Case study:
Durham
1. Summary

To deliver growth in the visitor economy destinations must be compelling. They must offer visitors high quality experiences, opportunities to stay longer, experience more and increase their spending. This case study focuses on Durham's development as a destination and the importance of destination management planning in achieving their vision, contributing to the delivery of objective 2 in England's Strategic Framework and associated Destination Management Action Plan. The development of a county-wide public-private partnership, working together under a single brand, has been an essential building block in establishing Durham as a ‘compelling destination’. Considerable progress has been made, but there is more to be done.

Approach

Durham is on a journey towards becoming a ‘compelling destination’. Since ‘Visit County Durham’ was set up six years ago, its underlying focus has been on establishing the concept of the county as a tourism destination. It brought together a wide range of partners to build a greatly strengthened destination called Durham - using the name, with its positive connotations, not just for the city, but for the distinct areas within the county as well - the Durham Dales, Durham Heritage Coast and the Vale of Durham, as well as Durham City. The place brand, 'This is Durham', developed by a group of senior leaders in the county, community and business groups and about 40 key players in the industry, is used internally, as well as externally.

The key steps in the process have been to establish a solid base of research evidence, to strengthen the mechanisms for tourism businesses to work together on a sectoral basis, and to keep the Durham Tourism Management Plan fresh and focused.

A major focus for the Tourism Management Plan is to improve the tourism product thought the county, in terms of both quality and quantity.

There are three key aspects of product development:

- Iconic attractions - enhancing existing attractions and creating authentic new ones.
- Conference and meetings - especially the positioning of Millennium Place in Durham as a venue.
- Festivals and events.
Major enhancements to Durham's attractions are planned, most importantly a multi million pound programme of development to enhance the city’s World Heritage Site. This includes:

- The £3.5m ‘Open Treasures’ project - to re-present the buildings and treasures of the cathedral.
- A new World Heritage Site Visitor Centre.
- Three new exhibition spaces created on Palace Green (within the University) for the Lindisfarne Gospels exhibition, which will be available for major exhibitions on a continuing basis.

There are big events in the county each year and occasional ‘signature’ events, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels exhibition and programme, a signature event taking place in 2013 and the Durham Mystery Plays, revived in 2010 and taking place on a three year cycle.

Beamish ‘Living Museum of the North’ is buoyant, with annual increases in visitor numbers of 25%, bucking all trends, as a result of a substantial programme of events, including a highly successful ‘Christmas at Beamish’ and a steam fair, and introduction of new products, such as a vintage fun fair, a traditional fish and chip shop. Bowes Museum has also been developing, with highly successful events and exhibitions, accompanied by substantial investment in café and toilets.

Other work to develop the richness of Durham’s offer includes the development of Auckland Castle into a major visitor attraction. The Castle, which houses many major artistic treasures, was recently rescued by a philanthropist and placed under the guardianship of a trust; enhancing the visitor experience of Durham’s ‘Heritage Coast’, mainly through landscaping and improving the walking offer and a new spa development in Teesdale and enhanced golfing facilities at Ramside Hall Hotel.

The new attractions and events that have been developed over the past few years and are planned for the future fit well with the strategy of Visit County Durham and England’s Strategic Framework for Tourism in highlighting the authentic assets of the area, differentiating it from other destinations and enhancing its power to attract visitors.

“There is great potential for new attractions and events not only in the city, but in many other parts of the county as well. Visit County Durham is committed to working with it’s partners to ensure this county-wide potential is realised.”

Melanie Sensicle - Chief Executive Visit County Durham
Funding

Given the essential focus of the Durham Tourism Management Plan on product development, the key issue is the availability of funding for capital investment. Whilst there is no longer RDA funding to support major new developments, Durham has to some extent been able to compensate for this by creating a climate of confidence which is encouraging further private sector investment. This has been as a result of the clear strategic direction set out in the Tourism Management Plan and all the hard work on implementing it by Visit County Durham and others. Also, development initiatives by Beamish Museum, Durham County Cricket Club and Durham Cathedral and various private interests have helped stimulate the confidence further.

With the dismantling of One NorthEast (the Regional Development Agency for the North East), Visit County Durham and the other Area Tourism Partnerships lost not only the largest part of their funding, but also central services and support. Durham County Council, which recently became a unitary authority, agreed to provide the core funding for Visit County Durham, which has now been taken into the Council’s structure, whilst retaining its private sector led Board.

Visit County Durham does not operate a membership scheme, but nevertheless has an increasingly strong relationship with tourism businesses in the county and is able to generate substantial income by way of contributions towards marketing activity.

The major initiatives to enhance Durham as a destination provide a strong foundation for attracting more public funding as well as private. Durham is one of the primary destinations in the ‘Growing Tourism Locally’ Regional Growth Fund (RGF) project being led by VisitEngland. Durham’s inclusion in RGF combined with local match will increase visitor expenditure and create additional jobs over the three years of the project.

In addition, the EU Leader Plus programme is still a major source of funding for tourism projects, similarly the Rural Development Programme for England, which provides specific opportunities for tourism organisations.
**Measuring Success**

Durham has experienced a 13% growth in the volume and value of its visitor economy since 2003. Latest figures (2010) show that tourism is worth £659 million to the county and that it supports circa 11,000 jobs.

There are key performance indicators (KPIs) for tourism in Durham, as a destination and for Visit County Durham as an organisation. For the destination, there are indicators reflecting strategic aims, such as accommodation occupancy levels, satisfaction with the destination offer and service and length of stay, measured in surveys; and the quality of the offer, measured through accreditation, for example, the proportion of restaurants participating in ‘Taste Durham’.

Visit County Durham runs an annual awards scheme, which celebrates success in a very public way. They also help to raise the profile of Visit County Durham and the whole programme of tourism development.

**TOP-TIPS**

- Develop a clear strategy and the destination management plan to deliver it, with key stakeholder engagement and buy-in.
- Use this plan as the foundation for everything you do.
- Maintain a single minded focus on the needs of the visitor.
- Get excellent, skilled, committed people working with you.
- Don’t get diverted by single agenda groups and those who shout loudest.
- Ensure that elected members are well informed and engaged in developing the strategy.

**Challenges and Lessons Learnt**

The first lesson is that neither the private sector nor the public sector can develop tourism successfully on their own. Partnership is fundamental. The private sector provides the accommodation and many of the visitor attractions and events. The public sector also provides attractions and events, but, in addition, has the critically important role of shaping and supporting the long term development of tourism through physical and economic development planning policies and infrastructure development.

Secondly, it takes time, often a long time, to build effective working relationships with a multiplicity of stakeholders, such as are involved in every significant destination.

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