

Report of the Rural Pub Scrutiny Task Group

1. Background

As you may recall, South Norfolk Council agreed to examine the factors leading to the success or otherwise of pubs and consider what advice or assistance, if any, this Council could offer licensees in the district. The councillors felt that there were a number of factors affecting pubs at present and that they should take a three pronged approach:

- Lobby central government on some issues out of the direct control of councils;
- Identify some areas where South Norfolk Council could assist directly and;
- Provide a list of ideas and suggestions to assist publicans in increasing their trade.

The councillors also felt some ideas should not be taken forward for various reasons, for example:

“Lobby govt so pubs can become a smoking or a non smoking pub, or bring back smoking rooms – an opportunity to choose to be smoking/non smoking would have been appropriate.”

2. Methodology

A questionnaire was sent out to all the publicans in the district, which asked a number of key questions. A summary report of those responses, which was discussed at one of the meetings of the Task Group, is attached as Appendix One. There was an excellent response rate, with more than half of all questionnaires being returned.

A morning conference and buffet lunch was organised for Monday 29 September 2008, which was an opportunity for all publicans in the area to network with each other and participate in one of the two workshops; “Marketing to Visitors” facilitated by Council officers and “Training and Support” hosted by Business Link. There was also a series of short, informative talks on issues identified by the publicans, such as business rates, trade waste, planning issues around signs etc. There were also officers available during the morning, on an informal basis, to assist with any queries on smoking, licensing etc.

3. Central Government suggestions

The Task Group has sent a letter to the All Parliamentary Beer Group, whose aim is to promote the unique role of the pub in UK society and the local MP, Richard Bacon was copied in. The major points in the letter were:

- Relax beer ties – allow publicans to buy some of their own stock.
- Lobby central govt re business rates – possibly on getting something back for the rates (include waste collection?) or making the rules less restrictive (only pub in village etc).
- Lobby central govt to reduce or freeze beer duty.
- Lobby govt to impose a minimum price for per unit of alcohol – which would effectively stop the off trade loss-leading on drink.
- Allow pubs to recycle glass via bottle banks.
- Lobby for a more equitable approach to business rates for social clubs to enable pubs to compete more fairly with such clubs.

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4. Suggestions for South Norfolk Council

Business Rates - From the conference and the questionnaire, clearly businesses rates are a major issue. It is important to clarify that councils have no control at all over how much business rates should be; they are determined by the Valuation Agency.

South Norfolk Council currently gives Discretionary Rate Relief, Mandatory Rural Rate Relief and Transitional Rate Relief to all pubs where they fulfil certain conditions as laid down by central government. Unfortunately this Council has no control over these conditions and thus this was something we have lobbied central government on.

Signage – there were a number of comments about signs and information was given out on the siting of 'A' Boards etc. Directional signs were also raised as an issue as the brown signs from Norfolk County Council are expensive and relatively difficult to apply for. There is a scrutiny examination currently being undertaken of signage in the district and those councillors will be asked to look into this.

Promotion/advertising – South Norfolk Council will do more to promote pubs as part of the tourist destination and the Council will:

Re print a series of 8 *Bike It* leaflets showing cycle routes throughout the district. These currently include the symbol PH but will be revised to include the pub name and relevant heritage information.

Roll out Quality Charter principles - all delegates at the Pub Conference were supplied with self-assessment guidance to help them audit their standards of presentation interior/exterior and identify areas for improving their service, efficiency and hospitality. Please call Joanna Kitchener on 01508 533602 if you require this guidance.

Support Welcome Host training and provide a venue and refreshments for free. The cost of Welcome Host training would be £40.00 per delegate, provided there are 20 delegates. The training would combine an expert overview with specific actions to improve customer service, this could help ensure businesses are better placed to sustain their customer base. If you are interested in attending the Welcome Host training, please contact Colette Davies on cdavies@s-norfolk.gov.uk or 01508 533816. The day covers:

- Understanding your customers
- Delivering excellent customer service
- Successful communication
- Providing information and advice
- Meeting specific needs
- Dealing with difficult situations
- Boosting business
- Assessment activity

Bring the free advertising on the Council's website to publicans attention. Any event you may be organising can be advertised for free. Simply click on the Add Your Event option on the home page, www.south-norfolk.gov.uk and add some details. Your event will then appear on the website.

Funding - EEDA have no specific funding available for any new scheme however they have highlighted the opportunities the Waveney Valley Project (WVP) may present. The

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WVP presents an opportunity for Pubs in that area to work together on projects that will support/promote the local produce of the area. This might be by selling WVP branded produce or having a specific WV meal on their menu for example.

The Council has a number of grant schemes; one of which is the Enterprise Development grant, which is designed to enable existing businesses to expand their operation. Applicants must clearly demonstrate how the grant will be used specifically to develop or introduce a new aspect of its operations. An example might a pub converting a redundant bar into a village shop or post office. To apply, go to www.south-norfolk.gov.uk/democracy/620.asp

The Business Link initiative has around 90 business advisors and they now have two advisors with a specific remit for working with pubs. They have an informative website which can point you to others sources of funding, advice around employing staff, how new regulations can affect your business and many other useful options. Their website is www.businesslink.gov.uk

Pub is the Hub. You may already be aware of initiatives such as Pub Is the Hub (PITH). This is an organisation set up in 2001 by The Prince of Wales which encourages breweries, pub owners, licensees and local communities to work together to help retain and enhance rural pubs. There have been a number of successful case studies where PITH has assisted in a project and advised o funding to allow for conversion of part of the premises to a shop or similar venture and one of the projects is attached as Appendix Two. For more details, visit: <http://www.pubisthehub.org.uk/>

Pub of the Year Award. This was a suggestion made at the Conference and the councillors felt there were benefits to this idea, however there are already a number of such awards in existence and there were also obviously costs involved. However it was agreed that some further work should be done on this idea.

5. Suggestions for pubs

Of course publicans themselves are in the best position to assess what is needed most in their community and business. There were a good number of ideas that some pubs are already utilising and councillors agreed that these should be highlighted to publicans to try these out if they so wished. The Council does of course appreciate that not all will be suitable, you may already have tried some and they didn't work, and some publicans will not feel the need to do anything different; the choice of course is entirely down to you.

Pub's own website - this is something that many pubs do not have, but a website can be set up very cheaply and this can be a very cost effective way of marketing, especially nowadays. There are a few simple steps to setting up a website, from registering a domain name (eg kingsheadharleston.co.uk) which cost around £3.00 pa. If a simple design is then needed, a pre-designed template could be used which could be as little as £30.00 or even less. If updates are needed (for example to menus) than there are many companies who will provide this for a small annual fee. If a more complicated website is required, then a professional, multi page website might cost around £500.00. In comparison to the cost of more traditional forms of advertising, such as in newspapers, this is an extremely cost-effective way of marketing a pub.

Branded leaflet racks - pubs could display more local tourist information to encourage repeat visits and to assist the Council may be able to supply branded display racks but

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there are only limited stocks. Please contact Colette Davies on cdavies@s-norfolk.gov.uk or 01508 533816 if you would like a rack.

Some ideas that some pubs are already successfully undertaking are:.

- ❑ Incentive for drivers – free or very cheap soft drinks.
- ❑ Promote local food and drink, maybe hook up with local producers e.g. sausage tasting. Perhaps get a local butcher to provide the sausages (or whatever), get people in to try them for free and give feedback. They are drinking and butcher gets cheap publicity and customer feedback.
- ❑ Bikes – some pubs offer out free bike hire in the hope of getting the riders back in the pub for lunch after the bike ride.
- ❑ Host music or beer festivals.
- ❑ Encourage local groups to meet there – WI, shoots, local community groups.
- ❑ Consider including B&B as part of the core business; the Council can provide support and assistance with a small grant towards the costs of becoming Quality Assured.
- ❑ Contact the planning service for informal advice before embarking on a smoking shelter project – any advice is given free of charge.
- ❑ Themed evenings, for example Caribbean nights, curry nights, quizzes etc. Email database, some pubs ask all customers for their email address, set these up on a database as one contact list and then can send a message to hundreds of customers advising of forthcoming events etc - a very quick and easy advertising.

Cllr Keith Weeks

Chairman of the Rural Pub Scrutiny Task Group