

Visit Wales - Mid Wales Regional Tourism Forum

24th April 2020

Virtual (online) Meeting

List of attendees representing the following organisations:
Royal Welsh Agricultural Society
Mid North Powys Tourism Network
Mid Wales Tourism
Cambrian Training Company
BHA Wales Chair / Lake Vyrnwy
Brecon Beacons NPA
Cambrian Mountains Initiative
Wales Activity Tourism Organisation
Salop Leisure
Dyfi Biosphere
Natural Resources Wales
Ceredigion County Council
Brecon Beacons Tourism
Tynrhyd Retreat
Powys County Council
Metropole Hotel & Spa
Best of Wales
Penrhos Golf Club
Transport for Wales
Mid Wales Tourism
Visit Wales representatives
Apologies
Growing Mid Wales
RSPB
Aberystwyth University

Welcome & Introductions – Steve Hughson

SH welcomed members, thanked them for their attendance during these worrying times and also thanked Visit Wales (VW) and Welsh Government (WG) for their work and support.

SH expressed his sorrow at the passing of Forum member and National Trust representative, Paul Boland. Paul had been a valued member of the Mid Forum almost since its inception and was also a director of Mid Wales Tourism.

SH assured members that through his attendance at the weekly Tourism Management Board meetings their concerns and those of the industry were being heard at the highest levels of WG. He encouraged members to continue to feed through any concerns to him on an ongoing basis.

Chair also introduced Jason Thomas; he thanked members for their ongoing support during these difficult times and also endorsed SH's words of condolence regarding Paul Boland. JT gave assurances that VW and WG appreciate industry concerns during these unprecedented times. He gave an overview of how far the industry has travelled in such a short space of time and that tourism was one of the first industries to feel the hit of COVID-19 and appreciated that it would be one of the last to recover. Although recognising that there are currently some gaps in funding support and sympathising with industry worries, he explained that WG is exploring further solutions in addition to current delivery of a Loan scheme through the Development Bank for Wales and the recently launched Economic Resilience Fund. He stressed that applications should be submitted as a matter of urgency, as the fund had experienced overwhelming demand in a very short time. He also stated that recovery planning is being worked on across Welsh Government in order to be in a position to support the industry when the times is right.

Officers from VW then dealt in turn with a number of questions submitted by forum members in advance of the meeting.

Grant / Loan Support – Rhidian Morgan

RM provided an update on the support mechanisms available to businesses and encouraged all to seek out information on business grants / loans support, all available on Business Wales website: <https://businesswales.gov.wales/coronavirus-advice/>. RM stressed the importance of applying immediately for the Welsh Government Economic Resilience Funds due the scale of current applications already submitted.

RM confirmed that VW Micro Small Business Fund & Wales Tourism Investment Fund are currently on hold to new applications, but any applicants who are in receipt of grant offers will be honoured.

In response to members' concerns, RM also endorsed JT's comment and emphasised that VW and WG are doing everything possible to find solutions to the current funding gaps and recognised that this is a very worrying and unsettling time for the tourism industry, including a large number of self-employed and freelance workers.

General Tourism Policy – Rob Holt

RH assured members that VW was aware of all of the issues raised through the members' questions, but that it remained extremely useful to have received them. He encouraged the industry to maintain the flow of information and communication with VW and Business Wales in order to feed the issues through to Ministers at a Wales and UK level.

The issue of the revised guidance in relation to self-catering accommodation and eligibility for the Business Rate Grants was raised strongly by a number of members and was felt to be of a major concern among this sector. RH was well aware of the concerns and said the aim was to ensure that only bona fide businesses accessed the support. He nonetheless recognised the view that the criteria set a very high bar which many genuine S/C businesses might not be able to meet. He noted that Local Authorities have discretion on the matter and advised businesses to submit applications and to follow up with conversations with the relevant LA. AD stated that existing applicants were currently being contacted by Ceredigion CC regarding this. JL said that businesses could make contact and she would feed through to the business rates team or they could be contacted directly on 01597 826345.

A number of members expressed concern that the considerations by each LA were not consistent. JT re-iterated that guidelines are clear and that LAs have discretion and are accountable for this grant administration. RH advised local authority colleagues to contact WLGA on matters concerning the guidance on which businesses fall within the definitions under the business rate relief scheme.

Taking into account the likelihood that 2020 season would be mainly lost, members expressed a need for support until the start of the 2021 season to prevent many operators from going into administration. Timing criteria around the current UK funded furloughing support was also proving to be difficult for some members. Discussions around these issues followed and RH re-iterated earlier comments and gave assurances that further support mechanisms are being discussed and explored.

In response to the questions regarding re-opening post lockdown, RH indicated that no clear advice is possible at this time regarding when and how restrictions might be lifted. He emphasised that this was a core activity undertaken at present at a Wales and UK level. Industry anxiety around re-opening the various sectors and the associated issues (such as possible deep cleaning etc.) was also discussed. RH felt that the partial re-opening of some sites, such as caravan parks, was challenging, but said that VW was fully aware of the issues and that industry feedback would be used to develop plans for opening with social distancing measures in place; he also fully acknowledged the difficulties in the visitor economy context.

RH clarified that Wales does not have a Coronavirus (COVID-19) Destination Management Resilience Scheme like Visit England for DMO support but encouraged relevant organisations to apply via the WG Economic Resilience Fund.

Research – Jo Corke

JC updated members on surveys and collaboration the Research & Insights team have been undertaking. JC has been leading on tourism business surveys taking place on a fortnightly basis and the results of which fed to Tourism Management Board. Due to the unprecedented circumstances, information is fluctuating widely and changing on a weekly basis. The team plans to move onto concentrating on renewal and recovery plans through identifying key sources and using comparative analysis over the next few weeks. RH thanked the LAs, Mid Wales Tourism and the other tourism associations/industry networks in helping to communicate VW's messages, via the industry newsletter, regional surveys, etc.

Marketing / Recovery Planning – Lucy Von Weber

LVW began by acknowledging the benefit of VW being within WG at this crucial time. Since March, VW paused any overt marketing and has been using 'Visit Wales – Later' as the main focus of communications on consumer social media and also been maintaining contact with travel trade. As well as working with colleagues across Wales, VW is in regular contact with Visit Britain counterparts and Scotland and others. The recovery plan would take its lead from Public Health and wider WG policy before VW would begin to soften the messaging.

In response to members' questions, LVW explained that VW will provide members with an update on short to mid-term planning information over the next 7-14 days. There was a balance with regard to marketing communications at this time; specifically, between keeping Wales visible to consumers in the right way (e.g. when many are not actively looking for destination information) while public health is an overriding concern and the phasing and logistics of restrictions are still unclear. It's not possible to work within distinct timings but potential activity will be broken down into phases and preparing messaging and content for consumer, travel trade, business events; we will move from a reactive phase to a reassurance phase in the short to mid-term. Many destinations have been producing material including film edits and other content that came out very early in the crisis but there is much "white noise" online at the moment. Planning is also featuring visitor management considerations at its core e.g. how to balance what may be a surge demand against supply and bearing in mind localised pressures that may come into play. Members discussed the role local communities have to play post lockdown and that messages need to be consistent from the various stakeholders/organisations, e.g. the farming unions.

DWM thanked VW for recent help in coordinating a travel writer visit to the Cambrian Mountains and looked forward to working together further when the collateral produced can be shared and promoted. LVW said that working with partners would be more important than ever moving forward and welcomed the willingness expressed by members to work in cooperation with VW. She thanked everyone for the invaluable feedback received, all of which is fed into planning and reiterated that members should continue to contact VW if they wanted to discuss specific marketing considerations.

LVW also thanked MWT for their support through their own membership newsletter; she also encouraged members to ensure they were signed up to Visit Wales' Newsletter; it provides the most up to date key information and tries to encapsulate as an easy to use digest with links to other information -

<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKWALES/subscriber/new>

Any other business

AW gave a brief update; saying that 86% of hospitality and 45% of food and manufacturing have been furloughed, which showed the close linkages and interdependency between the two industries. For information, he also gave the good news that Wales is in the shortlist of the World Chefs Congress 2024, with voting to take place in Europe prior to going head to head against Singapore in a World Vote Late July Early August 2020.

Chair / Closing Remarks

SH closed the meeting by thanking members for their valuable input throughout this difficult crisis. He reminded everyone to ensure they receive the VW Industry Newsletter; this is the key mechanism to keep up to date in order to keep informed of funding support and any developments. He also reminded everyone of their role as Forum members, to cascade information received through their relevant networks and to send issues to HJ for discussion at the weekly COVID 19 briefings.

Date of next meeting: The next virtual meeting will take place on May 27th, 11am – 1pm.