



DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR TUNBRIDGE WELLS 2014-17

REPORT FOR TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL

APRIL 2014

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1. INTRODUCTION

This **Destination Management Plan** for Tunbridge Wells outlines the objectives and priorities for managing, developing and promoting tourism in the Borough. The plan has been commissioned and led by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council on behalf of the tourism sector in the Borough. The industry is made up of many types of businesses and organisations, from accommodation and attractions, to cultural venues, outdoor activities, restaurants, food producers and transport providers. The plan is intended to provide guidance to the sector as a whole so that there is a common sense of direction and purpose and agreement on the way Tunbridge Wells will be described and promoted.

An **Action Plan** accompanies this report and describes the actions to be taken to move the main recommendations forward. The implementation of the Plan will call on the many tourism organisations and businesses to work together. Tourism cannot be delivered by one organisation; it needs a collective response from public, private public sectors.

The importance of tourism

Tourism is an important part of the economy. Nationally it has been estimated to make a direct contribution to the UK economy of £52 billion, or 4% of GDP. Around 1 in 14 jobs are in tourism and the visitor economy is particularly good at generating jobs in rural areas and for those less likely to engage with the full-time labour market. Tourism also interacts with many other businesses in the supply chain. A growing visitor economy will have a positive impact on food and drink production, transport, retailing and other services.

Tunbridge Wells Borough is estimated to have received 4.5m visitors in 2011. Around 321,000 overnight tourism trips were made; domestic visitors made 83% of trips (268,000) and overseas visitors made 17% (53,000). The total economic impact (including retail, induced and indirect effects) is estimated at £241m, supporting over 4400 jobs. Spend by visitors was on accommodation (9%), catering establishments (38%), retail (32%), attractions and entertainments (10%) and transport (12%).

Well-managed tourism can bring many benefits to the local community. It is a spur to careful maintenance of the public realm, the built heritage and the natural environment. It can support the variety of local shops, cultural, sporting and other recreational amenities which serve residents as well as visitors. And it can strengthen the sense of place, helping the Borough to stand out and attract the attention of investors and creative, knowledge-based businesses.

2. VISION AND PRIORITIES

THE VISION FOR 2020

Tunbridge Wells' Vision for 2020 is to be widely recognised as an ideal short break destination at the centre of the High Weald, offering great attractions and cultural activity and the highest quality environment to enjoy. Tourism businesses will be working together well, developing and promoting the visitor offer with expertise and imagination. They and their local suppliers will be prospering and job opportunities at all levels will be growing.

PRIORITIES

The priorities for the tourism sector to 2016 that have been identified through the research and consultation for this plan are:

1. To identify and communicate the essence of the place – a contemporary historic town, deep in its High Weald and Garden of England setting.
2. To develop the all-round offer to visitors, so they are inspired by the experience and stay longer and explore more.
3. To embrace a modern information plan that makes it easy to plan and book and to make the most of the visit on arrival.
4. To strengthen the networks of collaboration and innovation in the sector.

3. TUNBRIDGE WELLS AS A DESTINATION

A BRIEF AUDIT

Visitors are generally unaware of and indifferent to local authority boundaries. In the case of Tunbridge Wells, any attempt to promote just the local authority area would fail to do justice to the range of attractions, things to do and the natural environment. The town itself is located in the far western corner of the borough, which in turn is at the edge of the county of Kent. Yet within easy reach on its southern border is a large area of East Sussex that contains significant attractions and distinctive countryside in the High Weald. Tunbridge Wells needs to project itself to visitors as the centre of a rich, historic landscape with a variety of world class attractions and the natural base for exploration of the Weald.

The character of **Royal Tunbridge Wells** has been shaped by its history as a spa town, attracting visitors (many of them with royal connections) to take the waters. It has retained an appealing townscape with the Georgian Pantiles as a visitor draw, good places to meet and eat, a very strong range of independent shops, and open, semi-natural areas of the Common. However, it lacks a critical mass of things to see and do to make it much more than a half day destination. The town museum and art gallery is small and, as a result, is not currently able to make the most of its collections, some of which are of regional and national significance. The Spa Valley railway, running from the southern end of the town, is a splendid but small attraction that does not have universal appeal. The visitor offer at the Chalybeate Spring is very low key. Apart from these there is no other formal attraction to engage visitors. Guided Walks around the town are very popular and suggest an appetite for more information about the town and its heritage. The signposting for pedestrians is rudimentary and there is little information or interpretation of the town at points of arrival or on the streets, though there is an illustrated Heritage Walking Trail leaflet.

A number of festivals are held each year, and many of the events challenge the stereotype of a conservative and staid town. The Unfest alternative music festival uses several venues and has over 100 acts. There is regular Jazz on the Pantiles in the summer and the town is home to the International Young Concert Artists Competition every two years. There is a vibrant local live music scene with a range of pubs,

clubs and venues - The Forum, Assembly Hall Theatre, Trinity Theatre and The Grey Lady Music Lounge contributing to the potential of the town to be a key cultural destination.

Tunbridge Wells is centrally placed within the **High Weald** AONB, an area of very high landscape value. It is a medieval landscape of wooded rolling hills with sandstone outcrops. The smaller towns and villages of the Weald are known for their distinctive vernacular architecture of timber-framed, weather-boarded and sandstone houses. This is an area famed as the Garden of England for its abundant fresh produce, its hops and oast houses, orchards and more recently for its vineyards. The area has a number of protected areas for nature conservation including Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Local Nature Reserves or Wildlife Sites, managed by a variety of organisations such as the RSPB and the Kent High Weald Partnership.

Tunbridge Wells is also at the centre of a significant concentration of historic houses, castles and gardens open to the public. Among them are internationally renowned gardens such as Sissinghurst and Great Dixter, National Trust properties and independently owned historic houses, many with famous historical and literary connections.

This is good walking country, with an extensive network of footpaths. Although there is information available on the many walks and trails both the signposting and information could be further improved and better promoted to visitors. Bewl Water, Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest and the Bowles Outdoor Centre offer outdoor activities for families. The sandstone outcrops of High Rocks, Eridge Rocks & Harrison's Rocks are well known to both locals and keen rock climbers from further afield. Taken together the attractions provide a good programme of activities and events in the summer months, but are used, in the main, by the local population.

There are cycling opportunities too, both on the country lanes and off-road. The High Weald and Downs & Weald national cycle routes pass through the area. The family friendly Tudor Trail, between Tonbridge and Penshurst is traffic-free. For off-road cyclists there is Bedgebury and Penshurst Off-Road Cycling. There are also a large number of cycling events held throughout the year, including sportives and triathlons. There is increased interest in cycling for leisure and fitness and further promotion of these attractions is required.

The Borough has a good supply of **accommodation** across the range, much of which is of high quality. A majority of the hotel bedspaces are in the Tunbridge Wells and Southborough urban area, while the B+B and self catering offer is stronger in the rural areas. Hotel occupancy

levels are high in Royal Tunbridge Wells, particularly at weekends¹. There is no reliable data for annual occupancy in B+B's and Guest Houses although anecdotal evidence suggests that figures are higher than Kent averages, particularly in businesses close to major attractions, and those that are well marketed. Figures from the Visit Kent annual survey show that the Tunbridge Wells area has a much higher self catering occupancy than the Kent average – 71.6% in 2012 compared to 44.6% across Kent as a whole. Anecdotal evidence shows this is a strong sector of the marketplace amongst both domestic and overseas visitors – seasonal but without the extreme peaks and troughs faced by other areas. Overall it appears that capacity is well utilised in Royal Tunbridge Wells. The good level of customer demand makes it more likely that hotel operators will seek further sites and future investment in the Borough.²

Industry perceptions of Tunbridge Wells as a destination were tested through an online Business Survey, the main responses being:

Positives	Negatives
The Pantiles Shopping opportunities Location / access History Attractions Gardens / Countryside Restaurants Scenery	Traffic Parking Public transport TIC – moving and changing of opening hours Cinema site Empty shops and derelict buildings Poor sign-posting

¹ A 2011 Visit Kent Hotel Fact File for the area recorded annual occupancy figures of 69% for 3 and 4 star hotels with figures of 75% plus for boutique and budget hotels.

² See the Kent Hotel Developer Interest Report, prepared in 2010 by Hotel Solutions for Visit Kent & Tourism South East.

At an industry workshop participants were asked to state the words that best represent the visitor offer. The most often repeated words appear largest in this word cloud.



Visitor perceptions: according to the research undertaken by Visit Kent, visitors rate Tunbridge Wells highly for heritage and see it as a traditional place which is a good base for exploring the surrounding countryside. It is rated less well for fun, excitement and good value for money and is not seen as a place for family visits.

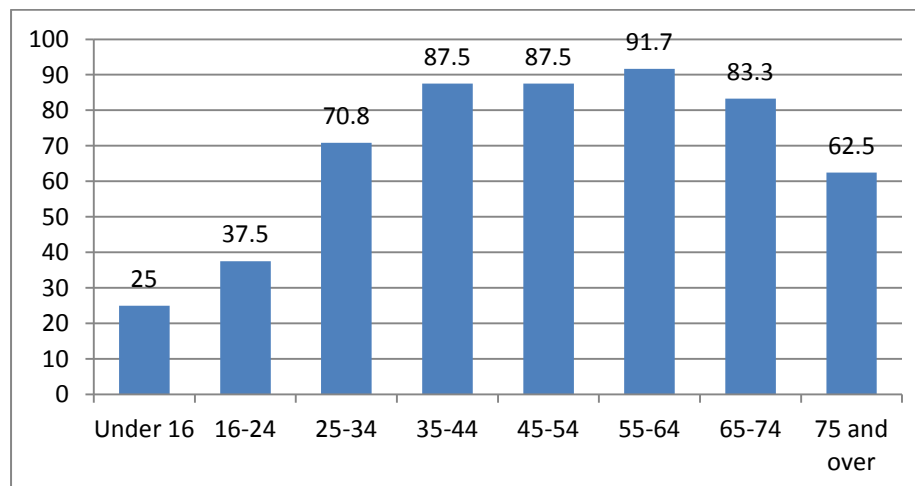
4. THE MARKET

LEISURE MARKET CHARACTERISTICS

Holiday destinations sometimes claim to have ‘something for everyone’. But in reality the most successful destinations focus intently on well defined segments of the market - they know they cannot appeal to everyone. They shape their product and their marketing to meet the expectations of their target markets.

The market segments for Tunbridge Wells have been assessed in a number of ways.

Firstly, the Business Survey indicates a **preponderance of mature adult visitors**. The age profile of visitors perceived by businesses was as follows (proportion of businesses serving significant numbers by age group).



Secondly, an analysis has been made of a large database of individuals who have requested information about Tunbridge Wells through the Heart of the Kent website (no longer in use). The analysis was made using the Mosaic market profile system³. The most prevalent types of visitor indicated by the analysis included the following:



Well-off commuters



Higher income village commuters



Successful older business leaders



Retirement

These are generally better-off, well-educated visitors. Many will be empty nesters with the time and money to enjoy regular leisure breaks, wanting good standards of service and plenty to interest them. Few will be accompanied by dependent age children. Most are comfortable using the internet to find information and to book accommodation but the more conservative among them will prefer face to face information and printed materials.

Thirdly, account has been taken of the nature of what Tunbridge Wells offers to visitors, as described in the audit. On this basis the following **4 market segments** are suggested as key leisure break targets for Tunbridge Wells.

³ The Mosaic market segmentation model, developed by Experian plc is based on postcode analysis using census data of the population. It places people into around 60 types and identifies their consumer preferences and behaviour including their access to information and preferred service channels.

1. Professional couples and friends

- ▶ Professional, working couples
- ▶ Could be pre-children, or couples with children wanting 'time out'
- ▶ Could be groups of friends looking for a relaxing weekend away
- ▶ Live within 1-2 hours travel time so on a day out or weekend away
- ▶ From the UK or near European countries such as Netherlands, France, Germany, Belgium on short European break – probably travelling in their own car

Looking for... Easy short break ideas – probably booked online - with something lively and interesting to do. Want high quality places to stay and eat/drink; looking for fresh air, moderate exercise and spa/leisure opportunities. Interested in a romantic break and even in finding the right wedding venue. They appreciate local food and drink and are prepared to spend if the offer is right.



2. Active Empty-nesters

- ▶ Aged 50+
- ▶ Live within one to two hour's drive
- ▶ Or are on holiday in the area or taking a short break
- ▶ Enjoying doing their own thing now the kids have left home
- ▶ Very active – great walkers
- ▶ Take lots of holidays and breaks
- ▶ Are relatively affluent (good pensions or possibly still working)
- ▶ Enjoying researching and planning where they will visit and what they will do

Looking for...An interesting place to visit; walking; cycling; exploring new places; intellectual stimulation; understanding the background of a place and its stories; a good café with quality food on offer (ideally locally sourced and homemade).



3. Special Interest Groups

- ▶ People on a group tour
- ▶ Day trip or touring for 3-7 days
- ▶ From the UK or overseas – in particular USA, Northern Europe
- ▶ Relatively upmarket, well-educated, experienced travellers
- ▶ Passionately interested in gardens and heritage

Looking for...a high-quality experience; historic houses, castles and gardens (for example); good quality accommodation and food; an interesting story; a good café with good (ideally locally sourced) food; attractive towns and villages to wander around and photograph; authentic experiences; meeting local people in natural settings.

4. Pure Indulgence

- ▶ Pairs or groups of girlfriends of all ages, mothers and daughters
- ▶ Once in a while book an indulgent trip away – no men, no kids!
- ▶ Short breaks, overnight stays
- ▶ Enjoy a gentle stroll, particularly if it includes retail opportunities

Looking for...Pampering - luxury places to stay and indulgent experiences, good restaurants and shopping. Interested in theatre & culture, festivals & events. Want quality and value for money, and interested in special offers.



BUSINESS MEETINGS AND CONFERENCES

Many of the hotels in the area rely to some extent on visitors travelling on business. The hotel offer is predominately small to medium scale and none of the properties in the area have large conference facilities capable of attracting the larger conference and meetings, which is a very competitive market served by dedicated venues. There are facilities for small scale meetings, and business and training events at the hotels and at attractions that can also provide corporate entertainment.

This steady segment of the market is driven by factors outside the sector's immediate influence – particularly the strength of the economy. Much of the activity is non-discretionary business usage and there is little that can be done collectively to generate more visitors of this type. Individual properties can encourage business visitors through pricing strategies and the provision of support facilities (Wi-Fi, video conferencing, office services). The destination website could however make a stronger presentation of the meetings venues available and of the attractiveness of the location for business gatherings.

WEDDINGS AND PRIVATE FUNCTIONS

In Tunbridge Wells there are plenty of venues, in town and country, pitching for the weddings and functions market. The same can be said for most parts of the country because weddings and social events can be lucrative and as a result many hotels, attractions and cultural venues have joined the market making this a very competitive area. Most wedding venue choices are generated by local connections - except where there is a unique or exceptional venue such as a castle or grand country house - so the potential for collective action to promote additional business for the area is limited. Individual venues can bid for custom through attention to customer needs, dedicated event planners, attractive pricing and packages. Nonetheless there is scope for dedicated pages on the destination website where the concentration of wedding shops in Royal Tunbridge Wells can also be featured.

4. A SHARED STORY

What is the essence of Tunbridge Wells as a destination? What defines it, what marks it out, what is the golden thread that runs through it? These are key questions for any destination.

The most successful places **stake a claim** that cuts through the noise of the competitive environment. They have a simple 'Shared Story' to tell. It is a commonly agreed way of describing the place, that everyone uses when they are planning how to invest in improvements and new experiences, and when they are talking to people who don't know the place.

The story should make clear what is special and different about the destination. It does not overpromise; it goes with the grain of the place and it is authentic and true. It focuses on the distinctive qualities: it isn't a list of everything that is on offer. If everyone uses the same broad ideas to develop the place and then uses some of the same concepts and phrases to talk about it externally, the image of Tunbridge Wells will be much stronger. That leads to greater impact, which means more visitors and stronger investment.

This is the Shared Story for Tunbridge Wells. It was developed through a workshop with public and private sector tourism interests, our discussions with local stakeholders and our own observation. It should be made available to be used by everyone who provides information or promotes Tunbridge Wells and should help shape business decisions, investment, marketing and place management priorities.

'Unless a place can come to stand for something it stands little chance of being remembered'

Simon Anholt,
Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions 2006

Shared Story Workshop, 2 July 2013



Just an hour away from London, the elegant spa town of Royal Tunbridge Wells has been attracting visitors for centuries. The white colonnaded Pantiles that welcomed royalty who came for the Chalybeate spring waters, today is buzzing with cafes, bars and music. Its fame for high fashion is still alive in the town's many stylish shops. Live music, art, drama and comedy are thriving here. The theatres, galleries and alternative venues host fresh local talent. There are music festivals to suit all tastes throughout the year.

Tunbridge Wells sits in the heart of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a landscape of rolling hills, ancient woods and sandstone outcrops. Dotted across the Weald are pretty market towns like Cranbrook and villages with the characteristic timber framed, weatherboarded houses and classic Kent oasts. It is great country for walking or cycling or golf, or even rock climbing at High Rocks and mountain biking at Bedgebury Forest.

This is the Garden of England and the gastro pubs and brasseries make the most of the plentiful local produce: seafood from the Kent and Sussex coasts a few miles away; Romney Marsh lamb; apples, plums, quinces and cobnuts from the acres of orchards; strawberries and asparagus from the fields... There's farm-brewed cider, wines from nearby vineyards, and real ales brewed with Kentish hops.

There are world famous gardens – the white garden at Sissinghurst, the peacock garden at Great Dixter, sculptures at Pashley Manor and the parkland and woodland at Scotney. Many other charming and unique gardens are tucked away across the area waiting to delight visitors.

Tunbridge Wells is at the centre of an area of outstanding heritage. With fairy-tale moated castles and mellow country manors that tell the stories of England's past – Hever Castle, childhood home of Anne Boleyn; Winston Churchill's beloved Chartwell; and Groombridge Place, where Conan Doyle created mysteries for Sherlock Holmes.

There are boutique hotels and luxury B&Bs in both town and country. Visitors can discover the past then relax and enjoy the present...

5. PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT – AN INSPIRING EXPERIENCE

Tunbridge Wells has much to offer visitors but it needs to enhance the visitor experience to inspire the target markets to come, to stay longer, and do more. For the most part this will not require large sums of capital investment in new attractions but it will demand more work on polishing and presenting the offer better.

There are four areas of product development to enhance and present Tunbridge Wells, both town and country, as a coherent short break destination.

INTERPRETATION AND PRESENTATION OF ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS

Such is the importance of the history, architecture and open spaces of the town that there is a strong case for the development of a coherent and comprehensive interpretation strategy which could be considered for a bid for Heritage Lottery Fund support.⁴ It could include

- ▶ Research and consultation with both local people and visitors into their understanding of local heritage and ways in which they would like it to be presented and interpreted, and actions to engage people in learning and volunteering.
- ▶ Interpretation of the Pantiles, its spa waters and the origins of the town, perhaps including public art (in keeping with the draft cultural strategy recommendation) to celebrate the source of the water that gave the town its status.

⁴ There are precedents for this: the spa town of Great Malvern has just received a stage 1 HLF grant to develop a comprehensive scheme to interpret the natural, built and cultural heritage of the town and its hinterland.

- ▶ Interpretation of the town using self-guided walks available in print, through signs, maps, marker plaques on buildings and pavements and using new technology such as QR codes and mobile website. Augmented Reality could show how the street scene appeared in another era. The proposed implementation of free Wi-Fi across the town centre will assist these developments.
- ▶ Incorporation of the interpretation plan into a wayfinding strategy and information scheme which guides visitors to buildings, features and open spaces of interest. See Section 6 for recommendations for a Visitor Information Plan.

Many visitors enjoy shopping as a leisure experience and are drawn to attractive town centres and the mix of amenity, heritage, retail, and food and drink they present. Royal Tunbridge Wells has a very strong retail offer, and was recently identified as the third luxury shopping destination outside London (Experian 2013), but more information should be provided for visitors. The preparation of literature and online presentation of the retail as a leisure experience in collaboration with the Retailers Group has already begun with a Christmas in Tunbridge Wells supplement for 2013. This should continue in order to add value to the town's offer and can be used to promote visits to the town at other key times including Easter and school holidays.

Visitors are drawn to towns with a unique character and a strong sense of place. The public realm does much to establish that character. Every effort should be made to ensure that the quality and upkeep of street furniture, paving and seating is consistent and high and that cleansing and litter collection is especially rigorous in the character areas. Shop and property owners in those areas also have responsibilities and should be encouraged through the Retailers Group to maintain their street-facing properties to a high standard and to avoid clutter and inappropriate signage. Where possible, the negative impact of empty shops and development sites should be mitigated by temporary "pop-up" shops, vinyl window-wraps, sympathetic boarding, and signs explaining what is being planned to improve sites and the town. This already features strongly in the Council's plans, but it is worth re-iterating that the quality of the public spaces and built environment is a strong incentive for visitors, and a source of positive recommendation and return.

COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS AND INTERPRETATION

Walking in the countryside is the fifth most popular activity among overseas visitors to Britain (VisitBritain 2009), and 70% of domestic tourist trips in the UK include walks under 2 miles (UK Research Liaison Group 2002). The Tunbridge Wells area is reasonably well served with long distance routes that cross the Borough, but the leisure visitor seeks shorter, circular and themed walks. Explore Kent, the High Weald AONB Unit, the Kent High Weald Partnership and the Ashdown Forest Conservators present a range of walks in the area (many downloadable from their web sites) that should be highlighted in the Tunbridge Wells leisure offer, presented on the destination website or with links to external sites, encouraging visitors to extend their stay and explore the rural area. Walks that can be accessed by public transport from the town should be included with details of rail, bus and taxi connections.

Similarly information about good cycling routes and events in the Borough and surrounding area should be made available on the destination website, either by downloads or by links to external sites such as Explore Kent which feature designated routes.

The development of a walking festival in the High Weald would add to the mix of events on offer (see below), and could be scheduled to help local accommodation providers in off-peak periods. This could be a joint venture between local authority partners, the AONB, Explore Kent, Wildlife Trusts, local walking clubs and businesses to reduce costs to the partners.

AN AMBITIOUS CULTURAL OFFER

The draft Cultural Strategy describes an objective of strengthening Tunbridge Wells as a cultural destination. Plans to enhance the cultural offer of the town, including the redevelopment of the Art Gallery and Museum and Library, would provide a welcome further dimension to the visitor offer within the town and raise the profile of Tunbridge Wells as a destination.

Festivals and events help to shape the image of a destination. The spa town of Cheltenham is a good example of a town that has built its visitor appeal around a full programme of events that project an image of a civilised destination.⁵ Tunbridge Wells already has a strong mix of events but the development of further festivals and events would enhance the offer and spread the season. Given the limited capacity of accommodation it would be better to foster a number of manageable events than to develop a regional or blockbuster scale event. Many successful and sustainable festivals emerge from the enthusiasm and commitment of an individual or group of people. The role of TWBC is likely to be as a facilitator, a provider of advice and assistance and in some cases small grants. Themes that might be developed include the following:

- ▶ Walking: the idea of a walking festival has been suggested above; it might be themed around the strong local offer such as heritage, castles, gardens and food and drink.
- ▶ A food festival could embrace activities and venues across the Borough and perhaps beyond, building on the existing Pantiles Food Festivals and the wider “Garden of England” brand. The Hampshire Food Festival is a good example of this “dispersed” style of event that includes encompasses retail opportunities, visits to producers, tastings, talks and cookery demonstrations.
- ▶ A Spa and Fashion festival that builds on the town’s original popularity and its Beau Brummel days but takes in today’s modern health and spa treatment culture and links it to the fashion scene represented in the retail offer. Working with hotels, retail, and food outlets and offering introductory treatments, fashion shows and educational sessions it could emphasise the contemporary edge of Tunbridge Wells and be aimed directly at the “Pure Indulgence” market.
- ▶ A Christmas or Winter Festival that could build on the 2013 provision to enhance Tunbridge Wells as a destination for the festive season.

⁵ Cheltenham has the advantage of its racecourse and well established racing festival. In addition it has Jazz, Science, Music, and Literature festivals and which are well supported by sponsors and external funding. These festivals have a common organisation behind them, the Cheltenham Festival not for profit charitable company.

TOWN AND COUNTRY OFFER – BRINGING THEM TOGETHER

A key objective is to position Tunbridge Wells as the natural hub of an area offering a rich choice of attractive things to see and do.

- ▶ Working together industry partners can present programmes for 48 or 72 hours to bring together the town and the country. Itineraries can be themed around history, royal, literary and political characters, music, natural history, food and drink for example, and be made available via the destination website and downloadable pdfs, through Facebook pages, the websites of participating businesses and even via video on YouTube.
- ▶ The itineraries could be developed further with ‘added value’ elements provided by participating venues. Accommodation upgrades, joint tickets or vouchers, behind the scene tours and similar special offers could be made to individuals supported by media and PR activity, and promoted to the Group Travel market.
- ▶ There may be scope in future for businesses to offer packages of accommodation, plus entry to attractions, and even taxi transport, for a single price. This will require the current EU review of the Package Travel Directive to make the conditions of packaging less onerous. If the changes are made there would be scope to work with Visit Kent or the local Chambers of Commerce to help businesses network to build the packages.
- ▶ Royal Tunbridge Wells and some of its nearby towns and villages are very accessible by train from London. The new bus map will feature attractions which are accessible by bus. Accommodation providers and attractions should present the ways to visit using train, bus, cycle and taxi in a clear and simple way to make the destination more accessible.

Recommendations

1. Develop an interpretation strategy for Royal Tunbridge Wells that incorporates a professionally designed pedestrian signage and information scheme; consider a supporting bid for Heritage Lottery funding
2. Present the town’s shopping offer as a leading leisure experience, online and in print, in association with the Retailers Group
3. Ensure the high and consistent standard of the public realm, especially in the historic character areas, with the collaboration of businesses and the Retailers Group.

4. Develop and present a range of shorter, circular walks, with themes aligned to strong aspects of the local offer, and create linkages to external websites that feature walks and cycle routes.
5. Consider development of a walking festival.
6. Pursue the positioning of Tunbridge Wells as a cultural hub for the region, and progress plans to redevelop the Museum, Art Gallery and Theatre.
7. Encourage and support initiatives to develop and extend the programme of cultural festivals and events building on and expanding the existing offering and in particular music, food and fashion.
8. Create and promote a series of 48 and 72 hour itineraries with maps for short breaks, linking town and country, accommodation and attractions.

6. VISITOR INFORMATION PLAN

The purpose of a Visitor Information Plan is to:

- ▶ Increase visits across the borough
- ▶ Have visitors staying longer and visiting more places
- ▶ Maximise visitor satisfaction and word of mouth recommendations

It is a key role of destination managers to ensure that visitors can find accurate and inspirational information where and when they seek it. Visitor information is needed both at the visit planning stage and within the destination. Poor or misleading visitor information at either stage leads to a poor visitor experience, negative word of mouth and critical online reviews from visitors.

PLANNING A VISIT

The last ten years have seen a revolution in the sources of information used at both these stages. Phoning a Tourist Information Centre (TIC) to request a brochure has been largely replaced by online searches, destination websites and use of review sites such as Trip Advisor. Hotel bookings are increasingly made via online agents (such as Booking.com, Laterooms.com etc.).

The content available through digital channels is functional for the most part and may feature inaccurate or out of date information. It is unlikely to feature all the area's strengths or to influence visitors positively. There is a plethora of platforms and ensuring the content is accurate and positive is a key destination role. Many people use online forums to ask questions when planning a trip, and these need to be monitored to ensure information is accurate and up to date.

Destination websites remain useful to visitors but are not necessarily the visitor's first recourse for information; for instance Google presents data directly to users and bookings can be made via online agent websites. The current Visit Tunbridge Wells website and the most appropriate format for it in future is currently under review during which time continuing with the existing arrangement or working with Visit

Kent are appropriate. There are also low-cost options of being featured on the VisitSussex and Tourism South East websites. For the future, opportunities are becoming available to use Open Source software that can provide websites at minimal cost, but this approach will take time to investigate and develop. In any event the destination does require the continuing maintenance of a central database of information to feed its own or other parties' websites.

Although demand is diminishing, some visitors still seek a brochure that includes a list of hotels. But it is important that such 'visitor guides' are more than advertising vehicles and actually do guide visitors by providing rich information about the destination and suggesting itineraries to appeal for example to garden lovers or history buffs. In the short term, demand for this traditional destination guide would best be met by the existing 'Weald of Kent' brochure produced in partnership with Maidstone. This provides an important means of engagement for local businesses, although business generated is not easy to quantify. This print can be much improved by inclusion of the 'Shared Story' to convey the unique appeal of the destination. A refreshed distribution plan will be required including local distribution at retail and other outlets.

Recommendations for the planning stage:

1. Review and refresh www.visittunbridgewells.com maintaining a central database of product information
2. Ensure that www.visittunbridgewells.com is positioned to get maximum coverage on, and links from other destination websites, including VisitKent, Tourism South East, VisitSussex etc.
3. Ensure that www.visittunbridgewells.com is well-optimised in search engines and has appropriate key words that reflect its Shared Story (e.g. gardens, heritage towns, spa town etc.)
4. Provide content for key 3rd party websites and social media platforms including User Generated Content sites etc.
5. Review and monitor the wide range of 3rd party websites and social media platforms to ensure content is accurate, comprehensive and up to date, including Google, Wiki-Travel etc. (Both of these actions require sound and detailed knowledge of the local tourism product)
6. Identify any local bloggers or individuals who are actively providing responses to online forum questions and establish a means of communicating with them with updates, information on events, new products etc.
7. Provide guidelines and training for tourism businesses on how best to manage their presence on 3rd party websites, including handling negative reviews

8. Continue the Weald of Kent brochure for at least the short term; seek to improve the editorial content and its distribution coverage.
9. Review the content of guidebooks such as Rough Guide and Lonely Planet, used by independent and overseas visitors and provide updates as necessary to keep their information current.
10. Promote the opportunities to visit the area by train, bus, cycle and taxi with clear and coordinated information provided by businesses and transport operators.

INFORMATION IN THE DESTINATION

National research by VisitEngland indicates that person to person and face to face contacts are the most trusted source of information. All those who come into contact with visitors can contribute to the visitor welcome, particularly taxi-drivers and staff at attractions, hotels and retail outlets. Many destinations are now focusing on 'taking the information to the visitor', using TIC staff and sometimes local volunteers, to provide an information source at key locations and events. Customer-facing staff and taxi drivers etc. are provided with training and appropriate materials to assist in this provision.

The recent relocation of the TIC in Royal Tunbridge Wells has been controversial although visitor numbers at the new TIC remain high. The valuable experience and knowledge of the staff is the key resource which can be channelled into much wider provision of information through all the methods described here. It is important that the quality of the TIC service in terms of knowledge and professionalism is not diminished in the new premises, but that visitor insights and feedback are exploited to provide input into promotional and product development plans.

Sat Nav and the rapid adoption of smartphones and tablets are changing the ways that visitors find their way around and discover what the destination has to offer. It is now essential that the destination website is configured to be accessible and easily navigated on a smartphone or small tablet device. Conversely the case for locally produced smartphone apps appears diminished by the appearance of 3rd party apps (such as Google Field Trip) that draw information from web sources, and present the visitor with a menu of things of things to see and do. But maps and leaflets that explain how to navigate the town and find the surrounding attractions are still vital sources of visitor information and orientation and need to be widely available.

An effective pedestrian signage scheme is a key element of in-destination information. The geography of Royal Tunbridge Wells with its strong linear layout and two-centre set-up calls for coherent signing to guide visitors to experience all it has to offer including the Common, parks and other significant buildings. A review should include welcome signage and large-scale maps at arrival points at car parks and the station. The information ‘drums’ found around the town have the potential to be very useful and are an opportunity to feature the attractions that surround the town, showing travel times, and describing the experience rather than just providing a name. QR codes and augmented reality applications could be used to enhance information and interpretation about places of interest. A professional signposting strategy (similar to Legible London for example – see photo to right) could significantly increase visitor satisfaction.

Recommendations for in-destination information

1. Consider a full wayfinding strategy for Royal Tunbridge Wells along the lines of the Legible London approach, featuring places to visit with walking and travelling times. It needs to be tied in to the proposed interpretation strategy (see Section 5 above).
2. Develop map and orientation boards at main arrival points (station and car parks) and also at attractions within the town and in the surrounding area.
3. Ensure that the Visit Tunbridge Wells website or a mobile version of it provides for easy access and navigation on mobile devices
4. Develop a local, giveaway map that makes clear the location of features of the town including green spaces, shopping etc. and also explains access to the surrounding attractions. This may be supported by advertising revenue. Ensure very wide distribution via council outlets, tourism businesses, shops and attractions.
5. Create a network of Tourist Information Points across the Borough, utilising current TIC staff, through:
 - ▶ Partnerships with potential visitor information outlets such as shops, cafés and hotels, and provide appropriate displays, leaflet racks and maps
 - ▶ Training in frequently asked questions, transport information etc. to these outlets and tourism businesses
 - ▶ Familiarisation visits, guided tours and free tickets etc. to partner organisations and venues
 - ▶ Training to other customer-facing staff such as taxi drivers, community wardens etc. as above and providing maps and leaflets



7. STRENGTHENING THE NETWORKS OF COLLABORATION AND INNOVATION

The future management, development and promotion of Tunbridge Wells as a destination requires the public, private and voluntary sectors to work together. Hitherto there seems to have been an assumption locally that the Council would 'do' tourism and there has not been a very strong record of collaboration in the local industry. It should be clear now that while local authorities have important roles in managing the public realm, maintaining amenities, supporting cultural services and providing visitor information, they cannot do everything and their resources are under increasing strain. They need the support of an active network of businesses and organisations prepared and able to take product development and promotion of tourism forward. Ideally that network should extend beyond the Borough boundaries into the 'natural' destination area.

The recommended first step is for the Borough Council to call together a small group of people with interests across the tourism sector to form a 'Destination Management Group'. The focus of that Group should be on taking forward the key recommendations of the Destination Action Plan. It will include representatives of the local authority as well as of private businesses and cultural organisations. It should enlist the help of Visit Kent which will be a key ally in achieving some of the actions and a source of professional advice.

The Group should remain quite small, act like a Board and avoid becoming a 'Forum' or 'talking shop'. It needs to focus on practical tasks and projects that make a difference. It may want to set up task and finish groups to tackle particular projects. It should take care to communicate to the wider industry what it is doing and, crucially, use its influence and connections to engage businesses and other organisations in Action Plan objectives.

Further steps to foster a sense of belonging to a 'tourism partnership' will be to develop a 'business to business' section on Visit Tunbridge Wells. It could provide information and invitations to forthcoming events and activities, training and marketing opportunities, carry the Shared Story toolkit and provide access for signed-up businesses to the Image Library and a discussion forum. A quarterly email newsletter to

businesses would keep them informed and included in developments. The Destination Management Group could consider mounting an occasional or annual 'get-together' of tourism organisations and businesses, to stimulate networking and ideas.

For the future, if tourism businesses and organisations show interest and commitment in working together, Tunbridge Wells could consider bringing activities into a more constituted tourism association that works for the interests of its members. This is a model seen in many towns and areas in Britain; at their best local tourism associations have developed a proactive and cost-effective approach to tourism promotion, enabling the industry to work in partnership with the local authorities.