

Pwyllgor Rhanbarth y Canolbarth MID 01-02(p4)

Dyddiad: Dydd Gwener 1 Chwefror 2002

Amser: 10.30am hyd 1.00pm

Lleoliad: Tabernacl, Machynlleth

Cyflwyniad gan Celtica: Twristiaeth – Safbwynt Gweithredwr

Presentation by Celtica: Tourism – An Operator's View

Ladies and Gentleman of the committee. It gives me pleasure to have been given this opportunity to present a paper on Tourism in Wales and in particular the experience of Mid-Wales and the Dyfi Valley. However, I must also point out the very short notice I received and advise you that the views presented are my own, formed as a result of observations during by brief period as Manager of Celtica. I do not represent any official organisation.

I am new to the Tourism business, having spent 15 years as a business and marketing manager in the agricultural sector. Up until the 23 February 2001, I believed I had left the ill fortunes of farming behind with my agricultural colleagues. However, I soon became aware how interdependent we are as rural businesses and how fragmented the tourism industry is. I hope to draw your attention to the following issues that I would like the Assembly to influence in future policy development:

- The Foot & Mouth Crisis
- Marketing Information Systems
- Our Role Within Education
- The Welsh Language and Culture

1. The Foot & Mouth Crisis

With the 23 February 2001 began a period of uncertainty for Tourism and Celtica. Little did I realise the effect the 'agricultural' crisis would have on our business.

Early on in the crisis, an indoor attraction, such as Celtica, benefited from those people who were committed to visiting the Dyfi Valley looking for something to do. However, the message that the countryside was closed quickly gathered momentum and it soon became apparent that we were unable to meet our projections in terms of visitor numbers. Celtica has also a strong conference business to complement the attraction. The reaction / decision of agencies and businesses to cancel almost all meetings again had an adverse affect on our business. We are therefore currently 9% down on what was an unsatisfactory year last year. There was, in my view, a complete over-reaction to the crisis by government at all levels.

When it came to peak holiday periods, the efforts of the Wales Tourist Board appear to have paid dividends with visitor numbers during these periods showing moderate increases on the previous year. This promotional exercise is one that should be repeated and sufficient funds within the WTB budget should be ring fenced to provide the appropriate funding.

It was apparent to me that no strong, national body directly represented our interests during the crisis. Celtica is affiliated to WAVA and the Regional Tourism Companies and both provided valuable information regarding the crisis, as did the WTB. It appeared therefore that the industry was reliant on good will during the crisis and inevitably some will be happy and others will not. I believe the industry was very vulnerable and that itself is a valuable lesson to learn. The industry must establish a strong and viable Tourism Alliance that can represent our interests independent of government agencies.

Finally, we must support demands for an inquiry into the handling of the crisis and identify what lessons can be learnt from 2001. My current concern is that should we experience new outbreaks of the disease, would anything be done differently? This is not acceptable to an already fragile tourism and agricultural industry?

2 Marketing Information Systems

Since I took up my appointment at Celtica, I have had difficulty in assembling what I would consider adequate market information. The Tourism industry in Wales is made up of many small businesses, many family run concerns. Such businesses, Celtica included, have not got the means to invest in, or commission much needed information and intelligence. The WTB do provide fairly comprehensive historical information although this has been in an inconsistent format. The information is generally on a National level with periodic regional information. I would like to see the Board being able to offer more comprehensive managerial information, where the statistics have been analysed, resulting in future forecasts and trends. These need to be provided on at least a Regional Partnership level, if not further. Such information is vital for sound, future investment and we need to invest so as to develop a competitive industry. However, we need the ability to assess

future market potential without having to commission a host of consultants – finance more projects and less feasibility studies.

3 Our Role Within Education

In April 2001, the National Gallery and Museums of Wales launched, very successfully, free admission to their 8 sites throughout Wales. This is part of a scheme by the Government to make the National heritage of Wales more accessible. NGMW now receive a support package from the Assembly to aid their activities.

I believe that this unilateral decision has consequences regarding aspects of Celtica and I'm sure other Attractions also. In particular, there are many attractions that are able to play an important role in the education of our children. Celtica has an Education Department. We have developed, in consultation with local schools, an education package that primarily targets KS2. This package is designed to aid many aspects of the curriculum, in particular, the study of the Celts. It is educational, beneficial, provides value for money, and importantly offers the children an experience not attainable in the classroom. Visiting schools, however, must pay for their visit and under continued pressure on school budgets and the availability of free admission to other quality sites, I believe that this does not provide a level playing field and is totally unfair. I would like the Assembly to provide financial support to attractions who can deliver an educational support package appropriate to the National Curriculum (ie not the traditional end of school year trip).

4 Welsh Language & Culture

An aspect I have found disconcerting during my brief period as Manager at Celtica is the view that we are an exception as apposed the norm regarding our use of the Welsh language and culture.

The Assembly has a stated ambition to establish a bilingual Wales and people need to realise that as Welsh speakers or non-Welsh speakers, we all own the language and culture. In pure commercial terms, it is one of the most powerful criteria available to differentiate us from our competitors. I am certain that a host of visitors look for this experience but on the whole we are very inconsistent in terms of meeting their expectations.

It would be a positive step if all businesses within the tourism industry were required to implement a bilingual policy regarding signage, information etc. A comprehensive training package could ensure that all staff working in the industry are able to communicate in both Welsh and English, ensuring that we have a consistent image regarding our language and culture, no matter what sector or area they operate in. I believe that such practise should be a condition when awarding financial support or operating quality assurance schemes etc via the WTB. We undervalue our uniqueness and status when we give in to the operator who claims, "The Welsh language and Culture is not relevant to my operation"

Peter Jones, Manager – Celtica (27 January 2002)