

Dear Councillors Mr. Dignum and Mrs. Keegan,

The Visitor Economy

Visit Chichester (VC), the Council's officially recognised Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO), understands that your Cabinet, at their meeting on the 7th July, will consider a reference from your Overview and Scrutiny Committee from their meeting in March 2015. Specifically, we understand that the Cabinet will be considering a recommendation that:

'the Council sets out a brief but clear three to five year plan which sets the aspiration, establishes the baseline information and leads the initiative required to bring partners together to develop the visitor economy under one robust and coherent strategy'

This recommendation is consistent with VC's own plans to review its Destination Management Plan (DMP) which expires at the end of this year.

As members of the Cabinet might be aware the decision to withdraw public funding from the tourism sector was made by the District Council in 2012. Since that date the only group working to sustain the promotion of tourism sector across our District has been VC. It must be noted that VC is made up entirely of unpaid industry sector professionals drawn from both the private and public sector, who give up significant amounts of their own time to support the local visitor economy. VC is supported, to a small extent, by paid marketing and administrative support on a scale consistent with its resources. VC enjoys no on-going public funding.

During the time since Chichester District Council withdrew its funding VC has:

- *Delivered many of the outcomes and objectives contained in the approved DMP particularly around marketing, social media, web-site and thematic developments*
- *Focussed on marketing the destination both locally and nationally – a financial imperative given the absence of public sector funding*
- *Provided a level of strategy input to groups such as LEADER and Chichester City Centre BID*
- *Contributed to the continued growth of the tourism economy, despite the recession, as identified in available Cambridge tourism statistics*
- *Developed a new interactive and mobile responsive website – one of only a handful of such tourism sites across the south coast*
- *Developed and expanded its social media presence on Twitter and Facebook*
- *Maintained its membership numbers*
- *Developed a relationship with adjoining areas to jointly market and promote tourism*
- *Continued to produce high quality print (holiday and attractions guides) to support the sector*
- *Provided continual support to tourism business on request around areas such as planning, marketing, and social media*

VC has met with your officers and Committee members during 2014/15 whilst the review has been ongoing. We have consistently stressed the fact that we wish to do more but that our ability is limited by a lack of resources and hampered by the absence of any public funding. We have invited the Committee and its task and finish group to work closely with us to design a solution that we can collectively take forward and deliver. We have received no response to that request and have been most disappointed with the rather insular approach adopted by the Committee. Indeed, the overall tone of the meetings has consistently been one of blame and criticism of VC, characterised by a lack of collegiality and respect for the work we have been doing. VC has stepped into the vacuum, occasioned by the then financial climate, and it is very disappointing that this effort remains unrecognised and unsupported. We cannot understand this approach and the Council has, by its own actions, contributed to the disaggregation of the sector further, for example by approving grants to separate organisations to develop tourism related websites without consultation with the District's recognised DMO, despite this being stipulated as part of the funding agreement, as known by officers. Moreover, CDC officers have a rather unrealistic expectation of VC in terms of destination management, as VS has no direct control or influence over many aspects of the visitor experience such as car parking, signage and the operation of visitor information centres.

VC has its own vision, which has been made known to your Task and Finish Group. This seeks to:

- *Develop a new Destination Management Plan to set and support the future direction of the visitor economy*
- *Attract funding to sustainably support the administration function of VC*
- *Further develop visitor themes across the District and beyond where appropriate, building on the capability within the recently developed website*
- *Improve representation on the DMO from senior members of key local organisations to provide a comprehensive "one voice" for the sector*

VC has been consistently criticised for not being strategic and lacking any long-term aspiration. This is a point we would strongly refute and the Council must recognise that grand aspirations can only be met if the resources are there to support them. With its available resources, VC has sought to prioritise key actions, particularly around ensuring the continued availability of print (still a significant prerequisite for visitors) and the development of a contemporary, engaging, and mobile responsive website that provides the shop-window for the local visitor economy. Notably all these actions are key strategic points included in Visit England's Modernising Visitor Information Action Plan.

VC does however, fully acknowledge that more could and should be done (as reflected in our aspirations above). The return of the District Council to this arena, with the potential of public sector funding support, will assist, particularly in attracting the private sector back when the withdrawal of public sector funding damaged that ability.

We very much hope that in considering any recommendations from your Overview and Scrutiny Committee that the pivotal role of VC in holding things together in the past and in being a major part of the solution, with public sector funding in the future, is recognised. VC has considerable assets, including its website, company structure, staff expertise and industry goodwill, which should help facilitate improved support for the District's tourism sector. We hope that the next piece of work can be undertaken in a much more positive and collegiate manner with VC playing a valued and leading role in the process.

We have not been privy to the report that will be submitted to you but await its publication with interest. We would very much appreciate, as the Council's approved DMO, an opportunity to address your meeting when you consider your report.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Clegg". The signature is written in a cursive style with a clear, legible font.

Dr Andrew Clegg
Chairman of Visit Chichester

cc. S. Oates / J. Hotchkiss / P. Coleman