Visitor Economy Potential for Todmorden

A synopsis of the commisioned visitor research report with recommendations for those in Todmorden with capacity to implement economic and strategic actions.

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Introduction

*"**Todmorden will have a strong visitor economy** and be a beacon for social and environmental enterprise, creative industries and healthy living".*

At the outset as a part of the vision for the town, the Todmorden Town Deal Board made the visitor economy a cornerstone of its long-term strategy. The proposition was that it is the people of the town who know best why visitors already come and would be best placed to implement any finding of visitor research

Whilst the vision was not something that could be achieved quickly the board took the step of allocating and applying some early funding for visitor research with that strategic goal in mind.

As the projects within the Town Deal Programme engage in the delivery stage, the time is right to outline a proposed strategy that those projects and other stakeholders in the visitor economy can develop and help implement.

Whilst reading this synopsis stakeholders should understand what the concept of a strong visitor economy might look like. Often 'the visitor economy' is simply interpreted as just 'tourism'. In the case of Todmorden this would be a mistake, as it has many more unique attributes than other locations in the valley and region that do pin their visitor economy on tourist recreation and day visitors. Tourism should not be ignored but there is a bigger picture for Todmorden.

The opportunities to boost the local economy by encouraging a wider range of visitors are significantly more than has been perceived by those responsible for this area of our economy in the past 30 years.

The street survey visitor research points to tourist feedback but also to other more regular repeat visitors and what we might learn from their experiences.

The second element of the research also took a wider perspective on the perception of the town from those who live within a 1-2 and 2-3 hour drive. This gives us the opportunity to see the town through the eyes of those who might or might not want to visit us, why that is and what we would need to do to change perceptions or meet the positive expectations both in assets and or destination marketing delivery.

The following is a synopsis of the 88 page report and data sets provided by QA research who were commissioned by the Town Deal Board to conduct the research.

From this, some basic strategic recommendations are proposed for the Board its partners and any other town organisations with the desire and capacity to partner in developing the wider visitor economy.

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Survey Report Synopsis – Key findings

The data from the actual visitors on the street was in some cases limited by the post pandemic downturn in visitors, the time of year and weather conditions. However, the research company provided a statistically indicative sets of data. And with the distance perception surveys the research company have demonstrated a statistically robust set of data. Both levels are sufficient to draw out useful working applications with reasonable confidence.

For the street based survey the areas of questioning were:

Profile of visitors
Reasons for visiting
Overnight visitors
Visitor experience
Perceptions of Todmorden
Appeal of different experience

Where comparisons were applicable and made with the benchmark survey of 2005 for the Upper Valley, there were similar data results to that time. Suggesting not much has changed in the profiles, reasons for visiting the town percentages staying over and their experiences. The caveat being only 16% of surveys in 2005 were conducted in Todmorden. [Note also a similar repeat survey done by UCVR in Hebden Bridge in 2015 provided similar consistencies though]

There has never been a perception survey done and so this is a key piece of work with data that can shape the future of the offer the town has and could make to visitors. A Sample of 400 people across a range of demographics were surveyed in two ranges 1-2 and 2-3 hours drive from Todmorden.

For the potential visitor research the areas of questioning were:

Profile of respondents
Leisure visits
Perceptions of Todmorden
Barriers to visiting Todmorden
Likelihood to visit
Appeal of different experience

Acccepting that the curent data from on street surveys and that of the benchmark survey of 2005 have similar findings and that perhaps not much has changed in the visitor economy activity of the town over the years, any desire to manage the destination by selective marketing of the town to desired visitor sectors will find this perception element of the survey the most useful.

From this survey of 400 people we can draw out potential visitor types and demographics based on what they would like to visit the town for. The data also tells us why they might not visit but also what would cange their minds about visiting.

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Street Survey - Key findings

The main profile of visitors and reasons for visiting in the report centre around the data provided that shows 34% currently are visiting friends and families, 31% are on leisure or Holiday visits (Traditional tourists).

The repeat visitors are significantly high with 55% visiting 10 times a year, 17% in last 2 years. To be able to revisit so often the data suggest that the distance travelled is minimal. This ties in with 16% coming to visit the markets.

The majority were on a day trip from home (72%), with 18% staying overnight in Todmorden. 16% of visitors were here for the first time.

When asked about perceptions there was a lack of any strong universal word association with Todmorden, none from a prompted list received agreement from more than half those interviewed, with the top 5 being:

- Quirky 45%
- Unspoilt 36%
- Independent 30%
- Local food culture 25%
- Creative 24%
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However, 76% agree (with 31% strongly agreeing) that ‘Todmorden has a unique spirit and ambience about it’

When asked what could be better offered in the Town, 66% of visitors thought that ‘you could easily visit everything you wanted to in Todmorden in a single day trip’ with 22% disagreeing.

81% of visitors rated the experience of visiting Todmorden as very good or good. there is still scope to enhance the experience so more rated it as very good;

11% or 1 in 10 rated their experience as poor.

The most popular experiences for those interested in experiences were:

- Exploring nature and wildlife (49%)
- Easy going activities (e.g. short walks, family cycling, pony trekking, picnics and viewpoints) (39%)
- Heritage experiences (33%)

Potential visitors - Awareness perceptions

This element of the research has some great indicators of how the town is perceived as a place not too far away that visitors can get to in a few hours. How we are seen through the

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eyes of potential visitors, or not in some cases, will help assess the impression we make as a town to visit.

Of those surveyed 1-3 hours away by car:

25% have never heard of Todmorden
31% had but have never visited
10% had visited but more than 5 years ago
12% had visited between 2-5 years ago
10% had visited in the last 12 months
10% plan to visit in the next 6 months

Interestingly, and encouraging to some extent, is that awareness levels are similar to Hebden Bridge (21% never heard of it) and Holmfirth (30% never heard of it), higher than Saltaire (41% never heard of it) but lower than Bury (11% never heard of it).

In the potential visitor survey undertaken with people who have not previously visited Todmorden or who have not been in the last 5 years or more nearly half (47%) when presented with a list of words did not associate any of them with Todmorden.

The top word associations were Independent (19%), quirky (18%), Local food culture (15%), unspoilt (14%) and environmentally conscious (11%).

Incredible Edible was only 3% (compared to 19% in the on street visitor survey) – for both this seems a surprisingly low level of awareness/association.

Only 7% strongly agreed with the statement ‘Todmorden has a unique spirit and ambience about it’ (with 28% agreeing but 31% saying ‘don’t know’) This is something much more strongly recognised by visitors than potential visitors.

When potential visitors were asked why they had not visited?, the greatest barriers to visiting are all related to **low awareness**, with the top 5 reasons out of the 20 prompted possible reasons being:

- Haven’t seen or recall any advertising for the place so it’s not somewhere have thought about visiting – 29%.
- Aware of the name but not what experiences a visit offers – 25%
- Don’t know what it is or what a visit offers – 25%
- Unaware Todmorden existed – 21%
- Other more interesting places are closer to get to – 12%

These percentages changed significantly, when potential visitors are told something about the town and its ‘offer’. Given a description of what the town offers and then asked based on the description of Todmorden as a place to visit, how likely were they were to visit for a day out in the next two years and separately how likely were they to visit for an overnight stay in the next two years.

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- 44% said they were likely to visit on a day trip (30% quite and 14% very)
- 35% said they were likely to visit for an overnight stay (26% quite and 9% very)

The key reasons given by those likely to visit were:

- It sounds interesting 52%
- I like nature and the outdoors 43%
- Didn't realise there was so much to see and do 41%
- I like visiting market towns 37%
- I am interested in history and heritage 35%

Conclusions and Recommendations

This data offers the basis for a strategy if well developed over the next few years could transform the perception of the town as a place to visit for a wide range of reasons and purposes.

If we are to take seriously the vision that "Todmorden will have a strong visitor economy". There has to be a **highly focused strategic** approach to developing this part of the local economy.

It is clear from the research that there is a need to raise awareness and fill the destination brand with a significantly greater meaning for potential visitors..

There are very encouraging findings in terms of potential visitors. However, attracting them requires a better understanding of destination marketing and destination management than has been applied until now. That begs the question as to if there is a need for a new agency approach to raise awareness and fill the destination brand with a significantly greater meaning for potential visitors?

It is apparent from the benchmark comparisons that Todmorden has made little or no progress in developing the visitor base from what it was in 2005. This should encourage a radical approach to an independent and skills based town led promotional strategy and a move away from reliance of regional or district branding which has failed provide growth in this part of the economy too many years

Assuming the Town Deal Board having commissioned the research initially, has taken the vision seriously, it is perhaps they who should direct the strategic development of the visitor economy? They could do this by engaging a suitable partner to review the full report in more depth than here and undertake to develop it in collaboration with the Town Deal partners and other capable local agencies or individuals.

A strategy for general visitor attention would include initially analysing in depth, the potential visitor data to see which sources of information encouraged them to visit the other places they have most recently gone to.

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Different information sources will be needed to reach different audiences, with clear differences between those likely to be used by pre-family and younger family audiences and older, retired audiences; for example:

Seeing a place featured on a TV programme has encouraged 31% of those retired compared to 16% from a pre-family lifestage.

Hearing about it from friends on social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) has more impact on young family lifestage (45%) than retired (21%).

Advert on social media (via Facebook, Twitter or Instagram) have more impact on pre-family (26%) and young family lifestage (29%) than post-family (9%) or retired lifestages (5%).

In the survey no one source of information stood out as likely to be seen by a majority of potential visitors even within different lifestages, so budget and resource will be required to use a variety of different channels and formats regardless of which audience(s) we are seeking to attract. This as indicated needs locally focussed destination marketing.

In general and following up to more recent initiatives of Destination TOD and “There is MOR in TodMORden” more needs to be done to develop the recognised ‘brand’ and clear associations of the town.

We know from the research why current day visitors come. We know what might attract potential visitors. To develop the strategy further we need to identify all the things Todmorden want to be seen as or known for. We know there are assets not yet promoted and they need an external profile developing and promoting as a part of the offer and our identity.

One final and important note is that, what the surveys do not cover are potential for, companies, educational groups, festival and event organisers to want to come here adding to reasons for a visit.

Synopsis by: Stephen Curry

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Nick How: for QA Research who helped pull out the key findings for this synopsis.

There's more in Todmorden

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