

Client Report

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A New Vision for England's Northwest Coastal Resorts



It is the last time that I will proudly display a glossy printed version of one of the reports I've helped write at a Locum Destination Consulting staff meeting.

The reward for flashing the hot-off-the press "New Vision for Coastal Resorts" report in front of my colleagues was to get asked to write this article. Not quite the desired effect.

The task allocated by the esteemed editor is to use the report, and how we went about preparing it, as a case study giving an insight into the process and methodology that we adopt in tackling a task.

As with most consultancy practices, Locum prefers to work within the structure of a well-proven methodology, allowing rigour across an extended process. What we need to avoid – of course – is rigidity: experience, flexibility and broad-based understanding of the current issues all play a part here. There is never a 'one size fits all' solution: problems are always complex and individual. The process and methodology that we adopted, for example, in the Northwest Coastal Resorts task, demonstrates the situation

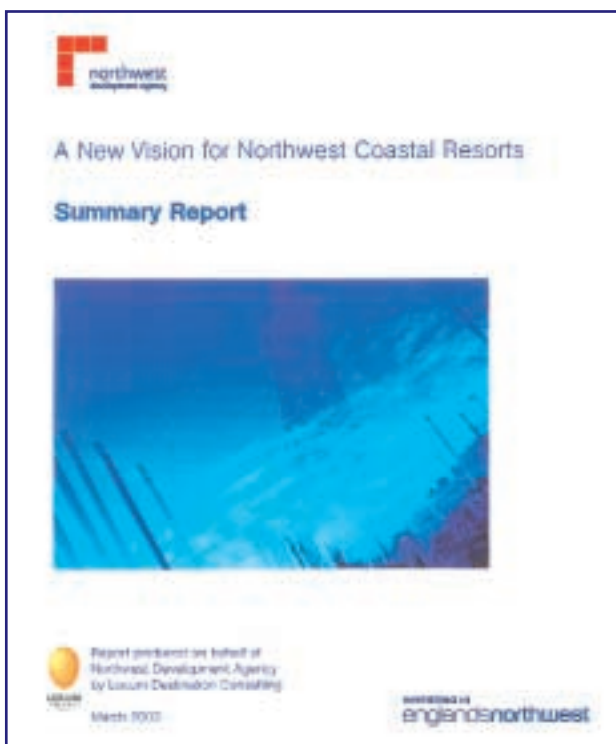
ably. There are many stakeholders, with many different expectations of your work. It is neither easy to work out good solutions, nor to present them in a way that wins the backing of everyone with an interest.

What the Client Wanted

We are lucky at Locum in that there is tremendous variety in our work. Every job is different, and every job is interesting.

That was certainly the case with this one. The brief was to produce a "New Vision for Northwest Coastal Resorts". It was commissioned by the Northwest Development Agency on behalf of the Northwest Coastal Forum, a group of stakeholders, mainly local authorities and other public agencies on the Northwest Coast.

The remit extended from Grange over Sands, a charming Edwardian coastal resort on the bottom end of the Lake District, through the varied delights of Morecambe,



Fleetwood, Cleveleys, Blackpool, St Annes, Southport, New Brighton, Hoylake (pictured right) and, finally, on the tip of the Wirral Peninsula, West Kirby. Not to forget – and I was periodically told off for doing so – the resort of Knott End on Sea on the southern tip of Morecambe Bay.

All have seen better days. All, in one form or another, are seeking to find a clear role in a challenging environment.

The task was to outline a way forward for this disparate collection, individually and as a group – to identify the market trends that were affecting them, to assess whether the strategies and plans which they had were sensible and sustainable, to identify opportunities. All this was to be wrapped up in a 'vision' for what the coastal resorts in the Northwest could be like in 10–15 years.



The first hurdle was the slight divergence of interest between the NWDA and other the members of the Forum, especially the local authorities.

The former wanted a totally honest and objective assessment that would help them to decide how to disperse funds in pursuit of their objectives.

The latter wanted to make sure that their neck of the woods was best positioned to receive funds from

the NWDA and other sources.

This is a common situation with the type of work that we do. Since it is certainly desirable for all parties to warmly endorse the final recommendations, the challenge is to find a way forward that is acceptable – preferably welcome – to all parties, without compromising the integrity of our advice.



Blackpool's Pepsi Max Big One

Below: Cafe culture in Southport - the new Chester?

Our Approach

The starting point is to get a good feel for the situation on the ground. In this regard, there is nothing to beat walking around, taking a look at what is happening and what people are doing. Riding the Pepsi Max Big One!

This is somewhat tricky in an area as big as that covered in this study. Weekends were spent frantically driving from one place to another. Not unpleasurable, however.

It is important to remember and capture the first impressions gained on these driveabouts. They are the impressions that visitors have. This is the point that I personally look for the big ideas that will inform the eventual conclusions, and that is what happened in this study. People who experience a situation day in and day out often lose sight of the big picture. By contrast, the big picture is often clearly visible to outsiders like us, although it is easy to fall into the trap of reaching banal and simplistic conclusions, which is why it is always necessary to reinforce initial impressions with a deeper understanding of realities.

The next stage combined application with analysis – as the team familiarised ourselves with strategies, action plans and reports. This is important contextual material; it gives a feel for the various perspectives, and allows a more rounded view to be formed. We then overlay our own in-house analysis of the statistics and demographics – trying to draw out trends and identify achievable solutions. That is of critical importance. A first principle for Locum Destination



Consulting is that recommendations must be market driven.

In this case, the news was not comfortable. British seaside resorts are on the wrong end of all sorts of socio-demographic and social trends. It has left them in a pickle, with some of the worst examples of socio-economic deprivation in the country. Ironically for a practice that does so much tourism work, we were in the position of advising that some of the resorts were basing too much reliance on tourism for

regeneration. In some cases, tourism had ceased to be the main driver of the local economy, but local stakeholders had not yet realised it.

The next stage was to discuss the situation with stakeholders. As always, we had one-on-one meetings, but the main forum for such discussion was seminars. We held them in all of the main resorts. The participants were a blend of people from the private and public sectors. As always, they were highly informed and interesting. The objective is to make them as enlightening and enjoyable for attendees as possible. These sessions play a vital role in bolstering our thinking processes with first-hand knowledge.

Our Recommendations

From this point, the team begin to shape and form the strategic thinking. We like to look outside the region to add context to our observations. Best practice is taken from



within and without the UK to extend horizons and change ambitions. Our finalised recommendations were drafted into a report (an exercise that always takes longer than initially envisaged).

Some of the recommendations applied to the NW Coast as a whole. For example, it is clearly the primary golf region in England (three of the four English courses on the roster for The Open are on the Northwest Coast), and we recommended that it should be marketed as such – England's Golf Coast.

There was a similar story with birdwatching. The deep and broad estuaries that puncture the coast make it probably the best region for birdwatching in the country.

A popular idea was that some of the resorts should be designated as "Classic Resorts" once they had achieved certain standards. It would be a bit like the Blue Flag scheme for beaches.

The core of the strategy, however, was advice delivered for the individual resorts, and that varied for each of them. For example, we advised Morecambe to take advantage of the glory of its location, and the proximity of booming Lancaster, to position itself as an attractive place to live. We endorsed Blackpool's bold vision to reinvent itself as a modern resort, based on the investment that reform of gambling legislation could bring to the town. We advised Southport to take advantage of the splendour of Lord Street – one of the finest shopping streets in the country – to present itself as a 'stylish and sophisticated' equal to Chester and Bath.



In some cases there were some harsh things to be said, some bitter pills to be swallowed. Although we tried to create a positive outcome for all parties, one or two of the resorts were dismayed. Overall, however, the response to the first draft was exceptionally positive. It was praised for being readable, honest and on the button in terms of its recommendations.

Then of course came the deluge of suggested amendments!

This is the point where nerves of steel are required. The temptation to dilute strong recommendations becomes acute. In the Northwest, we had a very enlightened client that insisted that this should not happen. We worked on finding more positive outcomes for those resorts that had to swallow the bitterest pills, and eradicating the errors of fact that are inevitably made in the first draft.

When Richard Tibbott, our Chairman, and I presented the final report to the Coastal Forum, with a slight sense of trepidation, we were delighted to find that it had universal endorsement.

A couple of months later, a beautifully printed glossy version arrived in the mail. That is when the fateful error was made...

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