

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 1: Survive

Tourism sector experiences & an expert panel from Finance, HR, Legal and Communications
Tuesday 5 May 2020 | 12:00 - 13:30

DATE: Tuesday 5th May 2020

Panellists & Contributors for 'Survive'

Industry Contributors

Simon Basset - Owner, 2xs

Sophie Tanner - Director of Sales & Marketing, Historic Sussex Hotels

Rosemary French - Owner of Hus B&B

Stephen Manion - Manager, Arundel Castle

Paul Bromley - Communications Director, Bluebell Railway PLC

Panel of Experts

Finance, HR, Legal and Communications

Phil Green - Director, MD Hub

Dan Soanes - Director & Solicitor, Sherrards Employment Law

Debbie Venn - Partner, DMH Stallard

Debbie Hindle - CEO, Four Communications

Introduction

Steve Bustin hosts the event and starts off by detailing the details of the series of events. There will be three sessions in the series over the next few weeks:

- 1: Survive (today's event)
- 2: Revive
- 3: Thrive

These events are a joint venture between Experience West Sussex, Sussex Chamber, Coast to Capital Growth Hub and South Downs National Park. These sessions are designed to pull together the important information and advice for tourism businesses across Sussex, who we know are struggling to survive at the moment. We want to signpost available support and resources. We are looking to gather 'sector intelligence' to feedback to relevant bodies, the Government for example, so that they hear the voices of the tourism sector. We want to build a network and foster future partnerships.

Industry Contributors Introductions:

Simon Bassett started by introducing himself, owner of 2xs in Wittering. They run a watersport centre and online shop. This time of year would be teaching watersports, they also have a club that is currently closed.

Sophie Tanner from Historic Sussex Hotels. They have hotels, restaurants and spas which are currently closed.

Stephen Manion, manager of Arundel Castle. They attract around 180,000 visitors a year between April and November.

Rosemary French represents the Bed and Breakfast sector. Based in Cranleigh, Rosemary has been running a purpose-built Bed and Breakfast for just over 2 years.

Paul Bromley from The Bluebell Railway. The Bluebell Railway runs for approx. 11 miles and is one of the largest employers in Mid-Sussex and has around 800 volunteers.

Steve asked the panel what their experience has been thus far.

Starting with Paul, last year they were looking forward to a big and successful 2020. This year is the 60th year of operating and big things were planned. As a not for profit organisation they are struggling as ticket revenue is the biggest source of income.

Sophie confirmed that they closed the end of March, just before a busy Easter of bookings. Customers have been postponed where possible and now there is a small team in each hotel, keeping them ticking over (plumbing etc.) and keeping them ready so that they can open as soon as they are given the green light.

Rosemary started receiving cancellations at the end of February. The business went from 80% bookings until September to zero.

Simons business was affected a few days before the announcements. They re-opened 1st March on the beach, bookings for courses were beginning to pick up. They have been working with customers and postponed until 2021. The hardest thing has been the sudden stoppage.

Stephen said that Arundel Castle was preparing to re-open for 2020, staff were beginning to come in for training and the events programme was beginning to be created. They are having to think smarter about how they remain in the public eye. They have furloughed a large percentage of the team. They need the gardening team, the maintenance team and security so have kept them working at the moment. Working practices have changed, with staggered staff start times, separate break

times, no sharing of tools and strict regimes with contractors coming in. Luckily, they have a large space so people can work spread out.

Steve asked Rosemary what help, if any, the business has received. Rosemary said that up until a couple of days ago they were not eligible for any help. As a small self-employed company, they could not furlough staff. The new grant scheme may include the business, but more information is yet to be released. They are managing by using savings and envisage that it will be tough re-starting.

Steve asked what help would make a difference to the business. Simon suggested replacing customers with loans, they have received help with rates, furloughed staff and have applied for Government 100% loan. They have also started a scheme with club members and a small percentage have paid for a few seasons in advance, which has helped. The uncertainty of re-opening and social distancing that make it so hard to make a solid plan.

Sophie would like to be able to be pro-active and look at what the next steps are and how they can re-open. They are looking at countries that are ahead of us and putting in measures that they are using in anticipation.

Paul detailed how Bluebell Railway is a non-profit organisation so have no savings to help during this time. All staff have been furloughed. They have launched an emergency appeal for funding, which they hope friends and supporters of the railway will help with contribute funds to keep the railway going and with re-opening costs. Although the railway is shut, they have decided that it is important to keep communication open (especially with furloughed staff and the 800 volunteers). They post on social media, have increased the number of items available on the online shop and have launched a new publication ('The Bluebell Times').

Stephen Manion (Arundel Castle) when opened virtually on 1st April they posted a video on social media, which was a year in the life of from 2019 to 2020. For the annual Tulip Festival, they produced a video, which has had nearly 1 million views. They have posted 'how to' videos for gardening and will do events virtually online. They are using social media, a new website and showing a 'virtual Arundel'. They have 120 seasonal staff and 30 full-time staff. They are contacting by an opening newsletter, quizzes and are trying to keep in contact and keep morale up.

Simon Bassett have been using Social Media, they started a webinar last week and have others planned. These have motivated people. Have communicated with staff via Zoom, have found it to be a lifesaver as it breaks the isolation for everyone stuck at home.

Steve asked Sophie and Rosemary how they have planned on what happens when they re-open. Sophie is keeping an eye on government advice and adding in their own extra levels to ensure everyone's safety and welcome guests back.

Rosemary is concerned that 'generational guests' will not be seen until there is a vaccine available and that is a huge concern for business. These guests are the most lucrative.

Steve asked a question from Sally-Ann Hart, MP Hastings & Rye 'What measures would the panelists like to see the Government taking to boost domestic tourism and help tourism related businesses get back on track?' Stephen Manion (Arundel Castle) answered that he would like to see more support, resource, access to new markets (regional promotion in partnership with hotels, etc.). Sophie agrees with Stephen that highlighting Sussex as a tourism hub is key. Sussex is like no other county in England, and more promotion nationally and internationally is important. Paul would like to have more clarity on the measures put in place for re-opening. We are not just one sector, but many different sectors, i.e.. Offices, transport sector, a shop, a restaurant and a tourist attraction. A longer term extension of the job retention scheme would also be very helpful. If anything comes out of this it should be a greater sense of business collaboration and promoting each other's businesses. Simon would like to see clear guidance on how people can integrate safely with other people and therefore clarity on re-opening. A lot of people won't be booking flights, and people who have been stuck at home will be looking to go away and re-discover the UK.

Rosemary would like to see the government to help Gatwick airport to promote the local area so that tourists go to the area. She would like to see more stay-cations.

Expert Panel Introductions:

Steve asked the expert panel to introduce themselves and the position their business currently finds itself in:

Phil Green is the Director of MDhub, which is a peer to peer growth network for MD's and Directors. The last few weeks have seen them having to rely on zoom, usually they have 2.5 face to face groups each week and are now running 8.5 groups a week online. People are wanting more connections, exchange ideas and discuss what is going on at the moment.

Debbie Venn, partner in DMH Stallard. From a legal perspective, more people are wanting advice on crisis management. More business as usual for supporting clients now remote working. Their concern is how to deal with customer cancellations and how to deal with consumers fairly, while still keeping the companies financially viable. Working a lot with ABTA, and some other businesses in the UK to make sure that travel can survive in the interim and revive at a later stage.

Debbie Hindle from Four Communications, which is a travel specialist communication agency. Represent countries, airlines and cruise companies all around the world. They've done a lot of crisis recovery for countries in the past, so understand the planning process. Their work has been understanding the situation, where countries stand and trying to create plans for future – so not just immediate but long-term plans.

Dan Soanes, Director & Solicitor at Sherrards Employment Law.

At the beginning of the crisis was very busy, getting to grips with furlough scheme and how it worked. Set up a YouTube channel, giving updates each time, a new

communication came out. The furlough scheme ends in June, so clients are now asking how employees return to work and also advise on the redundancy process. Steve asked Dan what we should all know about furlough scheme. Dan mentioned there is a lot of misunderstanding in the two parts of the scheme. Firstly, what you can claim from the Government through HMRC and secondly, what do you pay to employees. Dan clarified that employment law hasn't actually changed so the usual rules and policies apply.

Debbie Hindle discussed the biggest mistakes with communications and suggested that the biggest mistake is going quiet. A plan needs to be put in place for communicating with customers early, as it will be very aggressive with everyone trying to contact the same customers and attracting visitors at the same time.

Debbie Venn finds some customers are saying that some don't want to travel abroad at all. There is a lot of confusion over whether people should be making balance payments and refunds. A lot of travel companies are trying to get through the next few weeks before looking at future bookings. A lot of people are agreeing to postpone their trips, which allows companies to keep their finances in place. The worst thing that people can do is not communicate.

Phil said the best advice he has heard from one of his members is 'A plan is useless, and planning is vital'. Members have got to grips with their core finance; they've trimmed what they can from costs but now we're at the point where communication is key. If suppliers need paying, don't just stop paying but keep them informed with what can be paid. Other members are discussing what can be done now, how can we progress the business as it is, and this can be adapting from the core business and doing other things.

Debbie Hindle discussed communication and channels available. If you don't have social media, then set up channels. She raised that there is massive hunger for good news and human-interest stories. The Press Association have launched a new channel called 'Uplifting'. It's worth thinking about 'plan and innovate'. Should we creating extensions to booking terms, put yourself in a position of how you would feel comfortable as a customer and come up with new ways for the customer experience and communicate those. Think long term, start packages for Christmas 2021 as it still gets the message out.

Steve asked if there was any advice for communicating with staff. Debbie Hindle answered this with keeping communication personal, the more you communicate the better. Be open and transparent, you can't hide bad news so share things as much as you can. Ask them for ideas, as they may have ideas you had not thought of.

Steve asked Debbie Venn about the extent of which we should enforce contracts, how strict should we be? Looking at supplier contracts, these contracts will often be a case of seeing how favourable they are and if there is any room for manoeuvre or payment terms. Airlines seem to be offering vouchers rather than full refunds. This

puts tour operators in a more difficult position if they then can't make the refund back to the customers, they will then have to look at things like their own insurance. For the customer contracts you have to make sure that you comply with all of the different consumer laws. It's a case of how they can work for everyone. ABTA are doing a lot of lobbying with the Government to try and bring a relaxation of the

14-day refund period which is currently in place. A lot of it is down to communication with customers and trying to agree things, then things may move forward.

Steve asked the panel, what they think the Government can do that would make a big difference to the tourism industry right now.

Phil started by suggesting that the obvious thing is an incentive to encourage people to book and stay in the UK, something that supports properties to keep trading.

Suddenly there will be a lot of staff available at the end of June, so a phased extension of furloughing staff or part-time furlough.

Dan agrees with Phil and would like to see changes with the furlough scheme. It would be great to have guidelines for staff to return to work so that staff have more confidence in going back and then customers will have more confidence.

Debbie Venn would like to see some attention to how cancellations and refunds can be made without crippling travel companies. There has been pretty much no guidance from the Government on this. On a domestic side, it would be great to have some guidance on when re-opening hotels, facilities etc. how they can do this safely.

Debbie Hindle would like the Government to understand the role of tourism to the economy and how it can help the country recover.

Q&A WITH BOTH PANELS

1. *From Richard Freeman: 'Domestic staycationing is likely to bounce back much sooner than international travel. Is it time for a really bold, joined up Sussex-wide branding campaign that shows best of culture, heritage, accommodation and natural environment?'*

Rosemary answered by saying that in Summer 2019 there was a joint venture with Gatwick (a campaign and website called 'Gateway Gatwick') to promote local counties to incoming travellers. This would kick things off very quickly.

Debbie Hindle added that ferries and the Euro tunnels will also be key for inbound travel.

Steve discussed branding Sussex and who should be leading this. Stephen said we already have some of the infrastructure for this and we should put ourselves together as one place.

2. *From Maureen Page: 'Most of our visitors are organised school groups coming by coach. Does anyone know how the coach companies are planning to try to reopen?'*

Stephen mentioned that they have quite a few coach operators, but people are committing to going back to Arundel. There is a lot of loyalty from customers, but they are conscious of short-term bookings.

3. *From Vanessa Ferret: 'I have a restaurant and would like to test a takeaway menu. How do I do that without risking the furlough scheme?'*

Dan answered this, the concern seems to be that bringing staff back to test the takeaway would be a breach of the furlough scheme, unless the Government changes the scheme. The rule is that in order for someone to claim under the

scheme then the member of staff must be furloughed for a minimum of three weeks. There is no minimum period for how long they come back to work before they are furloughed again. So, you could calculate how many people are required and for a day/two days/ a week. They could come back for a week and be furloughed for three more weeks. Government suggested that people working in teams is a good idea. Phil added that a quirk of the furlough is that you can work for someone else while you are furloughed. So, hotels sharing staff could work well in this situation, and apply flexibility. Dan mentioned that the only thing you have to be careful on is that they must not be a connected company, i.e. between a chain of hotels, or any company run by a Director of your company. Simon agreed that it would work with his business, Sophie said she is open to the idea for her hotels, but it might be a little bit more complicated.

4. *From Simon Matthews: 'There has been mounting pressure on the Government to start a phased unlocking of the country. It is reported that No.10 is resisting this, irrespective to the short term and long-term damage to the economy. What can we do as businesses and organisations to lobby the decision makers to get re-opened as soon as possible, before we lose most of the 2020 season?'*

Rosemary answered with the first place to lobby is through your own business sector organisations. We have Sussex chambers; these have the ears of Government and that is a strong route to get to them. She is concerned about re-opening too soon, what if she gets customers who are carrying Covid?

Simon added that we need to consider the health implications on the next phase, if it's too early then there is a risk to a second lockdown. People have to be patient and we need to stick to the experts for the Government health and eventually the economy will follow. A double whammy of two lockdowns will be very serious for businesses.

Paul wanted to raise the point that safe re-opening is the priority over hasty re-opening. We have to be seen to be following measures, but to attract customers back the questions they will be asking is 'what measures do you have in place?'. Stephen added that Arundel Castle wouldn't want to open until it is safe to do so. The thought of staff and visitors becoming ill would be at the forethought of re-opening. There has to be a risk assessment.

5. *B Budd commented in the chat about affordability of PPE for guests and staff.*

Rosemary had been thinking about this and increased cleaning materials, increased masks will need to be added to costs. The cost will either need to be added onto the cost of the room or via cost-cutting, as there isn't enough profit to take on the cost.

6. Peter Carlow from The Old School B&B near Chichester raised an issue around ineligibility for his B & B for the recent top-up grants announced last weekend. Rosemary referred to the top-up grants announced at the weekend as a possible resource for B&B's. Unfortunately, 95% of the UK's 10000 B&B's are excluded from this as, unless the initial criteria announced change, you cannot apply for the top-up grant if you are eligible for the self-employed income support grant. This is a massive disparity with businesses who were eligible for the first round of £10k grants who can apply for both, and does nothing to help the vast majority of B&B's run from domestic premises. This is the same for many other B & B's he has spoken to.

Steve through out to the panels, 'What should happen next to move from a survive point to a revive point?':

Phil – for every hour spent worrying about the business now, spend fifteen minutes thinking about what it is going to be in the future and gradually switch that over in the next few weeks. We have to start planning for the future. Keep looking forward.

Debbie Hindle – share and innovate as much as we can in this new world.

Paul – realise that the wheels will start turning again. Look at the business model, take it apart and start it again.

Dan – during this period, we can have a we are all in this together mentality. But this scheme is coming to an end, and this will come up very quickly. Employers should start looking at what staffing levels will look like. Now is the time to look at redundancies if that needs to be an option.

Debbie Venn – a lot of conversations with clients have been about how we can refresh some of the existing relationships with suppliers or how we can look at trading with customers. It might mean a shift in the way that you trade.

Rosemary – take every opportunity provided by the Government as long as you don't load on the debt too much. Plan and budget keep it flexible. Most importantly keep safe!

Simon – plan for the future, things will change.

Stephen – the plan for 2020 is to get through it. The focus is on planning for 2021. The maintenance programme is being bought forward by six months. Key advice is valuing the team you have.

Sophie – planning on different occupancy levels that may be set by the Government. Looking forward, listening and talking to everyone. Gift voucher sales have proved very popular, which shows that there is hope and generates a bit of income at the moment.

The partners behind this series of events are hearing that there is a desire for a unified approach, and they are committed to ensuring that these discussions start.

The video and additional resources can be found:

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

The next session will be Revive on Wednesday 13th May at 12pm.

The final session will be Thrive TBC.