

### **Strategic Direction for Visitor Information within Cheshire East**

Transforming the experience of visitors depends not only on getting the attractions and accommodation right, but through quality visitor information delivered where and when visitors need it. Cheshire East Council recognises the importance of visitor information and through the development of this strategy is looking to work in partnership with Cheshire East towns and villages to improve the quality and availability of visitor information. Visitors must be able to find the information they require to make the most of their stay and this will be achieved through the development of new approaches to visitor information provision. Visitor information plays an important role in increasing visitor spend and supporting the growth of the visitor economy.

Traditionally, Cheshire East have invested in Visitor Information Centres (VICs) as the main form of provision, however we are now responding to growing demand for other cost-effective models to compliment this provision.

Cheshire East's visitor profile is predominately day visitors categorised in the main by high spending Cosmopolitans (*strong, active, confident, style and brand important but as an expression of their self-made identity. High spenders, especially on innovation and technology. Looking for new challenges, new experiences, globetrotters*) and Traditionals (*self-reliant, internally referenced, slow to adopt new options, strong orientation towards, traditional values, value individual attention and service*). Our challenge is to grow this important market whilst actively looking to convert more of the day visitors into overnight stays. Cheshire East is also growing as a family destination particularly with the investment that is happening in family attractions. This will be an audience to target in future years.

### **What do we mean by Visitor Information?**

Well informed visitors will stay longer in destinations and most importantly will want to return. Visitor information can best be defined by considering the range of interactions that take place throughout the "visitor journey" and the provision of appropriate information - when, where and how - at each stage.

The information needs and expectations of visitors in the early 21st century are distinctly different from those of a decade ago. Visitors now have easy access to the web and mobile multi-media devices – to download information, make bookings and seek independent consumer advice. Whether through new technology or via face to face contact, visitor information provides an opportunity to influence decision making – the choice of destination; the length of stay; what to see, do and experience during a visit and whether to return or recommend to others.

As the emphasis shifts towards collaboration and taking information to the visitor, rather than expecting the visitor to come to the information, there is an

opportunity for a wider range of 'contact points' to emerge, equipped with the tools and product knowledge required to service visitor needs effectively.

Businesses such as visitor attractions, hotels and accommodation, retailers, restaurants, travel agents, transport operators, car rental companies, public houses, village shops, petrol stations and post offices will find that they can increase their business and increase customer satisfaction by providing visitor information as part of their service.

## **Way Forward**

It is the aim of Cheshire East Council to provide a framework for Cheshire East towns and villages to increase the provision of visitor information in a cohesive manner providing a service that enhances and compliments the visitor information already available in libraries and Visitor Information Centres; working collaboratively with popular venues to ensure information is readily available; raising awareness and improving the visual presence of the Cheshire Market Towns, Cheshire Peak District and South Cheshire brands and establishing a cost effective distribution system for leaflets.

Visitor Information Centres have traditionally been seen as the main source of visitor information in an area and within Cheshire East we are fortunate to have quality centres in Macclesfield, Congleton & Nantwich. These are valuable assets; however they are cash and resource-intensive and with downward pressure on resources, now is the time to look "outside of the box" at new, additional and innovative ways of providing visitor information.

Work has been completed providing visitor information in a number of libraries across Cheshire East, and although this provision is good, the service is limited as it can only be accessed during library opening hours. In Cheshire East towns popular with visitors there is still a lack of cohesive visitor information on offer.

Nationally, new partnerships are being established all the time with the private sector. Businesses are beginning to understand the value of visitor information as an add-on to their core offer, to drive footfall, create distinctive local appeal, and differentiate themselves from competitors.

Ideally, information services should closely reflect visitor movements and needs. Visitor information is a means to generate sales and raise awareness. This is about encouraging longer stays and greater spend: up-selling and cross-selling, and capturing customer data to enable cost-effective direct marketing and customer retention

Cheshire East Council will investigate new models for providing visitor information; as relying solely on Visitor Information Centres is not applicable for all areas of Cheshire East. We will however continue with the management of Macclesfield and Congleton Visitor Information Centres. The key to this innovative approach is to complement other available sources of visitor information through the use of non-traditional premises at locations where visitors and the locality may benefit from improved access to information.

## **Visitor Information Models**

### *Visitor Information Centre*

- As funding from Cheshire East is becoming limited, traditional council run Visitor Information Centres will be limited to their current locations. There will however be opportunities for community organisations to take over the running of these centres if it is felt that this will be in all stakeholders' interests.
- There is also the opportunity for communities to set-up their own Visitor Information Centre. This will be run and financed through the local community; however this will be supported by the Cheshire East Visitor Information Network that includes Cheshire East Council and Marketing Cheshire. The benefit of this approach is that the centre could be located at strategic locations within the town and run by knowledgeable, enthusiastic residents of the locality. The link between tourist numbers and visitor information will be the catalyst for this type of venture.

The focus of face to face provision must continue to be on providing excellent standards of service (including recommendations), provided by skilled personnel trained to understand visitor's individual requirements, tailor information accordingly and maximise benefit for the destination area. Face to face contact with customers each year should be a crucial element in understanding our visitors. Visitor Information Centres provide an opportunity to learn more about their profile, visitor patterns and booking habits and to influence them to make repeat visits. They can also play a key role in customer data collection and e-marketing.

### *Visitor Contact Points*

Cheshire East Council Visitor Economy is currently developing visitor contact points across the Borough. It requires engaging with businesses in a town to discuss new ways of providing visitors with the information they require. There is potential to work with certain town centre businesses, such as book shops, coffee shops, wine bars, the railway station or the museums as examples, to explain the potential advantages this new way of working would bring to all parties.

The concept is that visitor information would be available within the identified businesses in the town, backed up by staff having the product knowledge to answer visitor enquiries. An assessment of the information most relevant for the area will be developed, and in partnership with the business supply branded dispensers to be displayed in the business; window stickers and branding so the visitor would recognise they can ask for information; a local PR campaign to ensure everyone can understand the scheme and a welcome manual with the necessary support information – top historical facts, key Cheshire information and relevant contacts, provided.

The intended work will have Cheshire East as its primary focus, with regard to what's on, local products, places to visit, places to stay and places to eat. As well

as visitors the project will be of most relevance to the resident population, particularly in relation to the day visitor market and visiting friends and relatives (VFR), which are significant markets in Cheshire.

Positives to the project:

- Using local knowledge and pride to have ambassadors throughout the town.
- Looking at all aspects of the customer journey – able to target at more strategically placed points in the town centre.
- Information could be accessed outside of the more traditional office hours when restaurants or pubs take part.
- Cost effective
- Targeted information on local attractions, events and local produce to showcase the distinctiveness of the area.
- Capture consumer feedback – able to really understand the needs of the visitor and in addition any relevant comments can help develop future tourism agendas.
- Businesses working together to improve their network and further develop their knowledge on the area.

Positives to the businesses:

- Raises their profile through additional signage, PR and communication channels
- Encourages a new type of audience to visit the business
- Promotes community support and will profile the link between the businesses and the local area
- Aid to secondary spend
- Added support to the business through tough economic times

### *Mobile Visitor Information*

Mobile visitor information is the final piece of the jigsaw. With the huge rise in ownership of personal computers, mobile smart phones and access to websites, visitors can now access visitor information anywhere at anytime and in most cases free of charge. The information is always up to date allowing the visitor to plan their visit in advance and to access relevant information when they are at their destination. Cheshire East is at the forefront of this technology and uses it in a way that adds to and compliments existing visitor information sources.

Cheshire East uses a number of websites to promote the area and to inform visitors and potential visitors of where to stay; what to do; where to eat; places of interest and further sources of information. Added to this are the apps and widgets that are also available including the accommodation widget that sits on the businesses website to enable the visitor to book accommodation immediately.

These are all sources of further information that can compliment other visitor information provision or provide the information directly to the customer.

## **Support**

### *Cheshire East Council*

The Visitor Economy Department of the Council have many years' experience of developing, implementing and improving visitor information services in the borough. From developing Visitor Information Centre business plans to redesigning the layout to reducing costs to implementing retail plans the Council will work in partnership with the town to develop appropriate visitor information points. We will also utilise the knowledge and experience of Marketing Cheshire to fully integrate the services within Cheshire's visitor economy.

### *Visitor Information Network*

Cheshire East Council has developed a Visitor Information Network Group through the social business networking site LinkedIn. The group is for any person or business within Cheshire East who comes into contact with visitors. Within the site anyone can offer incentives, update on news items, inform on promotions or when new leaflets and brochures are available. The aim of the group is to provide an opportunity for everyone to keep informed of all tourism activity within the area and to create real partnerships and contacts for all involved.

### *Welcome Courses*

For Visitor Information Centres, libraries and businesses to react to and service comprehensively customer queries and questions, staff need to be equipped and trained to the highest standard. This has and will continue to be achieved through a series of welcome courses, equipping staff with the necessary skills to exceed customer's expectations and to give added value. The courses cover customer service, itinerary planning, additional sources of information, hidden tourism gems and general travel queries. This will give the visitor a welcome to Cheshire East as never before; leading to return visits and longer stays.

## **Objectives**

Visitor information is inextricably linked to destination marketing – it delivers the “brand promise” on the ground. To be effective, it needs to be governed by a set of quality standards that reinforce the brand, ensuring high levels of customer satisfaction. It means that customers receive consistent, quality-assured messages about what Cheshire East has to offer, no matter where they are in the borough. In short, the “prize” for partners is to maximise the opportunities for the visitor economy by providing appropriate, cost-effective visitor information in the right place, at the right time to the right people.

Cheshire East Council's vision and objectives for visitor information services are designed around providing quality visitor information where and when the customer requires it:

- A modern, customer focussed and transformational Visitor Information Service, recognised as an integral part of the community, promoting &

selling the local area and further afield; what's on and local products to locals and visitors alike

- Contributing positively to the visitor economy of Cheshire East through the promotion of what's on, where to go and see, where to eat and where to stay and through the added value of knowledgeable staff.
- Ensuring Cheshire East is promoted where and when visitors require it.
- Ensuring that those who come into contact with visitors are understanding of the area and what it has to offer through relevant training courses and material.
- The implementation of partnership working to engage specialists in the visitor economy to impart valuable knowledge and experience; including Cheshire East Council and Marketing Cheshire.
- To work in partnership with Cheshire East attractions to continually up-sell the offer

### **Next Steps**

Cheshire East Council will pilot the strategy with Nantwich Town Council who has recently taken ownership of Nantwich Civic Hall, which currently houses Nantwich Visitor Information Centre. The town council have expressed an interest in running the visitor information centre and Cheshire East Council will explore the opportunity further, in line with this strategy. Once completed it is anticipated that the strategy will be opened up to the rest of the borough through the Cheshire East Sustainable Towns Network.