

TOURISM CONFERENCE

Incorporating the Annual General Meeting & Tourism Council

Tuesday 16 November 2010

WELCOME ADDRESS
John Williams
Chairman, Tourism South East

Well, good morning members and guests...

Welcome to the Marriott Lingfield Park, home of an imaginative new partnership with two great tourism brands coming together....

What a difference a year makes... it was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

This AGM should in theory look solely at the financial year, 2009-10 but of course it's the events since April I must also address...

Malcolm Lane will present the accounts formally in a few moments, but I do want to look back on the year we are reporting today.

I hope you have had time to study the annual report either in traditional print format or in the wonderful interactive online version...

It tells an impressive story of value for money, of hard work, of partnership, and of achievement....

We are grateful to SEEDA for the years of our core grant, and we should be proud that we made it work hard: to remind you, last year we turned a core grant of £2.1m into £5.3m of turnover benefiting tourism in the beautiful south...

We delivered a whole myriad of services:

- Preparing for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games
- Offering affordable and powerful marketing campaigns and the PR support to extend their impact
- Continuing to innovate with our websites and ensuring data stewardship kept up
- Running and servicing TICs throughout the region
- Bringing members together through conferences and seminars and our support for the very active Area Tourism Partnerships
- Championing the best of the best through our regional awards
- Providing to destinations and local authorities planning, development and investment support
- Offering training and business advice across all aspects of the industry's needs from customer service to search engine optimisation
- Running programmes to make the region the country's most accessible to disabled people, their friends and families and everyone with special needs
- Promoting sustainable practices both to save the planet and save costs
- Vital research and intelligence for the sector and individual destinations
- And acting as a voice of tourism, lobbying for and against legislation, making our case at a local, regional and national level

50:1 return on investment for the family fun marketing programme

£14m in incremental spend from our two main marketing campaigns

A dozen pre-games training camps

900 businesses and 2,800 individuals on our training programmes

A record 27% more entries for our awards and a record seven winners making the national finals

Over 2,000 tourism businesses and over 50 local authorities in membership

And here today, look at yourselves, a record attendance with over 200 registered...

And yet, and yet..

We're asking ourselves, and asking you today, what future role is there for us? Indeed, if there is a role for us at all?

By all accounts, last year was a great year, the year of economic revival for many of our tourism businesses buoyed by the staycation effect and everyone pulling together....

But then reality hit us...the election, the coalition, the budget, the comprehensive spending review, the political imperative to terminate the RDAs....

So, it's worth telling you briefly what has happened at Tourism South East since the end of the last financial year, to put today's conference into context...

We originally created a business plan and budget for the year based on SEEDA's committed core funding of £2.2m. As a result of the planned run down and closure of SEEDA, this was cut in-year by 50% in June, well into our new financial year, when we had made commitments to our plans and people....

Because of all the uncertainty ahead of the spending review, and the planned new tourism strategy from the Minister, and the proposals to create LEPs, we took the view that we should not implement the full impact of these cuts in the summer but try to maintain business as usual as far as possible while making some immediate savings and economies

So we have made cuts: we have this year lost 18 posts and many really good people and colleagues; at the same time, we have dipped into our reserves to tide us over until we were able to do some thoughtful future planning in the light of the government unveiling its plans... as a result, we will this year have effectively subsidised SEEDA this year to the extent of about £600,000

Mike Bedingfield will tell you more about the current political and funding context for tourism, but frankly to me it does not look that much clearer than it did in June...

But we now need to make some hard decisions.

So the board of Tourism South East has been spending a lot of time looking at our role, plans and options for the coming year, when we will have no core funding from SEEDA, and possibly no SEEDA funding at all, not even transitional funding. We need to create a new model of funding and operation that continues to support tourism in a way that draws on the years of expertise and experience that we can offer, in a way that provides coordination, economies of scale and complementary services to destinations and members large and small.

Last week, the board looked at a series of options for our future. There is much work and analysis still to be done. But the board did reaffirm its commitment to remaining a member-led organisation, a not for profit company there to serve and support the tourism industry all across the south of England.

The needs remain the same; older hands remind me that we prospered and delivered in the days before the RDAs were created.

I could thank lots of people, but I do above all want to pay tribute to the staff and executive leadership of Tourism South East: Mike, Malcolm, Nigel, Peter and Simon, who have continued to remain immensely focused and professional through such a difficult period, professionally and personally.

There is an irony in all this; the tourism industry has never been in more of a period of change and disruption and uncertainty; yet never has there been a better opportunity for it to grow, and contribute to the revival of the UK economy. We have the staycation effect; we have the unique opportunity of the 2012 games, we have still the most wonderful destinations, attractions, scenery, experiences, festivals, hotels, restaurants, bars, cafes and clubs....

We are committed as Tourism South East to playing our part.

It's not business as usual for anyone, but we look forward to supporting you all, working with you and championing tourism into the future....

Thank you