

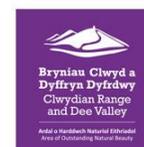


Evaluation of the Eat Stay Do Project
to identify a
Future Direction for the Clwydian Range Tourism Group

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**All photos from www.visitclwydianrange.co.uk unless otherwise stated.*

BACKGROUND

With support from Cadwyn Clwyd and the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB, the **Clwydian Range Tourism Group** (CRTG) have recently concluded a three-year project called Stay, Eat, Do. The aim of the project was to facilitate cooperation and collaboration by local tourism product and service providers, to offer a combination of unique experiences to tourists, to encourage them to stay longer in the region and thus enhance the benefits to the local economy and community

The aforementioned project made great strides in engaging current members as well as attracting new members to the group and the board are keen not to lose the momentum the project generated, especially at a time of isolation and closure, both temporary and permanent, of tourism related businesses. The project has also attracted new members to the voluntary board.

With all the work achieved to date and the current Covid pandemic’s disruption to the sector the board of directors feel now is the opportune moment to regroup with members and revisit work streams.

The Aim of the work is to:

- Re-look at the groups’ aims and objectives, make a judgement of their relevance and set new ones.
- Undertake an evaluation of what the group has achieved to date with significance to the tourism sector in North-East Wales.
- Identify a new strategic direction for the groups’ sustainable future.

It’s recognised that the future direction of the organisation can’t be finalised over a couple of workshops. This work and any recommendations should therefore be the basis for further development by the board, and validation / ratification by the members and other businesses (potential businesses) in the wider sector.

Following an initial inception meeting an interactive online workshop was held with CRTG board members to reflect on the group's activities and achievements to date. We discussed issues around capacity, financial sustainability, and the strategic positioning of the organisation, and identified what feedback we needed from members and businesses.

A wide-ranging online survey was distributed to members and tourism businesses through established mailing lists, social media pages and networks to gather their thoughts on the support they've received and their thoughts on the group. Unfortunately, despite distributing to over 200 contacts only 27 replies were submitted, so although the results give a valuable insight into the perceptions and thoughts of local businesses, the sample is not considered large enough to draw any definitive findings on their own.

The respondents were then invited to a follow up workshop to discuss these findings in more details. Four independent businesses attended this workshop alongside representatives from the board and the group's administrator.

A final workshop was then held with the Board members and strategic partners (DCC & CR&DV AONB) to discuss all the findings and identify a way forward.

Note: *The results of the online survey have been provided separately to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.*

Over the years the CRTG have undertaken a wide range of activities to support the tourism sector and local businesses. These have been undertaken either as part of the core activities of the group, or through specific funded projects such as 'Eat, Stay, Do'. They include:

- Sharing information, news and updates relevant to the tourism sector (including Covid-10 specific updates and advice)
- Provide opportunities to collaborate with others
- Provide opportunities to learn from others
- Networking
- Lobby on behalf of the interests of the local businesses and wider sector
- Represent the sector at regional events
- Provide links with the Local Authorities and the AONB
- Aimed to promote sustainable tourism, and encourage businesses to make the link with the AONB as a USP.
- Provide training opportunities and workshops
- Direct visitors to businesses through the website
- Host two Tourism Forums annually
- Developing new supply chains and/or products What the Sector Values

Specific projects such as 'Eat Stay Do' have been evaluated and shown to have had a positive impact on the sector. However, it's difficult to quantify the impact of some of the day-to-day 'core' activities that have taken place over the past 20 years. To overcome this, we can look at what elements the members and businesses value.

The most valued activities as identified by two-thirds of the respondents to our survey and validated in the following workshops, were '*the sharing of tourism related news and information*' and providing '*networking opportunities*.' These

were followed by providing the opportunities to ‘collaborate’ and ‘learn’ from others.

A third of respondents also noted that ‘Associating the business with the AONB and Tourism’ was a benefit, as were the ‘training opportunities and workshops.’

The common theme that emerges here is that the type of support that is most valued by the sector is:

- Business Support
- Facilitating Peer to Peer support and networking.

This was reinforced when we asked what people expected from their memberships, with the most popular responses in order being; i) Collaboration & Networking, ii) Support & Advice, iii) Information & Knowledge, iv) PR & Promotion

When asked what makes CRTG unique, the feedback noted their ‘area specific / local angle’ and their focus on ‘sustainability. Sustainability (environmental, social and economic) was highly valued by respondents across the board (av 4.2/5).

WHAT THE AUTHORITIES VALUE

It’s also interesting to note how the group is valued by the Local Authorities, as that is also a barometer of their past achievement and indication of their future role.

Within Denbighshire at least, CRTG is currently the only active membership group of tourism businesses. This makes them a valued representative of the private sector, and a vital consultee in the development of any regional policy, strategy or plan. The AONB also see them as ‘the voice of reason’ to validate their proposed initiatives and projects.

Members of CRTG also sit on the three Destination Management Partnerships (although details of Wrexham and Flintshire reps and feedback from these partnerships were vague). In Denbighshire, the chair of the DMP sits on the DCC Tourism Strategy Group, giving CRTG members a direct route to influence on the Local Authority’s regional policy.

KEY LEARNING

We have drawn out some key learning from the groups past activities, specific projects such as ‘Eat Stay Do,’ and the responses by businesses and members to inform the discussion about the future strategic direction of the organisation.

LESSONS LEARNT

- There is a mixed perception of what the group does and what it’s priorities should be.
- The vast majority of respondents to the survey rarely or never check the CRTG members website.
- The majority (over 80%) state that e-mail / electronic newsletter is their preferred medium of communication with CRTG. (A social media group was the next most popular.
- The main reason businesses haven’t paid/renewed their membership fee is that they haven’t been asked! (*During 2020-21 the group didn’t charge a fee, recognising the financial pressures caused by the Covid Pandemic.*)
- Hybrid working is the way forward. Online events and workshops have proved popular and have enable more people (especially considering members are busy running their businesses) to engage, however the benefits/products/experiences aren’t as good as ‘face to face’ interactions.
- Development of product clusters is legally unfeasible for small providers because of legislation around package holidays.
- CRTG has historically aimed to support the entire sector, but this raises questions about the value of membership (if everyone benefits regardless) and therefore the sustainability of the current business model.

QUESTIONS RAISED

- Is the market / landscape at capacity or is there space for new entrants to access the sector sustainably
- How many businesses closed over Covid-19, and what has/will/can replace them?

A BRIEF REVIEW OF CRTG'S CURRENT AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The group's current Objectives are outlined in their Business Plan, which was developed in 2012:

1. Promote sustainable tourism amongst members of the co-operative.
2. Provide support, advice and networking opportunities to members of the co-operative, in the running of their businesses.
3. Promote and maintain liaison and consultation with public, private and voluntary service organisations.
4. Work in partnership with Denbighshire and Flintshire County Councils, and other bodies, to promote the Clwydian Range as a major tourist destination.
5. Ensure that the co-operative is given due recognition as a group of businesses within the Clwydian Range and that statutory bodies seek the views of the trade on all tourism related matters.

It became apparent during the first workshop with the Board members that although the existing Business Plan and the Objectives within it broadly reflect the historic activities of the group, they are not actively working towards them and they are not at the forefront of decision making. This is perhaps understandable given that the document is 9 years old and much has changed in the industry since then.

However, these objectives are not stated anywhere on the group's websites, social media, or other publications either. There is also no defined Vision or Mission Statement that defines and explains what they are, and what is their overarching goal / purpose.

This means that it's hard for prospective members to judge what the purpose of the group is, and how they can gain from becoming members. It also makes it difficult for the group to evaluate their progress and highlight the good work being done.

WHAT THE BUSINESSES SAID

When we asked respondents to the online survey to rank which or the five current objectives were most relevant to their businesses today, there were some interesting results.

The highest average ranking was for *'Providing Support, advice & networking opportunities...'* (2). This was closely followed by *'Promoting sustainable tourism...'* (1) although this split opinions, with half of respondents noting it as the highest priority and the other half putting it 3rd or lower.

Working in partnership with Local Authorities and other organisations (3) also scored relatively high in 3rd place. *'Promote and maintain liaison and consultation with public, private and voluntary service organisations'* (4) scored lower, and *'Ensure that the co-operative is given due recognition as a group of businesses within the Clwydian Range and that statutory bodies seek the views of the trade on all tourism related matters'* (5) was the lowest priority by far.

MOVING FORWARDS

A review of the Objectives will depend on the future strategic direction of the group, which is discussed in the next section. However here are a couple of recommendations:

- Identify an overall Vision or Mission statement that your Aims & Objectives need to deliver. It should be a sentence or two at most that clearly and concisely defines the nature and purpose of the group.
- Objectives need to be SMART (Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time Constrained)
- More general ambitions can be captured as Aims, each with specific objective(s).

Example:

Aim: *Increase Membership Numbers*
Objective: *Increase membership numbers to 100 across the three Local Authorities by 2022, and to 300 by 2024.*

IDENTIFYING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Looking to the future, CRTG are considering changes and adaptations to ensure that they are established as a valued, effective, and resilient organisation that support the needs of businesses in the current visitor economy. This section outlines the results of the collaborative co-production workshop held with the board and strategic partners, in the context of the previously discussed findings.

CONSIDERATIONS

Any discussion about the future direction and activities of the group has to consider a number of key factors:

Consideration		Current Situation
Capacity	How much capacity does the group have to deliver outcomes through volunteer board members, paid staff, & members?	10 volunteer board members; 5 hours/week paid administration.
Resources (or access to)	Funding, property, materials, online platforms, office equipment, etc	Very limited funds and income streams; 2x websites, Social Media platforms; some AONB support for core costs (admin); occasional project funding (small).
Sustainability & Resilience	Securing long term and stable resources & capacity to deliver the activities of the organisation.	Sustainable growth limited by a lack of active board members & limited income.
Positioning	How does CRTG fit with other organisations? Opportunities to collaborate, lead, act, enable, or influence? Competing organisations?	Only active trade member organisation (in Denbighshire); Valued sector rep for LA's & AONB. Only active tourism association within the AONB. Rep on 3xDMP's.
Unique Selling Point	What does the group offer that differentiates it from other similar organisations?	Area specific / local angle; Focus on Sustainability; only active member org in the sector.
Value	The value that the organisation can offer the sector, and what the sector demands.	As discussed in previous pages

DEFINE YOUR IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

As an organisation, CRTG has undertaken such a range of roles and activities to support the sector over the years that businesses (and to some extent the board!) have varied perceptions on what it does and/or should be doing.

We recommend that you spend some time considering and defining what the role of CRTG is. What it does, how it does it, and why. Two key themes emerged from this work that identified that CRTG's purpose (the reason you exist as an organisation) is twofold:

- To promote sustainable tourism within the AONB for the benefit of the landscape and businesses
- To specifically support small and microbusinesses, especially in rural areas.

You should decide if you agree with these purposes and if so, it should then inform and guide everything you do as an organisation.

To communicate this with your members and the wider sector, you should develop a Mission Statement or something similar. It should be a sentence or two at most that clearly and concisely defines the nature and purpose of the group.

POSITION THE ORGANISATION

Focus on your strengths and areas where you can make the greatest impact and provide the greatest benefits to your members and the wider sector. The more value you can offer, the more attractive you will be to potential members.

Identify opportunities to collaborate rather than competing against other organisations. This will help you influence regional developments and pool your resources with others to have a greater impact.

PRIORITISE

At present CRTG has limited capacity to deliver which means that to provide a valued service / product that business value, you need to focus and prioritise your activities. This exercise has identified that the elements most valued by members and businesses are:

- | | |
|---|---|
| Business Support: | Sharing news and information; promote benefits of sustainable tourism ; associate with AONB; Training & Workshops |
| Peer to Peer support and networking: | Networking; enabling business to business collaboration & shared learning |

We've also identified the influential and unique role the group has in **representing the voice of the private sector and influencing regional priorities and policies**. The businesses themselves don't seem to realise this, and it needs to be highlighted as it's a real added value for members and a reason to engage with the group.

Taking this approach would mean that the CRTG becomes much more inward facing, focused on developing the skills, knowledge and capacity of members and influencing local developments within the industry. And the simplest way to do it would be through reviewing and adopting new Aims & Objectives that reflect this.

This would obviously be to the detriment of the current efforts on the public/visitor facing element of promotion and advertising. Although this might be controversial, there is a strong feeling that CRTG are merely duplicating the efforts of other organisations (both public and private) but are unable to compete because of the lack of capacity and resources.

Finally, on an operational level, we recommend that you prioritise engaging and developing positive and constructive relationships with your members. The poor response to this consultation, despite the general tone being '*what can we do for you?*' indicates that at present the CRTG is not perceived as a key partner, and/or communications channels are ineffective. Spam filters and bottlenecks are an issue for CRTG to overcome, potentially by providing value that can't be ignored.

RATIONALISE CURRENT RESOURCES

Narrowing the scope of your activities would also enable you to target your resources more efficiently to deliver less services of better value. This could include:

- Focusing on a single 'member facing' website
- Make greater use of existing digital platforms e.g. Touch Stay
- Maximise admin time on supporting businesses and building relationships rather than promotion and advertising.
- Decrease focus on social media (for promotion purposes).
- Use more admin time to coordinate and plan the influence of CRGT's representatives on the Destination Management Partnerships
- Focus your resources on activities that benefit your own members first.
- Ensure communication methods are efficient and functional

DEVELOP ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY & RESILIENCE

It's clear that at present the CRTG doesn't have the capacity or resources to deliver all its ambitions, even with a narrower scope of activities. Therefore a priority should be to:

- Increase Admin hours: through prioritising core funding or securing external investment/funding.
- Increase & expand membership Base: therefore, increasing both your income stream & sphere of influence
- Strengthen Board: Improve capacity by recruiting additional (active) members with different skillsets, knowledge, & experiences.
- Strengthen your brand; so, people can clearly identify the work, efforts, influence, and impact of the organisation.
- Develop a new business plan that clearly defines your new direction and scope. The process of developing it can be a useful tool to facilitate collaborative organisational change, and it will be a valuable resource to support applications for external funding.
- Review legal setup and status.

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU NEED TO (AND CAN) DO

After defining your purpose, finding your niche (positioning), focusing the scope of your efforts, and developing your new aims and objectives, you can focus on what you need to do to deliver them.

Initially what you can do will depend entirely on your capacity as an organisation, and it's more than likely that you won't be able to do everything from the beginning. Instead, you should focus on the activities that deliver your core objectives and provide the best value (for money!) for your members.

You won't be able to support the wider sector as you desire until you are established as a valued and influential organisation in all parts of the AONB. And for that you need a much larger membership base to provide both influence and income.

You should consult your members on what precise actions and activities you should undertake, and what would be of most value to them. As a guide, the following summarises the areas this consultation identified as being valued by both businesses and authorities:

Influence:	Local Authority and Regional priorities and policies by acting as a strong coordinated voice for your members.
Deliver:	Localised and targeted small-scale training & events exclusively for members
Facilitate:	Networking and peer to peer collaboration, learning, and support. Cross-marketing and signposting guests and clients to fellow members to keep them in the area longer and increase local spend.
Share:	Local & regional, sector specific news & information
Collaborate:	With strategic partners to deliver larger regional events and activities

CONCLUSIONS

The Clwydian Range Tourism Group is an established organisation that holds a unique and influential position as the only member organisation representing the trade. However, it is also apparent that over the years the group's scarce resources have been spread thinly across a wide range of activities, which has somewhat lessened its impact and diluted its core purpose and mission.

As the sector recovers from the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the issues of sustainability and Climate Change become more to the fore, it provides an opportune moment for the group to re-invent and re-position itself to address the changing needs of the industry. It has to operate within its means but shouldn't shy away from ambitions to be a big player in the sector.

The first step should be to re-define the purpose or mission of the group and develop specific and focused Aims and Objectives to deliver it. It is recommended that this should be reinforced by a new Business Plan reflecting the new direction of the group and the changing environment in which it is operating.

Another urgent matter is to increase the capacity of the group, both time and resources. 'There is a chicken and egg' situation here where increased membership is required to increase income, but this itself requires an increased (paid) capacity. The solution could be a development grant to enable the transition over 2 or 3 years, and a business case indicating a clear plan and development pathway would significantly benefit any such application.

Additional capacity and expertise at board level would also be beneficial, especially to manage actions and monitor progress. For example, to exert influence on regional priorities requires managed and coordinated input into Destination Management Partnerships.

The key to growing any membership organisation is to provide value to your members. Focus on fostering trusted relationships and working collaboratively, and the CRTG will be well placed to support businesses and influence regional developments. This will benefit businesses, visitors, and the unique landscape of the AONB alike, and establish you as a significant & influential player in the sector.



We wish you all the best going forward and will be keeping an eye on future developments. Hopefully an opportunity will arise to collaborate with you again in the not-too-distant future!



Resources for Change (R4C) is a socially responsible, employee-owned consultancy with an excellent reputation for innovatively involving people in their communities. We have developed a reputation for ‘bridging the gap’ between sectors and creating real and long-lasting results. In essence this means that we:

- Act at Grassroots level – with our significant hands-on experience of engaging communities and civil society
- Support the Managers – bringing practical experience of projects, partnerships and improving delivery
- Work with the Strategists – by advising, evaluating, and supporting policy and strategic programme delivery.

R4C celebrated its 24th anniversary at the beginning of 2021; and over the years we have established a robust business model and through this have successfully delivered in excess of 1,500 contracts for a wide range of clients throughout Wales, the UK, and occasionally further afield. Our main areas of work are:

- Action planning and strategic planning, with communities, Local Authorities, organisations, social enterprises, and partnerships.
- Research, evaluation, and learning, with particular focus on community and enterprise development, and environmental management.
- Stakeholder engagement and consultation.
- Organisational development, including change management.