

Strategic framework for tourism in Wealden



April 2010

Strategic framework for tourism in Wealden • Executive summary



Foreword

Tourism is vitally important to the Wealden economy. It brings in some £260 million pounds of income to the District each year, supports over 4,600 jobs and provides the lifeblood for many small businesses. I firmly believe that, if properly managed and supported, it can continue to benefit our wonderful District and its economy for generations to come.

This matter is too important to be left to chance. If it is to achieve its full potential, then all involved in tourism need to agree where our key priorities and strengths lie and work to a common agenda. That is the purpose of this document – to highlight the importance of tourism, set out a vision for its future, and identify the strategic priorities and action needed to take us there.

In commending our Tourism Strategy to you I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who have taken the time to contribute to the strategy through responding to our consultants surveys, attending workshops and for generally offering their views. The number and quality of responses from industry during the consultation process has been tremendous.

I would also like to give a special mention to all members of the Tourism Strategy Steering Group for their commitment and contribution to ensuring that this Strategy can now pave the way to fulfil the expectations of the industry, our residents and indeed all those who come to visit Wealden.

The publication of this Tourism Strategy Framework is the first step in taking tourism forward. It recognises the value of investing in our key assets, including world-class brands such as the Ashdown Forest, the recently designated South Downs National Park, as well as our particular strengths such as leisure activities, an attractive environment and many heritage assets.

I look forward to working with our partners in taking this Strategy forward over the next 5 years and to celebrating the future success of tourism in Wealden.



A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Pam Doodes".

Cllr Pam Doodes
Portfolio Holder for Community
Wealden District Council

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	3
2	BACKGROUND	6
3	CHALLENGES	12
4	STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES.....	17
5	QUALITY PROGRAMMES.....	21
6	DELIVERY.....	31

1 INTRODUCTION

THIS REPORT

The Strategic Framework for Tourism in Wealden was commissioned by the Economic Development and Tourism Section of Wealden District Council (WDC) in summer 2009.

The brief set out the requirements for an independent refresh of Wealden's tourism strategy 2004-2009 and the preparation of an action plan to further the tourism development in Wealden over the next 5 years to 2015. There is a desire to make Wealden a quality destination for tourism that meets or exceeds the expectations of visitors.

Over the past five years, there have been a number of changes within tourism provision in Wealden at both the local and the pan-Sussex level. Changes include reduced tourism resources within the Council, increased partnership working to maximise the opportunities for tourism promotion, and the creation of the Sussex Tourism Partnership during 2006. Wealden District Council is now in the process of preparing its Local Development Framework (LDF). In view of the extent of these changes, there is a need to review the priorities and actions contained within the 2004-2009 strategy.

The results of the tourism strategy refresh will be used by the Council to:

- ▶ Inform the future direction of the tourism function and the development of tourism related policy through its LDF
- ▶ Identify the key priorities and produce an action plan that will inform the tourism work programme for the next 5 years
- ▶ Provide direction and guidance on the accommodation and attractions quality assurance schemes
- ▶ Support quantitative and robust evidence of demand and supply of tourism accommodation and input to policy formulation for LDF purposes
- ▶ Respond to tourism related planning applications, in particular change of use applications
- ▶ Present an advocacy document to influence key agencies such as the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and Tourism South East (TSE)
- ▶ Raise the profile of Wealden as a key tourism player with organisations such as Sussex Tourism Partnership, SEEDA, TSE and 1066 Country.

Above all, the strategy should identify the key priorities for the District Council and produce a realistic action plan that can be implemented, given current resources available, by identified partners for delivery.

Since the last tourism strategy was approved a number of areas have become a focus for the Council. These include:

- ▶ The duty to promote equalities
- ▶ Sustainability, and the desire to better manage natural resources consumption
- ▶ The need for a sound Local Development Framework operating under a Sustainable Community Strategy
- ▶ Greater partnership working.

This Strategic Framework refreshes and builds on Wealden District Councils' previous tourism strategy for 2004-09 recognising current plans and progress, taking into account changing tourism markets and economic conditions, identifying fresh challenges and new opportunities, and prioritising to make the best use of resources available to the Council.

It shows how tourism can make the best possible contribution to the economic, social and environmental well-being of Wealden.

It sets out the strategic principles, programmes and actions for the tourism sector for the next five years to 2015. It has been developed with two fundamental aims in mind:

- ▶ To improve the quality of the tourism offer in the area for visitors and residents alike
- ▶ To ensure that any future actions and initiatives are sustainable, providing jobs and income to the local economy without having an adverse impact on its environment or communities.

There are five supporting documents:

- ▶ The Executive Summary - the summary of this report
- ▶ A separate paper that translates this report into LDF evidence and draft recommendations
- ▶ The Position Statement - the background, context, facts and figures
- ▶ The Action Plan – the evolving activities for the Council and partners
- ▶ The Stakeholder Workshop report - a record of the outcomes of the consultative event held in December 2009.

THE RATIONALE FOR THIS WORK

Tourism is extremely important to Wealden's economy: it supports a wide range of businesses and services for local people, and enhances the environmental characteristics of the area.

There were 5.8 million visitor trips to Wealden in 2008. Visitors spent £261 million, which supported 4,600 jobs - 10% of all jobs in Wealden. The main beneficiaries were catering and retail.

The tourism sector has many stakeholders. These include the District Council, which has a range of responsibilities such as strategic planning, economic development, market town regeneration, business support, marketing and communication, countryside, arts, culture and leisure.

Other key stakeholders include the High Weald AONB Unit and South Downs Joint Committee, the Conservators of the Ashdown Forest, the five market towns (Crowborough, Hailsham, Heathfield, Polegate and Uckfield), the Enjoy Sussex Partnership, East Sussex County Council, Sussex Tourism Partnership, Tourism South East and a large number of businesses – from hotels, B&Bs, conference venues and self-catering accommodation, to visitor attractions, hospitality and retail businesses.

This Strategic Framework sets out the direction for the tourism sector as a whole.

2 BACKGROUND

This is a very brief summary of the background. There is more information about all of these topics in the Position Statement.

OVERVIEW

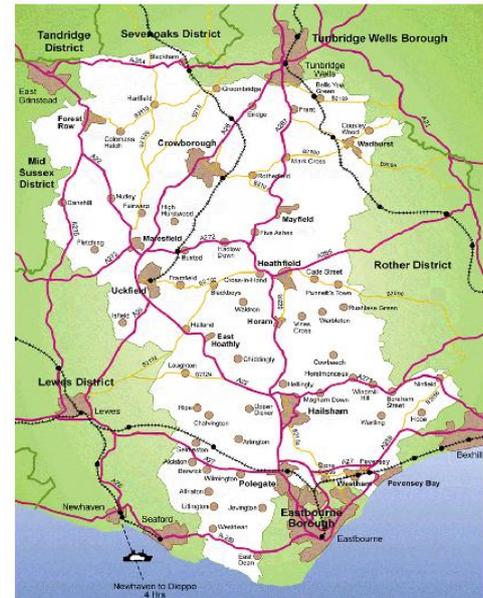
Wealden is the largest of the East Sussex districts and boroughs, covering 323 square miles.

It is one of the most rural districts in England (as classified by DEFRA). Nearly two-thirds is protected landscape – Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the newly designated National Park, ancient woodland and heath land, wetlands and wildlife habitats.

There are 143,000 people living in the small market towns, villages and countryside.

The economy is dominated by farm-based businesses and micro-businesses. The diversified nature of the agricultural sector has a significant impact on the area in terms of economy and shaping the landscape.

Wealden District Council location map



STRATEGIC CONTEXT

This Framework dovetails with strategies for other sectors and neighbouring areas, and with sub-regional and regional policies - so that there is greater potential to achieve economies of scale and impact in the market.

These are the key plans and strategies – the Position Statement highlights the relevant parts when it comes to the visitor economy:

- ▶ Wealden Corporate Plan 2009-12
- ▶ Wealden Sustainable Community Strategy 2009-12
- ▶ South East Plan (published 2006)
- ▶ Tourism South East Strategy for the London Games 2012
- ▶ Wealden Local Plan 1998 and Non-Statutory Local Plan 2005
- ▶ LDF Consultation / Core Strategy – Issues and Options Consultation Paper (published 2009)

- ▶ South Downs AONB Management Plan (published 2007)
- ▶ High Weald Management Plan (published 2009)
- ▶ Economic Blueprint for the Eastbourne Hailsham Triangle (published 2006)
- ▶ Various market healthchecks, town master-plans and visions
- ▶ Wealden Leisure Strategy 2010-26
- ▶ Wealden Tourism Strategy 2004-09
- ▶ Wealden Hotel and Visitor Accommodation Futures 2009.

WHY VISITORS COME

90% of visitors to Wealden are day visitors. The 10% who stay overnight are mainly on leisure trips (rather than business). These overnight trips are predominantly made by UK residents and they are most likely to be staying in friends and relatives' homes (VFR).¹

These visitors come for a mixture of places, landscapes and experiences:

The Places and Landscapes

- | | |
|--|---|
| ▶ Ashdown Forest, Winnie the Pooh sites and the High Weald | ▶ Market towns and villages |
| ▶ Eastbourne, Beachy Head, Birling Gap, Seven Sisters, Alfriston and the South Downs | ▶ “Destination” hotels, restaurants and pubs |
| ▶ The Low Weald | ▶ Heritage sites – castles, priories and railways |
| ▶ Pevensey Levels | ▶ Countryside attractions, parks, gardens and vineyards |
| ▶ Pevensey Bay and the coast | ▶ Designated paths and trails |
| ▶ Bewl Water | ▶ Literary & cultural connections |

¹ The terms “visitor” and “visitor economy” rather than “tourist” are more appropriate to describe the types of people who visit Wealden and the types of businesses that benefit from their expenditure.

The Experiences

- ▶ Peace and quiet
- ▶ Pampering
- ▶ Countryside leisure & recreation
- ▶ Walking and dog walking
- ▶ Cycling
- ▶ Horse riding
- ▶ Wildlife
- ▶ Outdoor pursuits
- ▶ Golf
- ▶ Fishing
- ▶ Beaches and water sports
- ▶ Food and drink
- ▶ Local produce
- ▶ Meet friends and relatives
- ▶ Functions and weddings
- ▶ Conferences & training courses
- ▶ Retreats and studies
- ▶ Touring and passing through

However, Wealden is surrounded by a wealth of other places, landscapes and experiences which add to the appeal of the area – the wider South Downs and High Weald, 1066 Country, the coastal resorts of Eastbourne, Hastings and Brighton, plus heritage towns such as Lewes, Tunbridge Wells, East Grinstead, Rye and Battle.

Accommodation

There are a large number of small accommodation businesses within the District:

- ▶ 116 serviced establishments providing 910 bedrooms with average annual room occupancies of 45% for hotels, up to 60% for pubs and around 50% for B&Bs
- ▶ 139 self-catering units, mostly single units with occupancy between 30% and 50%
- ▶ 23 touring caravan and camp sites providing 993 pitches, with high weekend, but very seasonal, occupancy
- ▶ 9 holiday parks most at their licensed capacity.

Around half of them are quality assured with the AA or Enjoy England. There is a greater incidence of non quality assurance in the pub and self-catering sectors.

There is a large stock of accommodation in Eastbourne which services some of Wealden's needs.

Attractions

There are around 30 visitor attractions in Wealden. Apart from the National Trust properties, visitor numbers are relatively low at each site (under 40,000 per year). There are some major attractions bordering Wealden which includes a cluster of National Trust properties to the north and west.

PARTNERSHIPS

Wealden is promoted by the District Council through three partnerships:

- ▶ 1066 Country - the long-established brand and marketing partnership that promotes the districts of Rother and Hastings and surrounding parts of Wealden (which includes parts of the High Weald, Herstmonceux and Pevensey).
- ▶ Enjoy Sussex – Wealden, Lewes, Horsham and Mid Sussex District Councils have been working in partnership since 2004 to promote their combined areas as a visitor destination in the UK tourist market
- ▶ The Sussex Tourism Partnership - an independent coalition of public, private and 3rd sector partners, created in April 2007, which acts as the sub-regional body for Tourism South East.

The Council is also a member of Tourism South East, the regional tourist board, which promotes the region in the UK and international markets, supports tourism businesses, provides market research and intelligence, training and skills development, and policy advice, and is the voice of tourism at both regional and national levels.

MARKET TRENDS

Visitor markets are changing. Since 2008 the recession has had a negative impact on some markets, especially business tourism, but these are the long-term trends:

- ▶ **Short breaks** - there has been long-term growth in UK short breaks relative to longer holidays - due to the greater frequency of weekend breaks by couples and longer midweek breaks from older age groups (including coach travel). They are mainly hotel-based. Health and well-being is a key motivator. There is strong competition from other UK destinations, European cities and budget airline deals.
- ▶ **Staying with friends and relatives** – this is an under-estimated and growing sector due to increased mobility, student population, functions and reunions. It stimulates the food and drink sector, visits to attractions, events, entertainment and recreation. Whilst it is difficult to influence the decision to visit, it is possible to have an impact on their local movements and behaviour. Local people are the route to the VFR market, accompanying them on days out and making recommendations for visits.
- ▶ **Overseas** – the mature markets of Europe and the USA are slowing, and all overseas markets are affected by the recession - but emerging markets in India, China and Eastern Europe are expected to deliver significant visitor business for the UK over the next few years – albeit benefiting the stronger destination brands such as London and Scotland first. Exchange rates are an important yet unpredictable factor. The UK's international profile is expected to increase in the run-up to London 2012.

- ▶ **Day visits** - there is major growth in health-related / outdoor activity (walking, mountain biking, fitness clubs, etc). Traditional visitor attractions are facing competition from new Heritage Lottery funded schemes. Urban regeneration has led to significant visitor increases in non-traditional places such as Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle. Educational visits and corporate hospitality are often now key markets for many attractions.
- ▶ **Business tourism** - has been badly affected by the recession but is expected to recover with the economy and return to its long-term pattern of growth. Business tourism generates high spend per head, but a significant part is non-discretionary business travel. The sectors that can be influenced are meetings, conferences, exhibitions and corporate hospitality. The trend is towards smaller and shorter meetings, more business focused (less leisure time), with shorter lead times.

Visitor expectations and motivations are changing too:

- ▶ People are increasingly well-travelled, so many are now looking for authentic places, products and experiences, the new, fresh and undiscovered, higher standards of quality and service. Some are looking for “responsible”, ethical and green choices when they travel.
- ▶ People have high expectations of their leisure breaks - they are looking for holidays and short breaks to deliver a range of emotional benefits, for example: escape from everyday constraints and rules; special / quality time with partner / family when lives are busy; positive self-esteem and image.
- ▶ Yet this emotional investment in holidays and breaks can make some people unwilling to take risks on the unknown - and lead to a preference for strong brands or familiar places.
- ▶ People are becoming much more difficult to classify: by age, life-stage, and class; by family type (now we have growing numbers of singles, second families, step families, multi-generational households).
- ▶ And a number of factors currently impact on choice and buying behaviour: recession - reducing spend and increasing desire for value for money; super-availability of information and knowledge - increasing the consumers' power to compare and make choices; scepticism re marketing messages and growing trust in (virtual) word of mouth and peer comment.

Wealden has similar tourism trends to the regional picture which shows an overall decrease in trips attributed to the onset of the recession in 2008 (when domestic overnight trips in the UK shrunk by 5%). For Wealden between 2005 and 2008:

- ▶ Domestic trips fell by 6%
- ▶ Overseas trips increased by 1%
- ▶ Day trips fell by 2%

- ▶ Overnight visitor spending increased by 4% (mostly because of inflation)
- ▶ Day visitor spending fell by 2%.

In 2009, UK trips rose nationally, as domestic holiday makers chose UK destinations. In the South East the main impact of this rise in domestic trip taking was through increases in day visits to attractions and in an increase in caravan and campsite occupancy. Occupancy in the serviced and non-serviced sectors stayed at 2008 levels.

3 CHALLENGES

The key challenges for tourism in Wealden over the next five years (2010-15) are:

Local perceptions

Overnight visits to stay with friends or relatives, day visits made by people who live in neighbouring counties, and business meetings and events are not necessarily thought of as “tourism”. This affects how tourism is perceived and valued locally.

The Challenge is to understand and quantify the scale of tourism, and assist businesses to market to certain segments such as visiting friends and relatives.

Distinctiveness

Wealden is rich in physical assets but lacks distinctiveness as a destination. It is an administrative area. The areas of Wealden that visitors recognise tend to be part of bigger things - the South Downs, the High Weald, Sussex, etc.

The Challenge is to market the area successfully using the main attractors, and at the same time to raise local visitors' awareness and pride in Wealden.

Geographic spread

A small number of specific sites in Wealden experience significant visitor pressures at certain times. This has a negative impact on local residents and the landscape, as well as the visitor experience. Much of this pressure is due to day visitors who bring little economic benefit. Many of them are regular visitors and will continue to come regardless of attempts to scale down marketing initiatives. This can mask the capacity for beneficial increases in overnight visitors, which can be stimulated by new targeted marketing activities.

The Challenges are to ensure that visitors are not demonised because of high profile issues in specific locations, to manage the visitors who come and to benefit the local economy.

Sustainability

Given the scale and financial importance of the tourism sector in Wealden, encouraging and enabling businesses to improve their management of waste, water and carbon emissions can have a significant impact. However, many small businesses are concerned about the cost of introducing green technology, and believe it will have an effect on visitors, reducing comfort and consumption. Persuading visitors to act sustainably during their visit can be difficult as private car use is the dominant mode of leisure transport - although attitudes are changing to both travel and support for local produce and communities.

The Challenge is to identify and deliver partnership programmes and policies that can actually make a difference, rather than trying to encourage actions in businesses and visitors that are unlikely to be taken up.

Transport

Congestion is increasing, but so is the desire to escape it. Wealden has the benefit of its good strategic location. However there are broader issues related to the volume of traffic, the speed of traffic on narrow country lanes, the likelihood of accidents and traffic noise.

Walking and cycling is becoming an important feature of visitor activity.

Rail connections to specific places in the district are good and service provision has recently improved. However, rail connections with bus services and links into the surrounding countryside are poor. This has a particular bearing on access to visitor attractions – many tend to be off-the-beaten-track and are only accessible by car.

The Challenge is to work with the rail and bus service operators, promote walking and cycling options, and encourage visitors arriving by car to restrict their car miles during their stay.

The National Park

The South Downs National Park will be established in 2010. This will be a major new asset for the tourism sector in the southern half of Wealden. How tourism will be managed and marketed is currently unknown. Wealden has some key sites – Seven Sisters, Birling Gap, Beachy Head and Alfriston - and some strategic rail links at Polegate and Berwick. There is an opportunity for the Council to seize the initiative and work with the new National Park Authority as a key partner to co-ordinate local activity – and then feed this into the wider tourism strategy and marketing of the National Park.

The Challenge is to engage with the emerging National Park Authority to ensure Wealden's businesses and communities benefit from the designation, and that Park policies allow for the development of sustainable visitor programmes.

Ashdown Forest

Ashdown Forest faces specific issues concerning visitor awareness, understanding, interpretation and dispersal. The Forest has a large volume of visitors yet the vast majority are local residents travelling 10 kilometres or less.

The size of the Forest coupled with the pattern approach roads from various directions means that the Conservators 40+ car parks provide the arrival point for most people's visit. Yet less than 1% of them visit the Ashdown Forest Centre. The Conservators have provisional plans to develop this site and enlarge the range of interpretive, educational, catering and retail services.

There have been planning constraints to develop visitor facilities near Pooh Sticks Bridge, yet Winnie the Pooh is an internationally known icon. It carries the clout of the Disney Corporation and the film, publishing and merchandising sectors – so visitors are inevitable. The current visitor experience is limited to walks and leaflets to the Pooh sites and to the Pooh Corner shop at Hartfield.

The Challenge is to ensure that visitors to the Forest do not have a detrimental impact on local residents or the environment, that they are better managed, and that a central visitor focus for the area is developed to maximise the local economic benefit and opportunities for public education.

Population growth

The Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East refers to the potential for 11,000 more houses in Wealden and 45,000 more in the surrounding area over the next 15 years. This has implications on job creation, inward investment and hotel demand from the corporate sector. It will also generate more visits from friends and relatives, and day visits. So visitor management will be even more important.

The Challenge is to ensure the tourism sector and policies keep pace with these developments and derive maximum benefit from potential new audiences.

Accommodation

There are relatively low occupancy levels at accommodation establishments, although some are turning business away at busy periods. The level of business tourism within the market mix is very low. This affects the likelihood of new investment at new sites over the next five years, especially given the current economic climate. There is danger that any new investment would simply displace and dilute existing local business.

The Challenge is to encourage and support appropriate development (through the LDF policies where appropriate) where there is a market need and monitor sector performance over the next 5 years.

Engaging with lifestyle businesses and small businesses can be difficult. Some dip in and out of tourism. Some lack business plans and many have very limited marketing budgets. Yet these are the lifeblood of the tourism sector.

Around 50% of Wealden accommodation providers take part in national accommodation quality assurance schemes. This is in line with the national average, but it still means that many businesses are not eligible to take part in local authority promotions or information services. Non-participation does not necessarily mean they are low quality. There are many reasons affecting the scheme's penetration: alternative routes to market including marketing partnerships and agencies; growing importance of web user reviews; and, for some, the dislike of official schemes.

The Challenge is to establish regular engagement and dialogue with small tourism businesses in the area through access to marketing, training and business development programmes.

Market towns

The five market towns are local centres that provide valuable day-to-day services for visitors (food, fuel, meals out etc), are relatively well connected to public transport (compared to the villages and rural areas), and have local events and festivals, farmers markets and free parking. They support their hinterlands of villages and rural dwellings.

Yet they lack the distinctiveness, quality services and attractive public realm that can draw visitors – such as speciality shops, local heritage centres, visitor information points, award winning restaurants, etc. They have little quality accommodation in their centres. The quality of the public realm is patchy and the evening economy is quite weak. They all face competition from better-known and better-provided towns surrounding the area – Tunbridge Wells, Battle, Rye, Lewes, East Grinstead, etc.

The Challenge is to work with the market town groups to establish realistic strategies and programmes to develop their visitor product and market appeal.

Marketing

Wealden District Council's tourism marketing resources (budgets and staff) are limited. Yet destination marketing is becoming increasingly competitive and sophisticated – using targeted, segmented creative techniques, digital routes to market and clever marketing partnerships.

Wealden belongs to three strategic marketing partnerships and to Tourism South East. There are obvious benefits to working in partnership: in particular combining resources to make more of an impact in the market, and accessing external tourism marketing skills. However, without more officer and member time to devote to them, Wealden's influence on – and benefit from - these partnerships is limited. Perhaps because of that, the participation by Wealden tourism businesses in these partnerships' marketing opportunities appears to be quite low.

There is currently no joint marketing with Eastbourne or parts of Kent – yet there are some obvious synergies. The supply and demand for accommodation in Eastbourne (which is surrounded by Wealden District) has an influence on tourism in Wealden.

The Challenge is to identify and work with partners to deliver effective, targeted marketing that uses the latest destination marketing techniques to attract the right markets, and that are supported by local businesses.

Visitor information

Visit Sussex and Enjoy Sussex tend to be the first online “port of call” for potential visitors to the area – they are targeted at visitors and have search engine optimisation programmes that make sure potential visitors find them.

Whilst there is also a lot of useful information for visitors on the Wealden Council web site (e.g. the Cuckoo Trail and guided walks), potential visitors might not get that far. The local partnerships and tourism associations also have their own web sites. But they lack capacity to update their editorial and images – especially information about events. And they are not linked to the Wealden web site or to the higher-profile visitor sites such as Enjoy Sussex, Visit Sussex, Visit South East England, Visit England, Visit Britain, etc.

The Challenge is to rationalise and improve the web structure (removing duplication and out-of-date, neglected sites) - to make sure that visitors and local residents can find high quality, accurate, clear and compelling information - easily and quickly.

4 STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES

A VISION FOR 2020

This is the broad 10 year vision for Wealden founded on the principles of quality and sustainability.

By 2020 **Wealden's** visitor economy is
renowned for the **quality** and **sustainability**
of the special **places, landscapes and people**
which contribute to local **jobs** and the **quality of life** for its residents.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The strategic objectives within the last tourism strategy are still largely valid so they form the basis of the objectives for the next five years. This should give consistency to the ongoing growth of the visitor economy. This Strategic Framework is part of an evolutionary process.

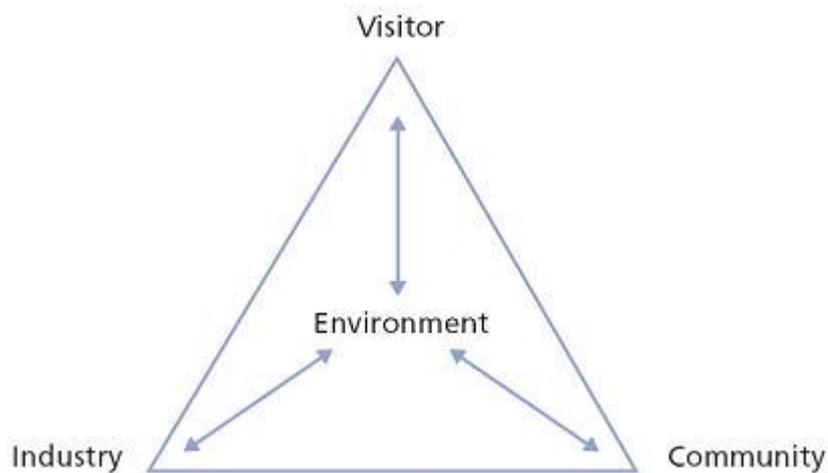
The strategic objectives for 2010 to 2015 are to:

- ▶ Contribute to improving the quality of life for local people, particularly in terms of improving market town vitality, helping to maintain and enhance local services and amenities
- ▶ Capitalise on the economic benefits, job and wealth creation which the visitor economy brings to the area
- ▶ Provide more effective management of visitors and responsible visitor behaviour to minimise any adverse impact on the environment and local communities
- ▶ Improve the quality of the visitor economy product and visitor experience
- ▶ Achieve better geographic and seasonal spread of visitor demand, to boost off-peak business
- ▶ Contribute to wider strategic objectives to help reduce car miles and increase public transport and non-car based visitor activity
- ▶ Champion local distinctiveness, produce and traditions in the development and promotion of the area

- ▶ Ensure there are profitable, well managed, sustainable and responsible quality businesses in the visitor economy
- ▶ Make the best use of available public sector resources and funding for the visitor economy in Wealden.

SUSTAINABILITY

The visitor economy must be rooted in the principle of sustainability. The VICE model will be used in this respect to achieve balance and compromise in the future actions.



This Framework is based on outcomes that:

- ▶ Welcome, involve and satisfy **visitors** visiting or passing through Wealden
- ▶ Support a profitable and prosperous visitor economy **industry** - for the operators in and around the area
- ▶ Engage and benefit the Wealden **communities**
- ▶ Protect, enhance and create better appreciation of the market towns, the villages and the rural **environment**.

RESOURCES

Wealden District Council's resources for the visitor economy are unlikely to grow so there needs to be:

- ▶ Strategic partnership work, to achieve economies of scale
- ▶ Effective engagement with tourism businesses
- ▶ More effective use of existing resources, with a more joined-up approach between Council services and activities
- ▶ Continued focus on bidding for external funding.

Even so, the number of initiatives that can be covered with modest resources will be limited, so the emphasis must be on doing a handful of things in depth. Tough choices will be needed to prioritise activity. Council funding should only be used where intervention is warranted.

Marketing and partnership working is Wealden District Council's main area of discretionary tourism expenditure. Partnerships need to be adequately resourced (in terms of officer time as well as funding), so the Council will need to prioritise in order to get the best out its various partnership activities. Phased change may be needed as partnerships grow and evolve.

GROWTH TARGETS

The five year visitor economy growth targets must reflect:

- ▶ the scale of local authority resources to support the visitor economy
- ▶ the highly competitive market place with other UK and overseas destinations
- ▶ the lingering impact of the current recession over the next few years.

These five year targets are cautious and place the emphasis on increasing the value of the visitor economy rather than growing the volume of visitors:

- ▶ A static number of UK and overseas overnight trips and day visits over the five years between 2010 to 2015
- ▶ An increase in overnight visitor spending of 10% (over and above the rate of inflation) and a static level of day visitor spending over the five years between 2010 to 2015
- ▶ An increase in visitor economy employment mirroring the growth in visitor spending between 2010 to 2015
- ▶ An increase in average quality grading scores across the area and the percentage of businesses engaged in quality schemes and initiatives between 2010 and 2015
- ▶ A maintained bed-stock level across the area between 2010 and 2015

- ▶ An increase in the use of local produce in hospitality businesses and an increase in spend in the local food economy.

There is a need to undertake an economic impact survey to provide headline indicators. This needs to be supported by a bi-annual bed-stock and quality assessment audit. There is also a need to identify current trends through a basket of performance indicators which can be measured quickly and easily to provide regular snapshots and to monitor change.

5 QUALITY PROGRAMMES

INTRODUCTION

This Framework is built around six integrated Quality Programmes of sustainable activity.

- A. Market positioning
- B. Visitor management and behaviour (in protected landscapes and market towns)
- C. Country walking
- D. Branding
- E. Quality assurance
- F. Evaluation

These Quality Programmes are the core areas that require public sector intervention over the next five years.

Each Quality Programme identifies the priority and supporting actions that are required and the delivery partners who should play a key role in the detailed action plans. These plans will establish the next steps, timescales, performance indicators and resource implications.

Some of these actions will be appropriate to the Local Development Framework (LDF) process. Their delivery will be helped by the active engagement of the business networks and clusters to be more involved in the Local Strategic Partnership and ongoing LDF consultations.

Quality Programme A**MARKET POSITIONING****Priority Actions**

- ▶ Identify the core values (the products, icons, emotions and experiences) that make Wealden truly distinctive and clarify the identities and distinctiveness of the market towns, rural villages, places and landscapes in and around Wealden
- ▶ Provide promotional material including editorial and images for local businesses and public sector marketers to use
- ▶ Promote local attractions and events to Wealden and Eastbourne residents to support the Visiting Friends and Relatives market
- ▶ Integrate and link up web sites on local areas (e.g. the market towns, Alfriston & Cuckmere Valley, Ashdown Forest, Enjoy Sussex, etc) as micro-sites within the Wealden and Visit Sussex destination sites

Supporting Actions

- ▶ With the cooperation of the relevant Highways Authority, provide "Welcome to Wealden" road-signs on the main approach roads as to help boost local pride and the sense of arrival for visitors

Delivery Partners

Wealden District Council, East Sussex County Council, Eastbourne Borough Council, High Weald AONB Unit, Conservators of Ashdown Forest, Ashdown Forest Tourism Association, South Downs Management Committee / National Park Authority, Alfriston & Cuckmere Valley Partnership, Market Town Partnerships and Town Councils, larger and active businesses

Quality Programme B

VISITOR MANAGEMENT AND BEHAVIOUR

(IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES AND MARKET TOWNS)

Priority Actions

- ▶ Create visitor management plans ² to provide a high quality visitor experience that reflects the needs of local communities and benefits local businesses for (1) the Ashdown Forest and parts of the High Weald and surroundings, (2) Alfriston and the Cuckmere Valley, parts of the South Downs and surroundings, and (3) the Market Towns
- ▶ Continue to engage with and support High Weald and Ashdown Forest partners to help develop and promote the High Weald and Ashdown Forest
- ▶ Work with the emerging South Downs National Park partners to integrate the Wealden components within the wider South Downs destination, which is likely to get stronger as a brand over the next few years
- ▶ Undertake a pilot project to do a Market Town visitor “health check” and apply the principles to the other towns and attractive villages

Supporting Actions

- ▶ Improve the quality of the Market Towns to meet the needs of local residents and visitors (to cover the public realm, the retail and catering offer, traffic management, parking, quality and choice of public transport, and initiatives to support the evening economy)
- ▶ Create new marketing activities with Southern Trains and the Community Rail Partnership to help develop the Market Towns as public transport gateways to the protected landscapes

² Visitor management plans should cover: visitor routes and modes of transport to the area, traffic and pedestrian signage, gateway sites / locations, first impressions, public toilets, safety and security, car and coach parking, visitor hubs, orientation and visitor routes, trails, alternative transport solutions, interpretive themes, information services, customer care, guided tours and walks, events, commercial opportunities to maximise visitor expenditure, overall site capacities, opportunities to generate additional overnight visits and more off-peak visits, and dispersal techniques to encourage visitors to other parts of Wealden.

- ▶ Support additional visitor facilities (subject to appropriate assessments) at Ashdown Forest Centre, Seven Sisters Country Park and Bewl Water to act as principal visitor gateways into Wealden
- ▶ Develop appropriate visitor facilities and visitor management initiatives at, and for, the Winnie the Pooh sites
- ▶ Develop appropriate visitor facilities at sites which are relevant to and based on the Arthur Conan Doyle theme
- ▶ Disseminate information and share best practice between the Market Town Partnerships

Delivery Partners

Wealden District Council with specific groups:

High Weald AONB Unit, Conservators of Ashdown Forest, Ashdown Forest Visitor Management Group

South Downs Joint Committee / National Park Authority, Alfriston & Cuckmere Valley Partnership

Market Town Partnerships and Town Councils

Public transport operators, site owners

Quality Programme C**COUNTRY WALKING****Priority Actions**

- ▶ Create a Wealden Country Walking web portal which brings together the many walks identified and promoted by various organisations, with download and pod cast options
- ▶ Co-ordinate existing and new public sector walking material (leaflets and web content) in a more consistent style with a distribution targeted on visitors and local residents

Supporting Actions

- ▶ Encourage the provision of appropriate small scale quality accommodation on or near the long distance walking and cycling trails and develop marketing programmes
- ▶ Create a network of short circular walks for visitors (top ten high quality walks) linked to market towns, viewpoints, villages, pubs and places of interest – and integrate them with the Cuckoo Way and Forest Way Trail

Delivery Partners

Wealden District Council, East Sussex County Council, Conservators of Ashdown Forest, South Downs National Park Authority, Ramblers Association, commercial publishers, key landowners, local businesses public transport operators, local walking groups / clubs

Quality Programme D**BRANDING****Priority Actions**

- ▶ Work pro-actively with Enjoy Sussex and the Sussex Tourism Partnership to promote the special places, landscapes and experiences of Wealden as part of the Sussex brand
- ▶ Continue the information management arrangements whereby the Sussex Tourism Partnership, Eastbourne Borough Council and 1066 Country act as data stewards for the collection of Wealden visitor information on their Destination Management Systems

Supporting Actions

- ▶ Develop and apply quality rural brand values for the area in wider Sussex marketing
- ▶ Exploit potential synergies between Enjoy Sussex and Sussex Tourism Partnership marketing
- ▶ Continue the existing marketing partnership arrangements with 1066 Country
- ▶ Generate stronger working relationships with Eastbourne partners to identify new joint opportunities
- ▶ Support Tourism South East as the regional body to add value to the delivery of appropriate actions
- ▶ Identify existing events which are truly distinctive to Wealden and have capacity to be developed for more visitors – co-ordinated in a countywide context and promoted through Wealden and Sussex web sites
- ▶ Ensure appropriate event information content on the Wealden District Council web site also appears on the Enjoy Sussex, Visit Sussex and Visit South East England sites

Delivery Partners

Wealden District Council, Enjoy Sussex partners, Eastbourne Borough Council, 1066 Country, Sussex Tourism Partnership, Tourism South East, data stewards, event promoters

Quality Programme E**QUALITY ASSURANCE****Priority Actions**

- ▶ Improve accommodation standards, food standards and customer service / care, encouraging more businesses to become quality assured
- ▶ Develop a more a joined-up approach between licensing and grading within Council Tourism and Environmental Health units

Supporting Actions

- ▶ Develop initiatives to improve the quality and support the viability of existing visitor attractions, specifically improving visitor access, brown sign provision, public transport links and extending the season
- ▶ Encourage quality improvements and upgrading at existing hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs, self-catering, touring caravan and camp sites and holiday parks
- ▶ Support the development of new quality bedroom accommodation at pubs
- ▶ Support the expansion and development of more accommodation within youth hostels and camping barns

Delivery Partners

Wealden District Council, Business Link, Visit England and the AA, visitor attraction operators, training providers

Quality Programme F**EVALUATION****Priority Actions**

- ▶ Identify a basket of performance indicators and arrange for a sample of businesses to regularly collect and supply data - annual visitor numbers at visitor attractions / sites and average annual bedroom occupancy at quality assured accommodation
- ▶ Undertake an economic impact survey every two years
- ▶ Undertake a bed-stock survey, quality assessment audit and average quality grading audit every two years

Supporting Actions

- ▶ Record annual web hits to a sample of sites that promote the area, and identify the number and value of bookings
- ▶ Collect spend data from a sample of local businesses on their purchase of local produce
- ▶ Create an annual event for the delivery partners and the wider visitor economy businesses to review achievements and set out the action plan for the year ahead – enabling local businesses to network and an opportunity for business support workshops

Delivery Partners

Wealden District Council, neighbouring authorities, Tourism South East, businesses within the sampling activity

ADDITIONAL ACTIONS

The Quality Programmes are complemented by this set of additional actions.

Again, some of these actions will be appropriate to the Local Development Framework (LDF) process and an accompanying paper translates the appropriate actions into LDF evidence and draft recommendations.

However, the delivery of other actions will be heavily influenced by the scale of resources which are available and the level and scope of engagement with a range of partners.

- ▶ Retain **existing visitor accommodation**, other than very poor quality properties that cannot feasibly be upgraded to meet modern standards and customer expectations
- ▶ Encourage the provision of **new visitor accommodation** in the longer term - country house hotels, spa hotels, budget hotels (in the Eastbourne / Hailsham triangle), golf resorts, residential outdoor education centres and residential training / conference / management centres
- ▶ Recognise the potential capacity for **new larger scale hotel accommodation development** if proposals come forward and are appropriate in scale, location and design
- ▶ Encourage the provision of high quality facilities (such as stabling with visitor accommodation) to enhance the development of an **equine cluster** within Wealden and the rest of East Sussex and Kent
- ▶ Support the development of appropriate **beach and water sports** at Pevensey
- ▶ Encourage actions to improve the **beach water quality**
- ▶ Ensure **business support agencies** are aware of the specific needs of lifestyle businesses and are part of a “signposting service” to help match demand and supply
- ▶ Create a programme of business support for **lifestyle accommodation businesses**, including the use of web communication and the growing importance of social networking and online marketing activity
- ▶ Create a programme of training workshops to encourage **sustainable business practices** and to improve the provision and promotion of accessible accommodation
- ▶ Develop a **“buy local”** campaign: food and drink initiatives to link local businesses to local suppliers to reinforce the local distinctiveness (e.g. the “Sussex Breakfast”); and encourage local businesses and organisations to use local establishments for meetings and conferences, and book their business guests and customers into local accommodation
- ▶ Phase in new interactive online **visitor information points** at the key visitor gateways, attractions and accommodation establishments

- ▶ Identify **new markets** for Wealden businesses and develop new initiatives – specifically autumn, Christmas and spring short breaks, cultural packages, heritage packages through the National Trust - which could be delivered with neighbouring authorities and other agencies
- ▶ Develop **new events** that reflect the distinctiveness of Wealden and identify the event champions
- ▶ Generate stronger working relationships with **Heart of Kent** partners to identify new joint marketing opportunities
- ▶ Encourage local businesses who are targeting the meetings and conference sector to work with the existing conference desks in **Brighton** and / or **Eastbourne**
- ▶ Support the **Bluebell Line** on the marketing of the line extension into East Grinstead and new visitor services

6 DELIVERY

The Strategic Framework will be delivered through the action planning process under the leadership and co-ordination of the Council and the Strategy Steering Group.

The Action Plan will identify the specific activities to be undertaken by Wealden District Council to co-ordinate and deliver the Quality Programmes. Broad objectives and specific policies will be included in the Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy and area assessments.

The Action Plan will take account of the capacity of the Council and its partners (financially and in terms of staff resources) to effectively deliver the Quality Programmes. Active private sector and partner organisation engagement will be fundamental to achieving the strategic targets.

Initially Wealden District Council has a key role to play to formally establish the Steering Group, its representation, constitution, remit and accountability. It should link into a wider forum of businesses which will meet annually and be involved in the broader review and forward planning.

The Council has four different roles to play in relation to the Quality Programmes:

- ▶ **As an enabler** - through policy, legislation and licensing activity embedded in the Local Development Framework and the emerging Leisure Strategy and Sustainable Community Strategy
- ▶ **As a deliverer** - through direct activity and local networks
- ▶ **As a facilitator** - through strategic partnerships
- ▶ **As an advocate** - an active supporter for lead organisations delivering services in the area.

These roles call for a range of skills, with appropriate officers and members taking on specific roles to:

- ▶ Provide the leadership and advocacy
- ▶ Deliver specific activities and develop a more joined-up approach across the Council
- ▶ Co-ordinate the Quality Programmes
- ▶ Support initiatives to be delivered by external lead partners
- ▶ Monitor, review and adjust priorities when necessary
- ▶ Host and facilitate the Strategy Steering Group
- ▶ Keep stakeholders informed.