

Toolkit - Making your Tourism Association more sustainable

Introduction

Creating, building and maintaining a successful Tourism Association (TA) is not easy. It is resource intensive. Those involved in our industry are typically individualists and not natural 'joiners' - they need persuasion. Many are also now looking to the digital space for their communities of interest rather than traditional organisations. But the future of tourism in Wales depends on a healthy network of TAs.

Tourism Associations (TAs) come in many varieties, shapes and sizes. Many in Wales have been operating for a long time, pre-dating, in some cases, 'official' tourist boards. It may be helpful to think about TAs in terms of the following categories of interest, operational scope and activities where any one TA will 'pick and mix' between them:

Interest	Scope of Operation	Activities
Place Sector Profession	International UK Wales Regional Local/ Destination Community	Product Quality Product Development Marketing/ Information Content Creation Business Development Member Benefits Communications Networking Advocacy CPD/ Training Destination Partnership Benchmarking Commercial Contracts

But despite any differences in history, scope and scale there are a set of common characteristics which are shared by all successful Tourism Associations. These 'critical success factors' can be summarised as follows:

- A shared vision and set of (positive) aims and objectives
- A clear and distinctive role fulfilling a proven need

- A realistic activity/ business plan commensurate with needs and resources which seeks to do deliver a limited number of high-quality activities
- A good reputation built on results
- Formal and transparent governance arrangements with clear roles allocated and effective succession-planning
- Plural funding sources and financial stability
- An explicit commitment to partnership working within and beyond its 'territory'
- A high level of penetration in its identified community of interest - to demonstrate a truly representative intent
- A commitment to internal and external communications with a dedicated point of contact
- An inclusive approach to membership
- The ability to get to a size which generates increasing self-sufficiency
- Purposeful, uplifting and positive activities - a genuine 'buzz'
- Clear leadership from the private sector which reflects the 'personality' of the organisation
- A commercial and professional approach to 'voluntary' activities

As well as helping TAs become more sustainable, these kinds of factors are also important if you are seeking to attract support from public sector, commercial partners or sponsors.

Let us look at each of these in a bit more detail

A shared vision and set of (positive) aims and objectives

Do all your stakeholders understand the enduring purpose of the organisation and the things you are trying to achieve? When did you last revisit these and have you written them down? Are they still 'fit for purpose'? Vision and Aims should be looked at every few years with objectives more frequently.

Do you stand 'for' something rather than 'against'? Some organisations come into being in reaction to a perceived or actual threat and change to the status quo. Others may coalesce around a particular event or anniversary. Experience tells us that TAs with positive and longer term aims have a much better survival rate.

A clear and distinctive role fulfilling a proven need

There are plenty of TAs in Wales - well over 70 at the last count - so it is important that yours is providing a set of functions and services which are genuinely distinctive and needed. Look at what other organisations are offering to your stakeholders. If they are doing similar things better then open up dialogue and see what added value cooperation might bring.

Do not be precious about your role - your stakeholders will probably already belong to a range of different networks and organisations and can distinguish where they can get best value

A realistic activity/ business plan which seeks to do deliver a limited number of high-quality activities

Not every TA needs a full-blown business plan (unless in support of a substantial funding bid) but it is important for all to set out clearly and simply 'what' is planned for the next year or two, ideally backed up by the 'why', 'how', 'who', 'when' and 'how much' (time and money).

This approach helps identify what the TA can realistically achieve with the resources it has and what it is best placed to deliver. An agreed plan helps you concentrate on doing fewer things, better, and resist the temptation to do everything for everyone.

When developing your plan see how it can help deliver specific requirements of the local destination plan or the Wales Tourism Strategy - Partnership for Growth

allowing others to concentrate elsewhere. This is particularly important if you are seeking funding from public sources.

A good reputation built on results

Sticking to and building on what you are good at also enhances your reputation not just with those you directly seek to represent but also a wider range of stakeholders who can positively influence lines of support. How do you enhance and protect your reputation through your communications, activities and actions?

Formal and transparent governance arrangements with clear roles allocated and effective succession-planning

Just as with business planning the level of accountability and scrutiny is ‘horses for courses’, depending on levels of activity and turnover, but it is important that all TAs have clear governance arrangements. Is it obvious how your organisation is structured eg board/ committee, general meetings, working groups etc, who is responsible for what eg Chair, Treasurer, Secretary etc and how (and how often) appointments are made?

Inevitably, the majority of work within in any TA falls to a limited number of people and so it is important that each is clear about the roles they are being asked to fulfil. It may help to develop a matrix to see what priority ‘boxes’ need to be filled through a recruitment process bearing in mind each candidate is likely to wear a number of ‘hats’ - here is an example for a typical destination-based TA where proving a wide representation base is important. (This is drawn from a real live example with a board of around a dozen directors).

Function/ Lead Role	Board	Expertise	Sector	Product Themes	Geography
Chair		Legal	Hotel	Walking	Urban
Vice-Chairs		Financial/ Funding	B+B/ Guest Accom	Golf	Rural
Company Sec		Marketing	Self-Catering	Watersports	Coastal
Treasurer		IT	Caravan +	Heritage	

		Camping		
Secretariat	Project Management	Golf	Well-being	
Communications	HR	Adventure Activities	Music	
Membership	Sales	Attractions	Business	
Events		Events	Family-friendly	
CPD		Food and Drink	Cycling	
Product Development		Retail		
Destination Management		Arts and Culture		
		Transport		
		Ambassadors		

In Wales we seem to live by the dictum ‘if you want something done, ask a busy person’ so the willing and able can soon find themselves over-loaded. The matrix approach helps to spread the load, but TAs also need to plan for succession - set time limits for roles for example, appoint deputies for key roles and give opportunities to new blood.

The majority of TAs in Wales are formal voluntary organisations (ie with a written constitution and a bank account) but a growing number of others are now incorporated, usually as Companies Limited by Guarantee or Community Interest Companies. Incorporation brings significant advantages in terms of limiting personal liability, the transparency processes of company law and the ability to register for VAT, but also brings formal reporting responsibilities and possible liability for Corporation Tax. Increasingly external funders and business partners also seek the reassurance that incorporation offers.

Plural funding sources and financial stability

Like any small businesses, TAs need to spread their risks in terms of income streams and business activities, and hold reserves against a ‘rainy day’ event. Over-dependence on any one source of funds can create jeopardy, and public sector funding can bring particular additional demands in terms of application and evaluation processes, cashflow difficulties, stop-start availability and leading TAs

away from their core purposes through fund-chasing. Successful TAs think about the services they deliver to support their core purposes in exchange for the funds they raise from a variety of internal and external stakeholders. They think about maximising those income sources which are in their control and offer continuity year on year.

Those stakeholders will also want to know how you are doing financially so it is important that you can provide profit and loss and balance sheet information to demonstrate stability over time

An explicit commitment to partnership working within and beyond its 'territory'

Visitors are no respecters of borders - whether lines on maps or sectors within the tourism offer so it is important that we also share that visitor perspective. Many destination TAs are dominated by accommodation providers. Do you have regular communication with all those other components of the visitor experience? Do you see neighbours as competitors or collaborators?

A commitment to internal and external communications with a dedicated point of contact

Successful TAs are extrovert by nature with a clear plan to communicate with all those, within or outside the organisation, affected by their activities. But, even in the digital age, effective communications can be resource intensive. Of course communication is two-way; what about those who want to contact you - do you have an identified and responsive point of contact with a name and a variety of channels - phone, e mail, social media etc.?

An 'inclusive' approach to membership and/or participation

Every TA needs to set a bar in terms of shared beliefs and ethical business standards, but an open and inclusive approach to recruitment will foster growth

and dynamism. This may sound obvious, but think about the barriers you may be (even unconsciously) putting in the way of more tourism businesses and individuals getting involved - fee levels, time and place of meetings and events, membership criteria, breadth of communication.

A high level of penetration in its identified community of interest - to demonstrate a truly representative intent

Size may not be everything - especially for those organisations active in specialist areas of tourism - but authority is, and that comes with a clear demonstration that a TA is truly representative of the community of interest it is targeting. Have you set targets for market penetration as well as income for example? Do you have the key 'movers and shakers' on board?

The ability to get to a size which generates increasing self-sufficiency

Again, the ultimate size of a TA may be governed by its stated target market but evidence from Wales and elsewhere suggests that genuinely sustainable TAs are those who have a dedicated human resource at their heart, providing focus and drive for communications and profitable activities. This pre-supposes a critical mass of income. In those organisations charging a basic membership fee this might translate into the need to attract c100 members. More stakeholders engaged also increases credibility and authority. Has your TA done the calculations? How much do you want to grow? Are there enough opportunities to fuel that growth?

Purposeful, uplifting and positive activities - a genuine 'buzz'

Tourism is about creating fun and great experiences for our visitors. It is the same for your stakeholders - they need to feel the investment (of time and energy as well as cash) they make in their TA is rewarded, not just through a business transaction, but because involvement makes a real difference to their business and brings an infectious 'buzz' of excitement. Operating a small tourism business can be a lonely job so don't underestimate the importance of the social and networking aspects of your TA.

Clear leadership from the private sector which reflects the ‘personality’ of the organisation

TAs are organisations for the tourism industry comprising operators seeking to generate tourism activity and income, but are themselves also small tourism businesses, so demand commercially oriented leadership. While a strong and positive relationship with the public sector is highly desirable, not least in developing successful destination partnerships, TAs cannot be considered sustainable if this relationship becomes dependency. That’s not to say all private sector candidates are all natural leaders - it is important that those chosen to head up TAs have the respect of stakeholders and are committed to the stated vision, aims and objectives of the organisation alongside an entrepreneurial approach to developing the business.

A commercial and professional approach to ‘voluntary’ activities

It is sometimes easy confuse ‘voluntary’ for ‘amateur’. Most TAs are the former, but those involved in their governance and activities are far from the latter. Successful TAs adopt best business practice as a matter of course for good reasons - even if turnover and activities are sometimes relatively modest, reputation, accountability and credibility need to be jealously protected. It’s not just about business planning either. Do you advertise and interview for board/ committee members against a clear job description? Do you offer training to those managing your activities? Happily much help is at hand to develop your people and your association whether through Business Wales www.businesswales.gov.uk, Wales Council for Voluntary Action www.wcva.org.uk, local authorities or the many county-based voluntary sector bureaux.

Comparator Case Studies

Comparators

Based on the exemplars identified during the recent research there are a number of model approaches for more sustainable organisations. We are aware that destinations across Wales eg Pembrokeshire have already started looking at some of these options.

Across the UK there are an emerging cohort of legacy Tourist Boards eg

- Visit Cornwall (www.visitcornwall.com/industry)
- Cumbria Tourism (www.visitcumbria.org)
- Visit Kent (www.visitkentbusiness.co.uk)
- Shropshire Tourism (www.shropshiretourism.co.uk)
- Northumberland Tourism (www.northumberlandtourism.org)

where the Tourism Membership Organisation is the Destination Management Organisation (rather than just a partner in it). These are all identified as destination partners by Visit England (Visit Britain)

Covering large but not all necessarily popular county destinations they have made the transition from public to private sector while retaining the unassailable 'official' Tourist Board reputational tag. They raise funds from sponsorship, brand partnerships and commercial activity as well as individual businesses. Membership fees are linked primarily to marketing benefits with again the comfort of involvement in 'official' destination campaigns. County-wide coverage affords economies of scale and a sustainable professional executive team. As an example Visit Cornwall's fees range from £93 to £665 per annum.

Visit Cornwall and Cumbria Tourism have been enthusiastic advocates of the 'fairbooking' initiative which puts them clearly on the side of the small accommodation provider faced with Online Travel Agent commission rates. Visit Cornwall sells a strong set of brand values and a great story alongside its membership package cf:

https://www.visitcornwall.com/sites/default/files/generic_files/Visit%20Cornwall%20Membership%20Booklet%202016.pdf

Visit Kent and Visit Shropshire provide free listings for all tourism businesses but members get enhanced entries and exposure on websites and through campaigns.

Following the business model of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) - focused business plan, core funds raised by a levy on business rates, 5 year funding cycles voted on by eligible businesses, incorporated structure - there are now equivalent Tourism BIDs operating in the UK which have absorbed the membership and roles of previous Destination Management Organisations in **Inverness and Loch Ness** (www.visitinvernesslochness.com/trade), **Great Yarmouth and Torbay** (www.trtbid.co.uk) which retain 'official' destination status with Visit Scotland and Visit England In **Lincoln** (www.lincolnbig.co.uk) the city-centre BID has also taken on a range of tourism functions including operation of the TIC. In its last reported year it turned over £1.3m of which 50% was spent on Marketing and Events. There are a number of BIDs now operating in Wales which could be encouraged to take on a wider visitor economy remit.

Closer to home we find more hybrid solutions although again marketing exposure is the key to driving membership:

Covering parts of 3 counties and 2 countries, **Wye Valley and Forest of Dean Tourism Association** (<https://wyedeantourism.biz/members>) has direct responsibility for the destination website, which provides comprehensive listings although members receive enhanced exposure as well as a range of other benefits. Fees range from £50 - £350. The Association still relies heavily on volunteer input to discharge all its functions and services but does fund a part-time executive director post on a consultancy basis to drive forward marketing, social media, pr and recruitment. WVFDTA is a key partner in Destination Management issues, with aspirations to be seen as the DMO in time.

Under the aegis of a wider Sustainable Destination Partnership, **Brecon Beacons Tourism** (www.breconbeaconstourism.org) is the lead trade partner with a joint stake in the destination website (with the National Park Authority) and undertaking wider PR and social media campaign activity as well as providing a range of

membership benefits. Membership fees range from £52.50 to £262.50. Again volunteer input remains important, but BBT does employ a part-time Director. There are many smaller local community or product-based groupings across the Beacons and these are typically affiliated to BBT and included in communications activity.

It should be noted that for each of the organisations above membership numbers are measured in 100s not 10s. For each there was initially genuine anxiety about raising fees to more commercially viable levels but membership has stayed strong. Each has undertaken a detailed and honest business planning process. It is also no surprise that focused leadership by particular individuals, both volunteers and paid staff, has played a large part in their success and growth.

In terms of sector-representative groups that are not primarily concerned with marketing, those that have a wider UK membership base and remit eg BHA and BHHPA are seen as strong exemplars. One that has only one member in Wales currently, but strong membership in Scotland as well as England, is the **Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (www.alva.org.uk)**. Membership is open to individual attractions, operators of multi-site attractions or dedicated attractions consortia which achieve a total of 1 million visitors + per annum. ALVA's remit is advocacy, exchange of good practice, networking and professional development and benchmarking. Membership embraces public, private and voluntary sector and attractions which are free and paid entry.