

Experience West Sussex, Sussex Chamber of Commerce,

South Downs National Park Authority & Coast 2 Capital LEP Present:

## **Tourism in the time of Coronavirus Survive, **Revive** and Thrive**

A series of dynamic webinars for the Sussex Tourism Sector

Produced by **PLATF9RM**

### Session 2: Revive

Tourism sector experiences & an expert panel from Finance, HR, Legal and Communications  
Wednesday 13 May 2020 | 12:00 - 13:30

### **Panellists & Contributors for 'Thrive'**

#### **Industry Contributors**

Samantha Richardson - Academy Director, National Coastal Tourism Academy

Jo Williams - Experience West Sussex

Steph Fuller - Director & CEO, Ditchling Museum

Richard Betts - Adventure Director, Pied a Terre Adventures

Stewart Drew - Director & CEO, De La Warr Pavilion

Mark Driver - Owner, Rathfinny

Andy Sparsis - Owner, The Proto Restaurant Group

Jeremy Pardey - Resort Director, Butlins

#### **Panel of Experts**

#### **Finance, HR, Legal and Communications**

Finance: **Phil Green** - Director, MD Hub

HR: **Dan Soanes** - Director & Solicitor, Sherrards Employment Law

Legal: **Debbie Venn** - Partner, DMH Stallard

Comms: **Helen Coop** - MD, Four Communications

## **Introduction**

Steve Bustin is hosting again and starts off by introducing Jo Williams from Experience West Sussex Partnership. Jo discussed that these sessions were set up to be a voice to influence and inform the government and to help the sector and promote Sussex, by building relationships within the sector. Influence, inform and build relationships. Experience West Sussex Partnership are working hard in three different areas: 1) Keeping communications going and are using #westsussexwishlist to keep West Sussex top of mind.

2) Business support – to help everyone in the sector.

3) Influence, inform, building networks and partnerships. They took on board points raised from last weekends 'Survive' session and are having continuous meetings.

These events are a joint venture between Experience West Sussex, Sussex Chamber, Coast to Capital Growth Hub and South Downs National Park.

## **Industry Contributors Panel:**

Andy Sparsis is one of the founders of Proto Restaurant Group and Director of TCI and Chairman of Worthing Hospitality Association.

Mark Driver is an owner of Rathfinny Wine Estate in East Sussex and is part of the steering group for Sussex Modern.

Richard Betts is co-founder and Events Director for Pied a Terre Adventures. They provide walking events, predominantly in South of England but also other National Parks and overseas.

Sam Richardson is the Director of the National Coastal Tourist Academy. They support coastal business and destinations to thrive.

Stewart Drew is the Director of De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill On Sea. The Pavilion is a combined arts centre with a 1500 capacity auditorium. They hold a lot of events and approximately 420,000 visitors a year. He is also the Chair of 1066 Country and is a partner at Sussex Modern.

Jeremy Pardey is Resort Director at Butlins in Bognor Regis.

Steph Fuller is the Director of Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft. They are a small rural museum. Steph is also a partner of Sussex Modern.

Steve asked the panel *'What has the last 8 weeks been like for you?'*

Steph mentioned that it has been hectic and confusing. They closed 1 week before lockdown and were scenario planning about what might happen. They have been trying to buy some time to think before they act. They spent a lot of time anticipating what might need doing, what should they do. They have furloughed a lot of staff and have a small team working at the moment and are now thinking about what re-opening will look like. It has pushed them into doing things that would they like to do but not had time, like online programme, online board meetings.

Stewart echoed what Steph had said. Stewart feels he has become head of cashflow rather than Director. They have been trying to adapt and flexible. They have gone from 130 staff to 10, so it is challenging but they are getting on with things they wanted to do, like online content.

Mark mentioned that they have had to close their restaurant and accommodation. They closed a week before the lockdown as they were receiving lots of cancellations. On the production side they had to buy in lots of things from Europe before they went into lockdown (bottles, caps etc). They have twenty people a day working in vineyard on a casual basis and 12 full time. Hong Kong are still showing strong sales and there has been a lot of interest from the overseas market. They have had to redirect the business, i.e. nationwide delivery. They are also launching a new website at the end of the month.

Jeremy said that they have had a very big challenge, having gone from a team of 1300 to 50. They have had to be more resourceful and consider how to stay connected with the team. They have planned how to stay connected with guests, with bookings already made and future bookings. They had talked about people working from home for the past 3-4 years and the IT team managed to make it work within 10 days, showing it's incredible what can be achieved if you think of things in a different way. Jeremy is mainly focused on scenario planning, how do they sustain the guest experience with distancing rules.

Andy said that they have been on a rollercoaster like most businesses. They have looked retrospectively at everything are are proud of what they have achieved by quickly coming up with initiatives and putting them into practice and out to customers. They have a lot of furloughed staff and are trying to keep them engaged. They are currently re-launch planning, speaking with managers and teams about how to cope and what they can do. He feels that the real challenge is yet to come.

Richard mentioned that they had a strong 2019 and were looking forward to going into a strong summer. The business just stopped so they have had to look at new ways. They are now doing online courses, with skills instruction etc. Clients have been fantastic and have not cancelled. They are looking at new, innovative ways that they can offer the outdoor space and experience in a safe way to clients. A lot of staff are freelance, have been trying to keep them engaged and working. Not going to let it beat them!

Sam says that it has been two-fold. They do a lot of work within Europe so they started seeing changes earlier and so switched to inspiration content pretty early on and have seen a bigger engagement across the European markets. On the domestic side they have been trying to help destinations and businesses get the help they need. They are now thinking about recovery planning.

Steve's next question to the panel was: *'Did Sundays announcement make a positive difference to you or has it muddied the waters even further?'*

Jeremy started by saying that we need to be positive about the announcements. He felt better for his team, it gave him some clarity about what to do over the next two months. It gives time to plan for every scenario so that guests are at the heart so that they feel safe and protected. The team can be trained more on what safe and secure and clean looks like as it will be very different.

Steph said that she welcomed to have an idea of timescales and phasing but found that there is a lack of detail on what social distancing looks like and what will the standards be. As a public facing charity business, their emphasis is on people being safe and secure (both those that work for them and visit them). They have a duty of care to their large group of volunteers, and also can't open without them. The announcement showed positive steps but they do need as much detail as soon as possible so can move forward.

Mark was confused and was looking forward to more guidance and relaxation so that they could look at how they could potentially re-open the restaurant, although they knew that accommodation re-opening would be further down the line. They rely on the summer months so the extension to furlough provides more of a lifeline. With summer edging away they need to look at how to build the fat for the winter months.

Sam said that they went through two phases. The first with the leak in the press last week was emotional, as to how coastal destinations would open and be ready for visitors and the impact on residents. In terms of the wider piece, the beginnings of the road map is good but leaves a lot of questions about the rest of the summer. They are working with Visit Britain on a kite mark for different businesses.

Andy was pleased with the furlough announcements. They have no real rush to open, as they cannot function fully with social distancing measures in place. They need public confidence to recover before they can realistically open.

Richard felt like it is a nightmare to plan as there were leaks in the press, Sundays announcement and then Mondays update. There needs to be clarity and clear messaging from the government.

Stewart agrees with Richards point, he feels the government likes us to make decisions for ourselves, with rules in place as guidelines. It's hard to know what the

public wants to do, so Sundays announcement and the furlough announcement give a roadmap.

Steve then asked: *'Which members of panel are prepared for the domestic holiday boom that is expected when lockdown is lifted? Are you preparing and planning to meet this demand?'*

Andy said they are in discussions about opening up their open spaces. They have lots of spaces on the sea front and they want to fill all of their outdoor spaces, where socially distanced and safe to encourage people to use the outdoor areas. They are asking local councils to relax legislation to allow this to happen.

Richard pointed out that as they do guided walks, that means people being in groups so goes against social distancing to a degree. They also provide a lot of services around their local walks, such as providing wine and food. They are looking at a way to get people into the countryside responsibly, essentially having a walk by themselves but with the benefits of a guide. Some of this means getting funding to do this and enable partners to still introduce produce to clients. They are gearing up for a long summer and a staycation boom.

Stevens final question to the industry panel was *'What 1 thing do you think that businesses in the tourism industry should do to revive?'*

Stewart answered by saying planning. Scenario planning, planning for all eventualities and being prepared.

Mark said to be nimble. They have 600 acres of land so are looking at things like picnics to encourage visitors to the estate.

Steph advised not to rush into anything, reflect before you jump into the next thing. There are new opportunities out there so adapt to survive.

Jeremys answer was to make sure you have done your scenario planning so that before guests come the scenarios are in place so that they feel comfortable. Plan for the 2m social distancing as a worst case and if it becomes less then adapt your plan.

Richards answer was self-belief. Believe in what you are doing, build on the strength of that. It will get better.

Sam said take a moment to rethink. Things won't go back to normal, think about how consumers will change. There is a lot of research out there so use it.

Andy says communication is key. Find out what customers are going to want, what will it look like and be ready for it when you re-open.

### **Expert Panel:**

Phil Green is the Director of MDhub, which is a peer to peer growth network for MD's and Directors.

Helen Cooper is MD of the travel team at Four Communications. They represent clients both UK based and overseas.

Debbie Venn, partner in DMH Stallard.

Dan Soanes, Director & Solicitor at Sherrards Employment Law.

Steve's first question to the panel was: *'How have employers found staff confidence when faced with asking staff to come off furlough?'*

Dan says that clients have seen staff unwilling to come back to work when asked to do so. From a practical point of view, you have to be very encouraging, positive and sympathetic to their views. Unfortunately, furlough is not a right but employers can choose to put you on or take you off furlough. If you choose not to be taken off furlough then you do not have a right to be paid. It is dangerous to say 'if you do not come back to work then you would face disciplinary measures' but as long as you are sympathetic then you can say 'if you choose not to come back to work then we will choose not to pay you'.

Steve asked Debbie *how her clients questions are changing and what sort of advice she is having to give following on from Sundays announcement.* Debbie answered by saying that a lot of questions are around how they can vary their contracts with existing suppliers and clients. They are helping a lot of businesses raise finance, they have had a lot of questions around this. Another area is diversification and how businesses can prepare for staff and clients coming back.

Phil also answered this question and had found that the initial press leaks found a few businesses starting to get ready to go from Monday, but then found that they couldn't. The one thing everyone is concentrating on is safety, how do you carry out business in a new way. They are looking at their business model and where do they really make their money, does that still apply. How can they change their business model. The most important thing is keeping in contact with their customers.

One question from the audience was *'protecting staff and visitors has to be paramount. Does the panellists feel that up-front costs of the extra measures (social distancing, PPE, etc.) might out-weigh the income from returning visitors?'*

Phil answered that it is a very common concern, the answer is if you have a business that wants to carry on then you have to do it. There are expensive ways of doing it, and innovative cheap ways of doing it. Its about getting the balance right. They have to accept that the next 6 months to a year you have to be ready for a safe working environment.

Steve asked Helen if she *felt that the messaging we have to give to customers has changed since Sundays announcement.* Helen said that people are now thinking about what we will do, rather than what we could do. The media is now looking for facts of how companies are going to re-open, what safety measures they will have in

place. The media is as desperate for information as the rest of us are. Everybody is aware that plans are evolving by the minute. As long as you can convey what you are planning to do given the current situation then that is all you can do. It doesn't matter if certain things then change as everyone is aware of the situation. Be clear that it is an evolving situation and things may change. Launch your website and make sure that you are in the public domain as soon as possible.

Debbie added that in terms of domestic versus international travel, a lot of messaging around how people will need to quarantine when they travel overseas will put people off travelling overseas. Anything we can do to build the domestic holiday side of things will really help the industry.

A question from the audience was about *the legal obligations around refunds, should we change our T&Cs around refunds and should we lobbying the government to make it clear to consumers that refunds are not to be expected and/or could be delayed.*

Debbie answered that it depends on what you have actually booked, i.e. there are specific regulations for package holidays about what you are entitled to for refunds for. ABTA are trying to lobby the government to get some form of relaxation around the time period for refunds. They are also introducing a refund credit note system which will enable people to receive a promise of a refund in due course or a credit note to pay for a holiday in the future, which would be protected under ABTA's scheme. A lot of patience is needed from consumers.

Steve asked if there was *any advice about businesses taking out additional insurance at the moment. Are there policies that people should be looking at to give themselves cover for what is to come?*

Phil answered that the insurance sector is in a lot of turmoil at the moment. Debbie agreed that a lot of business interruption insurance is not being paid for accommodation and event facilities. A lot of policies do not provide the cover that a lot of businesses thought that they had. The insurance sector is coming under a lot of fire. It will be up to brokers to help see what cover they have.

Steve had a question for Dan: *'you have just said do not pay the person who does not want to come back to work. Surely that is discrimination on the grounds of health?'* Dan said that if someone is disabled then there is an obligation to make reasonable adjustments. That does not extend to paying them when they do not come back to work. It is important to note that, on the non-legal side, part of the message to employees should be 'these are the things that we have done to make sure that you are safe, as far as we are concerned it is not as safe as it possibly can be. Obviously you have to put your health first and if you do not want to come in then we will have to pay someone else to do your job'. That wouldn't amount to disability discrimination as you would be saying the same to anyone that raises the same point.

Another question for Dan was *'we are considering enforcing holiday on staff while they are in furlough as we won't cope in giving 28 days for the rest of the year. This is for restaurant staff. Do you have any advice?'* Dan said you can force staff to take holiday, you have to give them twice as much notice as the holiday you would like them to take. You would have to top their pay up to 100% during the holiday period.

Steve asked Helen if she has any advice for effectively communicating with staff and volunteers. Helen feels that it is very important to keep staff in the loop, to keep communicating with them, to make them feel as part of a team. The staff that are furloughed can opt in/out if they want to be communicated with. Communication is absolutely key.

Steve's final question to the expert panel was *'What 1 thing do you think that businesses in the tourism industry should do to revive?'*

Phil started by saying future planning. Look at the business money and see how you are going to make money. If you need to change the business then change it.

Dan answered as a tourist rather than a lawyer. At the moment he is looking at where he wants to holiday in the UK. Everyone in the industry will have to work hard to keep a customer experience going. The more you can achieve by making it look effortless and less like the scene of a crime the more keen people will be to come and use your facilities.

Debbie's advice is learn from what you have been doing in the last few weeks. Take the good and try to build that in to improve the business model moving forward.

Helens advice is make sure you have the right information out there and are providing the facts. Also, keep an eye on the news agenda as there might be information you can use or news stories that you can jump on.

## **Q&A WITH BOTH PANELS**

1. *At the moment, what would you call on the government to be doing?*

Stewart said that there is a real need to re-organise how tourism is promoted and the business in the economy is promoted. When you visit the region, the enjoyment levels are very high but the awareness of the destinations of the region are not so well known.

Andy agreed with what Stewart said. Growth in the south for the tourism industry is 1.9%, which is higher than in London. Andy believes that the hospitality and tourism

sectors have been hit the hardest. The government needs to look at that and enables us to compete with Europe and keep the tourism industry going.

Phils plea to the government is to look at the taskforce and ensure that there is representation for each sector or break it down smaller so that areas are not overlooked.

Mark would like strong messaging. We are competing with Cornwall, Cotswolds, etc. so we need a strong message. Sussex is unique to a lot of areas. It will be difficult for accommodation to open up over the coming months, but other visitor areas can open sooner.

Richard says short-term is domestic tourism, but it was not that long ago that Visit Britain had a big push and funding for inbound tourism. We need 2021 to be a very big season and we need to be very clear about how the government will manage borders.

Steph thinks that in the cultural sector a lot are not big businesses and there are a lot of very fragile business models. The government needs to be aware of this and help protect them.

Sam would like as much clarity as possible and long-term support. Coastal and rural areas rely on the summer season and will need the support well into 2021 and beyond.

Jo echoed what everyone has said. The message should be about not just the short-term approach but also a long term view. The ability needs to be there locally to have a strong focused view of the sectors.

Steve read a comment from an audience member *'please can we discuss, and it is imperative to put pressure on the government, to be able to delay refunds both for suppliers and agencies or to fully understand credit vouchers.'* Debbie agrees that this is something that the government should act on. The difficulty is that a lot of companies do not know what to do. The government should look at relaxing regulations.

Stewart wanted to add the banks into the mix. They are finding that banks are slow to clear refunds, they are holding onto the money before they release the money back to customers.

Jo raised a point about a united Sussex approach and the fear that Brighton would take all of the glory. They have been working in partnership with Brighton for the past year or two, and East Sussex. They recognise that tourists do not see political boundaries. For the wider Sussex picture, we have a strong offer with the city of Brighton, the coastal areas, the rural areas and the South Downs National Park. This will help to strengthen the partnership.

Steve's next question was *'how should businesses be inclusive and accessible with new operations?'*

Sam said that there is a lot of good advice on the Visit Britain support hub, from general inclusivity and wider accessibility.

Steve asked the panel if there was anything from today that has really stuck out?

Jeremy answered that there has been some great information and as a point, do not wait for things to come to you. There is a lot of resources out there. We need to change the way we work, we need to communicate better and support smaller initiatives. We also need to think what we can do locally for our local communities.

Andy added that it is a time for businesses to be brave. The great thing about independent businesses and SME's is that companies have a lot of entrepreneurial strength and it's time to be bullish. Ask for help from local councils. If you have initiatives then be confident that they will work and the public will support you.

Helen said do not be frightened to communicate. Do not think that it might change or be afraid that you may say the wrong thing. You need to be out there and heard. Do not ignore the local audience as they will be the first to come back. Think about a wider target audience, peoples needs change. Think of difference groups that you would not have considered before, so be flexible.

Steph said that the overwhelming thing is that we are all in it together. We are creative, we are entrepreneurial and if we work together and combine our offer then we have something very unique.

Richard said that collaboration is key. We all have our own independent goals but working together will make Sussex the place that people want to come to.

Phil added that one thing he has seen is that this is an opportunity to look at your business and change things that you have been putting up with. It is unlikely that the business that you had 7 weeks ago will be the same business that re-opens in, hopefully, a few weeks.

The video and additional resources can be found:

<https://www.experiencewestsussex.com/survive-revive-and-thrive/>

The final session will be Thrive within the next few weeks.