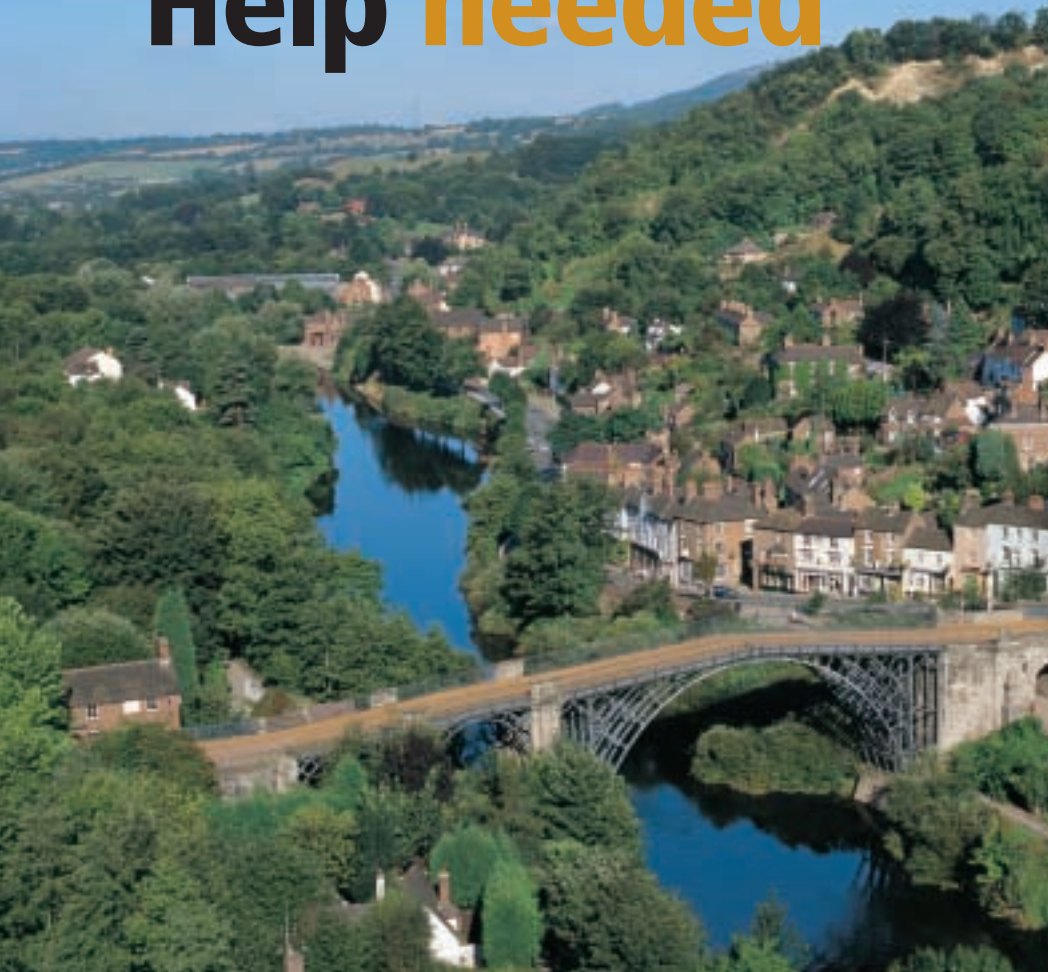


Help needed



The Ironbridge Gorge, a World Heritage site which, typically, could benefit from better tourism promotion
Picture courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust



Regional successes such as the Ironbridge Gorge Museum could benefit hugely from direct RDA action
Picture courtesy of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust

What should Regional Development Agencies really be doing for tourism?
Katie Foster, formerly Head of Public Relations at Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust and now leading Katie Foster Associates, an independent consultancy in tourism, marketing and PR, sets out her personal view that the RDAs have yet to help the tourism industry on the ground.

When the RDAs were first announced by the Government – what did we all think? Well... the word *regional* was promising if overworked, *development* sounded progressive and helpful, and even *agency* couldn't be all bad could it? After all, that ultimate mover and shaker James Bond was an *agent*.

So were RDAs going to be the great white hope of domestic tourism? Would there at last be regional bodies who could see the problems at the coalface, talk to the people on the ground, understand their difficulties and then provide a direct channel into Government to find solutions which were workable and productive? Regional bodies which could take the strategic view and become enablers and facilitators, and *not* duplicators? Regional bodies which could provide real competitive advantage, by seeing tourism for what it is – a collection of disparate businesses, serving and driving the disposable income requirements of transient and resident populations?

One thing was certain: for the RDAs to produce real competitive advantage, they would need to think radically and creatively,

ensuring integration not duplication right across all industries, not just those identified as 'the tourism sector'.

If we thought anything at all, in the face of diminishing visitor numbers to Britain and our diametrically opposed rises in business rates, we might well have hoped for a champion to help us overcome the evil forces prevailing; we might well have hoped that the RDAs would combine powerfully with regional Government Offices (in the spirit of *glasnost*, shall we say) to fight a regional corner, albeit ensnared within the European legislative spider's web.

At this point, it is necessary to produce a tourism 'wailing wall' – a selection of our favourite gripes and groans which beset the industry. So here goes, in no particular order:

- The tourism industry's abject failure to provide a strong and properly funded domestic body to promote the England brand.
- The increasing imbalance between incoming and outgoing tourism pounds.
- Laughable global statistics – 75 million visitors into France, 25 million into the UK.

- Onerous red-tape, legislation and business rates crippling even the smallest operator.
- Unjust VAT rates, unharmonised – which, for example, allow for no VAT on developing greenfield projects, but apply 17.5% on converting and conserving old buildings.
- EC funding streams geared up geographically not sectorally – understandable and justifiable, yet frustrating where causing unfair competition/advantage.
- Lottery potential enormous, but for those in business already struggling with so much else, an apparently labyrinthine and byzantine monster to deal with unless aided perhaps by a Council lottery officer, varying in existence and competence across the country.
- Lottery-funded attractions and development fuelling unfair competition and further pummelling those left behind in the lottery race.
- No direction or lead on websites from the English Tourism Council or the Regional Tourist Boards, so individual tourism operators as well as local authority tourism departments themselves moving forward, with huge disparity in multimedia skills and expertise, in

the one area where one might have expected strong leadership and frameworks.

- Fragmentation in other areas, such as training and language competence, let alone quality standards in the catering offer.
- A saga on accommodation grading and inspection schemes longer and more convoluted than Eastenders.
- Taxation regimes which encourage the British to shop abroad, buy cars abroad and holiday abroad, and which definitely put off both the potential touring holidaymaker and farm diversifier when faced with the threat of yet heavier fuel taxes.
- Councils cutting back on tourism promotion due to the exigencies of the dreaded ‘best value’ and an increasing unwillingness to understand tourism as an anti-poverty mechanism.

You can add to the list *ad libendum* and everyone will have a tale of woe, be it a ‘diversified farmer’ in an overstocked marketplace full of converted bijou dairies, or a struggling independent museum knocked out for the count by Lottery-funded competitors.

So for the small operator (and let’s remember that the majority of tourist board

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members are exactly that), the existence of a Regional Development Agency must still have seemed a remote and distant third cousin, twice removed, who would never remember his name, let alone his birthday. The local tourist association will still mean much more to the farmhouse B & B or the volunteer-run steam railway, which often attracts thousands of tourists yet is rarely consulted. Would it, therefore, be too much to expect RDAs who really mean business to use such existing tourism communications networks to do their own ‘best value’ exercise and develop their

Can English tourism really fight back?



It's all a matter of quality...