

Draft LDA Tourism Action Plan 2009-2013

London First consultation response

Introduction

London First is a business membership organisation which aims to improve and promote London, and to enhance its position as a leading world city. We mobilise the experience, expertise and enthusiasm of the private sector to develop practical solutions to the challenges London faces, and we lobby both central and London government for the investment that London needs. London First delivers its activities with the support of 300 of the capital's major businesses, universities and colleges, who between them represent 26% of London's GDP. For more information, please visit our website www.londonfirst.co.uk.

We support the broad thrust of the LDA's draft Tourism Action Plan and its delivery through Visit London. We have campaigned hard in recent months at both regional and national level to increase Visit London's marketing resources, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. However we believe that the draft Plan deserves to be strengthened in a number of key areas, to ensure that London takes full advantage of the opportunity for developing tourism in the capital that is offered by the unique combination of the newly competitive sterling and the general build-up towards the 2012 Games.

Do you think the proposed Year 1 Actions are the right actions to enable London's visitor economy to tackle the current challenging economic conditions? If not, what is missing?

Yes in principle, but at this stage some of the actions lack specific measurements, and we are concerned that there is still insufficient funding available to support the necessary marketing (including market research), both at home and abroad. In addition, many of the Year 1 actions seem to be a continuation or modest development of what already exists, as opposed to breaking new ground that will have an impact over the strategic period,

Despite the reduced value of sterling, we understand that international tourism in London has declined since the beginning of the economic downturn. The main impact of sterling's reduction may actually be the large increase in the number of domestic visitors, as people look to stay within the UK. We believe this presents an opportunity in the short term to further exploit the domestic tourism market, although it is not clear in the draft Plan how the LDA will do this.

Overall, there needs to be more focus on getting the message across to all potential visitors about the richness and variety of London's tourism offers, plus its great value for money and the fact that "there has never been a better time to visit".

The following additional actions and initiatives should also be considered for the first year of the Plan:

- Approach landowners/developers to discuss innovative ways of bringing vacant land into use during the Olympics and in the build up to the games. This could include temporary exhibitions and events, (e.g. corporate entertainment) accommodation and storage associated with the Olympics (e.g. coach parking) and public open space (e.g. temporary park/gathering area). Produce best practice guidance for Local Authorities in an attempt to speed up the time it takes for such temporary uses to receive approval. Bringing vacant land into use during the Olympics will improve the perception of London, whilst allowing landowners and developers to receive income during a time when development conditions are poor.
- Improve liaison between TfL's Legible London project, developers (especially for the schemes which have significant public realm components) and the hospitality sector businesses located in the areas concerned.
- Investigate whether funding accrued by Local Authorities through Planning Gain over the last number of years could be redirected to Tourism priorities, subject to agreement between the Local Authorities and the relevant developers.
- Accelerate delivery of the Mayor's cycle hire scheme, ensuring that cycle hire stations are in appropriate locations to encourage tourist use.
- London's Theatreland offerings should be given a higher profile in the Plan, given that the West End theatre is acknowledged as the best in the world and is frequently quoted by visitors as a key reason in visiting the capital.
- The idea of an online database of London tourism products (Section 1.4 of the draft Plan) has excellent potential, as long as it is supported by a heavyweight profile-raising campaign targeting relevant national and global audiences.
- We would like to see BIDs and business networks identified as partners in the Year One actions wherever Local Authorities are mentioned, since some LAs do not have a tourism function and have to rely on BIDs and business networks to undertake this activity on their behalf.

Do you think that the proposed areas of activity and actions will deliver the tourism elements necessary to ensure a successful Games and lay the foundations for a post-Games tourism legacy? If not, what is missing?

Given its scale and range of capital city roles, London is unlikely to secure the step-change improvements in tourism levels from the 2012 Games that have been achieved by some other Olympic cities such as Barcelona. However a strategic focus on the longer-term benefits for the capital that can be gained from the 2012 legacy would provide significant returns; this strategic thinking is not yet evident in the draft Plan. In addition, the many potential visitors to London who have no sporting interest need to be reassured that the capital and all its other attractions will remain open for "business as usual" before, during and after the 2012 summer period.

Our other key comments are:

- There is still a strong outstanding need to attend to the public realm basics in the most visited parts of London – for example litter, the proliferation of charity collectors and free newspaper distributors, and the acute shortage of public loos.
- The Community Greeters Scheme is excellent – can this be rolled out further to populate key areas of the capital, offering advice, “reassurance” and information to visitors (similar to New York community stewards)?
- The theme of culture is under-represented. It is crucial as part of London’s Games offer and a means of providing opportunities for many non-host areas of the capital. We want to ensure that we maximise the opportunity to ‘sell’ local cultural events in the run up to the games. The reliance on the Cultural Olympiad to galvanise local tourism support presupposes that these events will be well enough funded and coordinated to achieve this. Is this the case?
- We are pleased to see that the Mobile Information service is to be expanded and believe it could deliver great value. There are huge opportunities in the run up to 2012 to persuade more volunteers to staff the Infobikes and Information Centres services, and become true ambassadors for London.
- We would like to see stronger set of actions aimed at improving facilities along the River Thames. We need to celebrate this unique feature of London and ensure that the necessary investment goes into the piers to make the river experience for visitors as pleasurable and easy to access as possible.

Are there any other actions for tourism in London that should be considered a priority in the Action Plan or actions within the Plan that you consider unnecessary, if so what are these?

Business tourism

Business tourism is a vital and currently under-valued sector of the London market. Business tourists are higher spenders than retail visitors, and business events in London constitute a large and growing sector in a very internationally competitive market. The generalised commitment in the Plan to “Support the findings of the International Convention Centre Mayoral Commission” should be backed up by specific actions to identify a site funding mechanisms for a new ICC, together with the development of a strong convention bureau to maximise the use of the capital’s existing conference and exhibition resources.

Transport

The transport network is an essential part of London’s tourism infrastructure. Yet international and domestic visitors’ perceptions are of a system that can’t cope now, never mind during a period of significantly increased visitor numbers. An overcrowded Tube system, unreliable trains, slow-moving buses detouring around endless roadworks are all adverse images, broadcast globally. London became a world laughing stock when snowfall in February literally brought the city a halt. London has one of the most expensive public transport systems in the world. Tourists would pay less using Oyster cards; however Oyster is still under-used by both domestic and foreign visitors. New measures to promote Oyster to tourists – perhaps by working with tour operators or hotels - should be included in the final Plan.

As it currently stands, the draft Plan does not propose any significant new measures to help make the network more tourist-friendly. The final version of the document should include the specific actions that TfL will take to support London tourism industry in the period up to 2012 and beyond.

There also needs to be a stronger set of actions that aim to improve both the welcome and departure of visitors to London, particularly through the airports. These should include reduced queuing times, modernisation of terminal buildings, better London branding and directional signage, and reduced cost of transport links to the centre of the city.

Governance

We believe that the LDA and Visit London could work far more closely with the private sector. Businesses who are dealing with tourism at the sharp end could make more of a contribution through advisory boards and other mechanisms. We would like to see business's role formalised on the Leadership in Tourism diagram in the Plan, as we believe the support of the private sector is crucial to the success of industry in London over this period. A single representative organisation should be given the remit to marshal London's tourism and hospitality industry businesses to provide cohesive support for the sector - the current confusing mix of organisations dilutes recognition of tourism's value to London's economy. In this context, it would also be helpful to understand in the Plan how the LDA's new commissioning strategy will operate to support the tourism sector.

Public Realm Improvements

There is a strong link between the quality of the physical urban public realm and the quality of the tourist visitor's experience. It is crucial that the improvements planned and prioritised in the most visited parts of London are explicitly included in the overall Plan. The LDA should work with the landowner/developer stakeholder groups and Local Authorities, other statutory bodies and developers to improve the implementation of public realm projects in the most visited parts of the capital. This is especially important for those schemes likely to be completed in advance of the Olympics.

Unnecessary elements of the draft Plan

Ref 2.3. We are not supportive of a unique London quality marque, as there are already national hospitality standards that visitors to the UK can understand. We have concerns that this measure represents duplication, is confusing and will require extensive budget to promote. We believe it is unrealistic to expect hoteliers to pay for yet another accreditation scheme.

Ref 5.3 We are not clear on the rationale for the emphasis on street markets in the draft Plan. Surely the good ones are already well known and have great appeal? We would suggest that supporting the cultural offer or indeed the river would be strategically of more use than street markets.