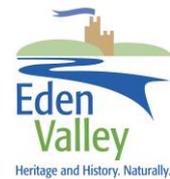


Notes of the Eden Valley Tourism Forum held in Hever Castle Golf Club, on Tuesday 18 March 2014, 10am to 12.30pm



Present: Claire Jones & Amy Davies (Hever Castle Golf Club), Alex Paton & Jane Higgs (Eden Valley Museum), Ali Ditzel (Chiddingstone Castle), Anna Skinner (Hever Festival Theatre), Christine Lane, Cllr Clive Pearman, Cllr John Scholey (all Edenbridge Town Council), Debbie Greenfield & Sue Potter (Commonwork), Debi Rice & Juliet Steinmetz (Discover the Garden of England), Helen Jackman (Mowshurst Farm House B&B), Jacqui Wilcox (Becketts B&B), James Barton (Yew Tree Barn B&B), James Turner (Hidden Britain SE), Cllr John Bryant (Westerham Town Council), John Ingram (Sevenoaks B&B), Jill Dain & Ruth Wood (Visit Kent), Judith Owen (Poppy Cottage B&B), Julian Ashton (The Apartment on Granville), Kate Rowbottom (Astor Wing, Hever Castle), Kirsten Olszowska (Old Manor House B&B), Lela Weavers (Crossways House B&B), Lorraine Richardson (Brands Hatch Thistle Hotel), Louise Frater (Little Saxbys), Lynn Mathias (Starborough Manor B&B), Neil Crabtree (Oak End Lodge B&B), Nicholas Morris (Charcott Farmhouse B&B), Sarah Cole (Hever Castle), Sharon Gray (Sussex Community Rail Partnership), Sigrid Sherrell (Edenbridge Chronicle), Tessa & Mike Murray (The Pightle B&B), Wendy Macklin (Thatched Cottage B&B).

Jon Wittenberg, Club Manager, welcomed everyone to **Hever Castle Golf Club** and gave a brief history of the Club and its links to the Hever Castle estate.

Jody Harding, Forum Chairman, then introduced the event and those delegates who wished, gave a brief overview on their businesses. Ali Ditzel – Chiddingstone Castle is going to feature on BBC Radio Kent on 1 April. Sarah Cole – new at Hever Castle and working on the digital side. Kate Rowbottom – upturn in corporate hospitality and wedding spending; Astor Wing accommodation going from strength to strength, with 300 hits a day. Jacqui Wilcox – a busy year. Jill Dain – marketing for Visit Kent. Sharon Gray – promoting rail travel to rural links. Lynne Mathias – a busy year, particularly with business guests. Sue Potter – was keen to pursue marketing Commonwork via social media; Debbie Greenfield – lots of wedding enquiries. Debi Rice – she and Juliet promote attractions, accommodation and events by means of the internet, a guide book and apps. Jane Higgs – introduced Alex, the new house manager for the Eden Valley Museum; will be having a WWI exhibition. Christine Lane – Town Clerk for Edenbridge advised that the Council is withdrawing its Tourism Development Committee as the Tourism Forum is so successful. Louise Frater – business good and looking to improve. Cllr Clive Pearman – has been working to promote cycling tourism in the area, discovered there are 45 clubs within 30 miles, and there is to be a launch of cycling facilities at Edenbridge Leisure Centre over the Easter weekend.

Jill Lynch, co-ordinator for the **Eden Valley Summer Festival**, gave an update on plans and explained that the idea is to promote everyone's event during the fortnight, which this year is 24 May to 8 June, with the theme of Edenbridge on Sea. The Eden Valley Chamber of Commerce is organising Bank Holiday Monday when Edenbridge High Street will be closed to traffic, enabling events such as Morris dancing, a fun fair, town band, singers and pram races. The highlight will be a car parade, started by John Surtees – the only world champion on two and four wheels, and will include Formula 1 cars, classic cars, Harley Davidson club, scooters, etc, which will go round twice and finish at the Recreation Ground. Other events being put on in the fortnight include Open Gardens, the Festival Theatre, Edenbridge Cricket Club and the Folk Festival. On Sunday 1 June there is a Big Lunch at the Eden Centre.

Next up was Peter Birnie from **Visit Kent**, who visits tourism businesses, mainly accommodation, usually new starters, to give free business advice on operational and practical issues – what others are doing, what does/doesn't work, what trends are coming up. He also spoke about the Kent Breakfast Award – the breakfast has to include at least 60% local produce, award is free, and about 60 B&Bs and food providers have been awarded it. In addition, there is the Kent Hamper Award for self-catering establishments, where 60% of the elements in the hamper have to be Kent products.



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Peter went on to talk about Visit Kent accommodation assessment and quality control, typically star rating. In the last five years a number of accommodation providers have dropped out of this system. Regardless of the value of star rating, Visit Kent wants to be able to promote as much as accommodation as possible but the issue is countrywide. In the last 18 months, different steps:

1. Kent Accommodation Scheme (part of the National Scheme) – pass/fail only. The assessment will be a short daytime visit by appointment, and the assessor will check cleanliness, maintenance and compliance with legal obligations.
2. Michelin guides, etc – have annual checks, so Visit Kent can ‘adopt’ and market the eligible properties in these guides.
3. Accommodation Charter – self-accreditation; used in other counties; Kent piloting the scheme for a year, until September, in Canterbury, Swale, Shepway and Gravesham. About 40 places have signed and, if it’s breached, the charter can be withdrawn.

Peter was followed by Penny Cracknell, who has driven the **Sevenoaks District Accommodation Forum** for B&B providers in Sevenoaks. They started a year ago; use the Charter as their own vehicle; currently have a membership fee of £35; list properties on Visit Kent and Sevenoaks Town partnership site; produce a small annual guide; and issue a fortnightly availability list via SDC on-line or by phone. Working in partnership with Visit Kent, they are running a ‘Simply Sevenoaks’ promotion card, offering discounts at a small number of independent retailers and restaurants for May. They’ve instigated a number of new display stands around the district to dispense visitor leaflets.

An open discussion for marketing ideas now took place – some of the points were:

Financial help from SDC –

There are four grant schemes available for small businesses:

With the launch of the Escalate programme, established following a bid to the government’s Regional Growth Fund, local businesses can now apply for interest-free loans to help their business grow.

Business Flood Support Scheme – funding is available for one-off grants of up to £25,000 for small and medium sized businesses that have been affected by flooding since 1 December 2013.

Repair and Renew Grant – homeowners and businesses that have been flooded at any time between 1 December 2013 and 31 March 2014 may be eligible for a grant to pay for work that improves a property’s ability to withstand future flooding over and above repairs that would normally be covered by insurance. Grants of up to £5,000 are available.

Business Rates Flooding Relief & Council Tax Discounts – business properties that have been flooded may be eligible for 100% business rate relief for three months, and Council Tax discounts are available to homeowners whose homes have been flooded at any time between 1 December 2013 and 31 March 2014.

Check SDC’s website for more details.

May be an idea to ask Lesley Bowles (SDC Chief Officer for Communities and Businesses) to talk at next Forum in Oct/Nov.

Other comments in brief –

Commonwork had accommodation and availability for group bookings, and were keen to promote as holiday accommodation – thought special offers were a good idea.

There was a desire to develop social media.

Discover the Garden of England is working with Edenbridge Town Council and detailed listings for individual events are available to a small charge, or free to advertisers.

The Forum’s draft marketing plan should lead to increasing communication and clarity between organisations and events.

Forum needs to present a united profile – lynchpin to co-ordinate communications.

The Sevenoaks Directory lists local events.

Demand for Saturday accommodation has increased.

It’s proving a big problem when a provider is asked for accommodation but is full and then spends

time (sometimes a considerable amount) trying to find somewhere available. It would be useful to have one phone number for accommodation, to co-ordinate dates/empty accommodation. Peter Birnie suggested encouraging public houses in the area to offer accommodation – drive needs to come from the Forum, has to be proactive; ask Visit Kent to visit; promote grading. Debi Rice and Juliet Steinmetz can organise accommodation start up events, through their HoneyPot Destination Marketing, for businesses, pubs, etc. Need to adopt a grading system or use trip advisor. Grading system in the Eden Valley – Edenbridge Town Council is only able to promote accredited accommodation. Need for camp sites. No TIC in Sevenoaks. The positive economic impact in the local community from spending per head of visitors. Key ideas are: communication, grading system, business start up. Jacqui Wilcox has a Youtube video for Becketts B&B.

The event was rounded off by Anna Spender, from **Hever Castle**, who gave an interesting history of the castle and estate. This was followed by coffee, time for informal discussion and the opportunity to speak to Peter Birnie, and an exchange of promotional material.

Thank you very much to Jon Wittenberg and his team for their kind and generous hospitality during the Forum, and to our guest speakers Jill Lynch, Peter Birnie, Penny Cracknell and Anna Spender for their interesting and informative talks. Thanks also to all those who attended, including our guests from the Sevenoaks District Accommodation Forum.

During the marketing discussion a number of key matters were raised, which we hope as a group to be able to action and address in the near future – many thanks for these ideas and suggestions and we look forward to welcoming you to the next Eden Valley Tourism Forum.

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