrictive as a result.
- Money obtained from development in the form of S106 agreements or the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) can, in limited ways, be used to further tourism objectives, for example the improvement of footpaths. It is accepted that CIL funding is in its infancy and has yet to be employed extensively and that its use will have community input via parish councils. We would hope that a proportion of this money is used to promote tourism and therefore the economy in the area from which it is derived.
- Any reduction in Business Rates would help the local economy, in particular reductions for start-up businesses or on necessary infrastructure (e.g. public loos) which clearly has a knock on effect on the tourist industry.

Planning and regulation: What, if any, changes are needed to planning and other regulations covering rural areas of special character, such as National Parks, to encourage sustainable tourism?

- From a community perspective, the Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDP’s) should be supported throughout the planning process at all levels, which is not always the case.
• Government has provided local communities with this planning tool (the NDP) which in most cases sets out the local view on environmental protection and the relationship between development and the area and therefore how tourism might be affected. Once the NDP is adopted by the Local Authority, development should comply with this advice.
• The AONB should always be included in the review process for all planning applications that may impact the nature or setting of the AONB, and this should also include developments on the edge of an AONB area.
• Dark skies are one of the attractions of visiting and staying in the countryside. Light pollution can have an impact some distance from where the light source is located. More importance should be attached to this impact during the planning process and ways of reducing the impact should be actively encouraged.

Infrastructure and skills: What measures are needed to ensure transport, housing and other infrastructure meets visitor needs? How can the sector ensure there are enough people with the right skills to support customers and businesses?
• Patchy or no mobile phone network coverage across the Pewsey Vale is a major problem. The unpredictability of the service is a major problem both for visitors and many small businesses alike.
• Service levels in some areas on the OfCOM map for mobile coverage are inaccurately displayed because there are hills in the way of the signal, therefore getting any interest for improvement in the area is difficult.
• Access to high speed broadband is improving but there are many areas with low speed copper wire technology which is also susceptible to frequent interruption. Satellite technology (usually cited as an alternative) is not always appropriate to achieve a reliable, faster service.
• Public transport is limited and we do the best with what we have. More reliable, more accessible buses providing a more frequent and wider service would be a great improvement. There is strong support from parish councils for a sustainable and improved public transport network.
• Because funding for running costs is so difficult to access or just not available, much of the work in promoting rural areas is done on a voluntary basis, which is not sustainable.
• The problem of providing sufficient people with the right skills to support businesses, and therefore tourism, might be helped by training (e.g. apprenticeships) and attracting the right type of businesses into the area (for example if there is a lack of overnight accommodation in the area, this could be specifically addressed). Funding, business rate 'holidays', grants and so on would all help to provide this type of fundamental basis to stimulate this requirement.
• The Local Authority decision to close public conveniences to save money is extremely detrimental to the tourism industry – for example most tour coaches will not stop at villages or towns where there are no public loos. In the village of Pewsey, the Parish Council was given the opportunity to take over the loos, but this impacts on Parish Council costs and volunteer time and effort.
• Access to public toilets is not such an issue in large towns and cities, where fast food outlets, supermarkets and cafes are common and so their facilities are often used by the public if no public conveniences are available or located close by. This is not the case in the countryside and so a scheme to provide grants and business rates relief could be made available to support running costs and to encourage businesses to open up their facilities to the public.
• Planning and business rates support should be improved to encourage more tourist accommodation to be provided.
Local environment and character: How can national and local policies get the right balance between growing tourism and enhancing the local environment and character?

- More funding to improve public transport solutions would be beneficial to both the visitor economy and the residents of the Pewsey Vale.
- A more even spread of tourism across the calendar year would be beneficial to local businesses, employment prospects of those in the industry and infrastructure (road traffic issues for example). Is there the possibility for allowing more flexibility on school holiday timings?
- Listen to advice and concerns from the local communities and then take action on that advice.

Defra role: What more should the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs do to ensure government departments (including Departments for Communities and Local Government, Business, Innovation and Skills, Culture Media and Sport and HM Treasury) support rural tourism?

- Recognise the cost of running a rural business is often greater than that of an urban business. For example, the owner often has to provide accommodation because transport isn’t available, or have to transport their workers themselves.
- Remove the need to have a taxi licence for businesses who would like to provide a lift to or from a location to their customers. Often a lift from or to the station is the only option and for such a requirement to be imposed on the business is unreasonable.
- Recognise the need to support locally driven and smaller initiatives financially. Many funds (e.g. Big Lottery funding) are generally aimed at larger projects and organisations that are not voluntarily run. Grant schemes often have a long and complicated application process. Smaller destinations and voluntary groups just don’t have the bandwidth for major projects and therefore have to split a programme of ideas and initiatives into smaller bundles of effort and cost. The complexity and time-consuming processes for many funds excludes voluntary groups from accessing the funds. Grants often don’t allow revenue costs or are only eligible for certain geographic areas. Make grant application processes easier.

September 2016