

North by Northwest

Developing a vision for tourism in England's Northwest

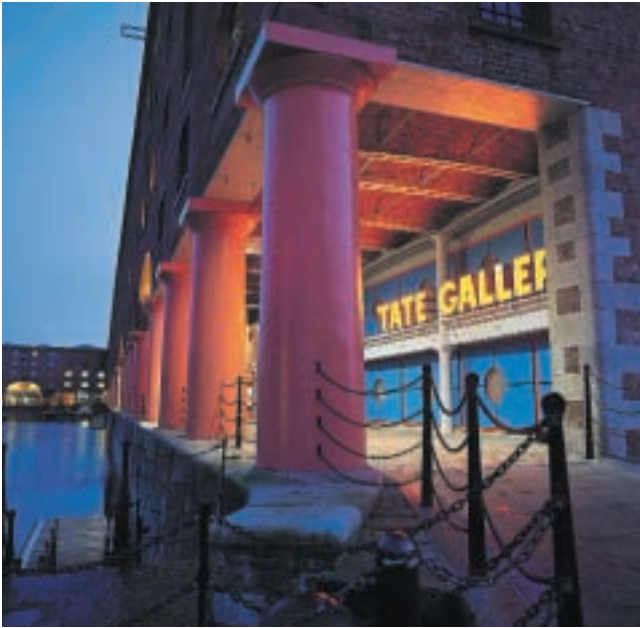
From April 2003, all of England's Regional Development Agencies take on new responsibilities for tourism, including funding for Regional Tourist Boards. This change of focus is mirrored at a national level with the creation of a single new body, with a remit that includes the marketing of England. Both sets of changes reflect the new seriousness accorded the tourism industry post 2001. The NWDA has been preparing the way for a new long-term tourism strategy for England's Northwest region. Here, [Phil Reddy](#), Tourism Projects Manager at the NWDA, describes the process of consultation, information-gathering and vision-forming that has been undertaken to underpin the new strategy.

Even before the announcement that England's Regional Development Agencies would play a more prominent role in supporting and promoting tourism within the regions, the Northwest Development Agency (NWDA) regarded tourism as a priority sector within its Regional Economic Strategy. The effects of the Foot and Mouth outbreak emphasised this importance; Cumbria was by far the worst hit part of the UK, with over 40 per cent of all incidents of the disease occurring there. In part because of its largely rural nature and partly because it contains the world-

renowned Lake District, nearly 20 per cent of the county's GDP is derived from visitor spending. Foot and Mouth (FMD) hit both visitor and farm incomes, sending a shock wave through the county's economy.

In response, the NWDA acted quickly to provide significant emergency support across the region, support that was delivered through the rural renaissance programme. The outbreak also acted to further sensitise the Agency to tourism and helped strengthen its involvement in the national debate on the sector, in which Mike Shields, the Agency's Chief Executive, took a leading role. James Berresford was appointed as Tourism Cluster Head in the middle of last year and acted quickly to strengthen the Agency's response to the FMD crisis and to coordinate tourism-related activity across the board. The new thinking at national level provided an additional impetus to seek fundamental change, and it is this project that is the subject of this article.

England's Northwest is unusual as an English region in having two Regional Tourist Boards; the North West Tourist Board covers the two metropolitan areas of Merseyside and Greater Manchester, a number of unitary authorities including Blackpool and the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire, while Cumbria Tourist Board is focused exclusively on that one county. The organisations are significantly different however; a product of many differences in the tourism product as well as of the scale and relative importance of tourism in the two areas. Both RTBs act strategically within their areas, but despite this, and a proliferation of other tourism strategies, there is



The Northwest region incorporates diverse yet powerful tourism assets, including historic cities, coastline, lakes and mountains

no single strategy for tourism in the region as a whole, nor is there anything else that could provide the strategic framework that is necessary if the actions of the Agency are to be properly focused.

A regional forum for tourism

The Agency recognised the importance of taking a strategic approach to tourism within the region; as the basis for its own actions as well as those of others. It therefore set up a Northwest Tourism Forum as a transitional body with two key functions; establishing a vision for tourism in the region, and identifying appropriate delivery mechanisms for the effective realisation of that vision. The Forum is chaired by Mike Shields and draws together key public sector stakeholders in the region: the two RTBs, who also provide important links to the private sector; the region's Cultural Consortium; key sub-regional destination management organisations; the Small Business Service; Learning and Skills Councils; Government Office; the Regional Assembly; Local Authorities; and Agency staff.

Fundamental to the purpose of the Forum is the recognition that the lack of comprehensive, reliable and consistent data on the economic impact of tourism has prevented a proper understanding of the sector. Without such information, strategy making is harder than it would otherwise be, and progress towards goals far more difficult to measure with any accuracy. At the heart of the changes being driven by the Forum is the desire to develop processes leading to good, clear data.

The creation of the Forum also reflected the need for strong and dynamic leadership of the sector within the region, and the determination of the Agency to take on this role. While not underestimating the importance of national activity, or the continued need for this, it is clear that RDAs have a key role in taking forward tourism in their areas. RDAs are driven by the need to improve the economic performance of their particular region. In the Northwest, this is manifested in a number of themes of which that of 'Investing in Business and Ideas' relates most obviously to tourism. The

objectives of this theme are to develop world-class clusters of business that offer outstanding employment and growth potential; to pursue business excellence in existing businesses, and; to accelerate new business development. The broad approach adopted by the Agency is to exert strategic influence and provide regional leadership in tourism, to inform and influence national and regional policy that directly or indirectly influences the region's tourism industry and to champion quality provision in all aspects of the industry.

Leadership requires a strong sense of vision, and the establishment of a clear direction in which the tourism sector should be heading if it is to succeed in an increasingly competitive domain. The Forum therefore developed a brief for the creation of a tourism strategy for the region that included a major piece of work on the future for tourism over the next ten years. The aim was to develop a vision that is innovative, challenging, inclusive and focused while also being realistic and achievable.

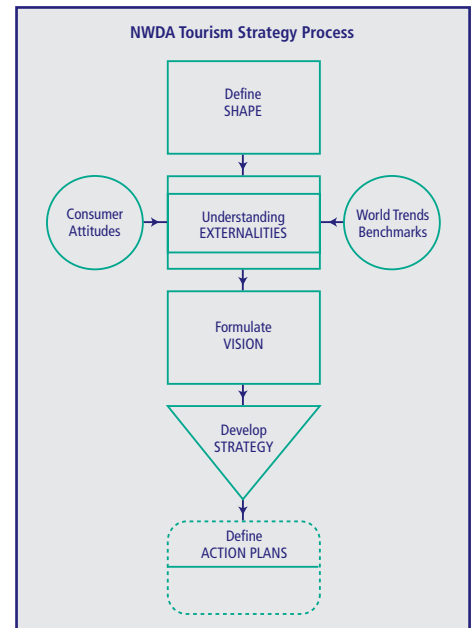
The final component of the Forum's brief involved work to benchmark the performance of the Northwest against other areas. The aim of this is not to compare all aspects of the tourism product with others so much as to look at the processes adopted in other parts of the world to develop and implement successful tourism strategies and to learn lessons from these.

A Steering Group drawn from the Forum was created to provide guidance to the consultants and to monitor the process.

Pushing forward the vision

A brief was issued at the end of July 2002 that included all of the elements described above: the development of a visionary strategy, economic impact assessment, future thinking, and benchmarking work. Five organisations were short-listed and the project finally let to Locum Destination Consulting, with The Henley Centre in a supporting role.

The project - A Tourism Vision for England's Northwest - is fulfilment of the first of the Forum's two functions. It will complete



at the start of January 2003 with the publication of the Vision document. It will be followed by work to identify the appropriate delivery mechanisms for realising the vision and to develop action plans for its implementation. An England's Northwest Tourism Vision Conference will take place on 5 March 2003. The Conference will provide the opportunity to publicly launch the vision and to explain the steps being taken for its implementation. It will also strengthen the leadership role of the Agency.

In summary, the process being followed is to: i) define the shape of the industry within the region; ii) gain an understanding of the external factors that drive and will change the sector; and; iii) formulate a vision and develop a strategy, leading to the definition of action plans.

Considerable effort has gone into the first phase: defining the shape. This has been helped by two related pieces of work that Locum Destination Consulting were already doing; one was a study of the region's coastal resorts, commissioned by the NWDA itself, and the second a Market Forecast Study commissioned by Cumbria Tourist Board. This latter piece of work involved considerable research into the industry within the county including a detailed questionnaire that was sent to tourism operators. A slightly modified version of this questionnaire was subsequently sent to all tourism operators in the rest of the region and a separate questionnaire was sent to tourism staff in both local authorities and tourism partnerships. The input from these various sources, and from desk research, formed the basis for a current state analysis report.

In order to stimulate debate and provide more information about the issues facing the sector, a Tourism Green Paper was produced jointly by Locum and the NWDA. A second document was created with a more explicit consultative purpose; this sought views in response to specific questions as well as providing an opportunity for more general views on tourism to be expressed. Both were distributed widely within the region, and both are available to download from the NWDA website (www.nwda.co.uk).

Three sets of seminars were also arranged. The first series of ten seminars focused on thematic issues: coastal tourism, urban tourism, tourism infrastructure, etc. A wide range of tourism specialists was

invited to these from both the public and private sectors. The thematic seminars were followed by a high-level foresight seminar attended by key decision-makers within the region and focusing upon the future for the industry over a 10- to 15-year time span. The third series of seminars had a strategic focus and provided an opportunity for the developing strategic vision to be debated. One of these strategic seminars was held in London in order to capture an extra-regional perspective. Briefing papers for seminars were distributed in advance and the outputs from each fed back into the process to enrich and inform the thinking of those involved. Input from The Henley Centre has not only fed the Foresight seminar but has also informed the thinking on strategy.

The two Regional Tourist Boards were closely involved in all stages of the processes described above, as vital members of the Forum itself and of the Steering Group, through their contact with the industry both directly and through tourism partnerships, as a result of participation in the seminars and by virtue of their face-to-face contact with the consultants.

The Tourism Vision for England's Northwest is about to be published. It will be a short, succinct and clearly focused piece of print. The ambition is to set out an agenda that is challenging and distinctive and that will stake out a claim for the Northwest's leadership in tourism development and thinking. The vision and the strategies that support it must appeal to both logic and emotion, they must lead to a set of actions (although these will not be identified until the next stage of the process) and they must have relevance to all sectors.

Above all, the Tourism Vision, and the actions taken to implement it, must bring about a step change in the way we think about, and act to support and develop, tourism. The future for tourism is enormously exciting, but success will only be achieved through strong leadership and a clear-sighted ambition. These are qualities that the Northwest Development Agency is determined to provide in order to ensure that England's Northwest is at the forefront of tourism in Britain.